

## Scriptures and Doctrine :: Christian Spiritual Formation

**Christian Spiritual Formation - posted by TrueWitness, on: 2017/3/19 8:36**

### Christian Spiritual Formation

How do we as Christians develop into the character (nature, disposition and temperament) of Jesus Christ? Too often, the believer is instructed to practice spiritual disciplines such as Bible Study, prayer, worship, fellowship, witnessing, and other good works. While these are good things to do, I think we have lost sight of the fact that they are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Transformation must come from the inside and work its way out into our behavior and not the other way around. These spiritual disciplines are tools designed to make us into more relational beings who are in tune and sensitive to God and others. We don't practice the spiritual disciplines to impress God or earn points with Him. They should never be approached in a "bucket list" fashion. And for true spiritual transformation to occur, we must become disciplined in our thought life as well as our affections. Things of the world and the flesh and business of life can crowd out the things of the spirit and we starve spiritually.

I found the following article helpful in my spiritual formation. David Takle has expanded upon Dallas Willard's VIM approach to spiritual formation and shares it with us here:

Many people experience some surprising changes inside when they first become Christians. Those changes come about because God gives us a new heart as part of our adoption into his Kingdom. But that is just the beginning. God wants us to grow our new identity into a strong Christ-like character so that we can become the person he created us to be. Learning how to participate with the Spirit to bring about these changes can be challenging, and many Christians become discouraged with their spiritual development because the results do not always seem to reflect the effort they have invested. The good news is that transformation and change are not only possible, they can become the normal experience of those who learn how to participate well in this process.

### What is Christian Formation?

We are always in the process of being formed spiritually, positively or negatively, by our experiences, the things we dwell on, the ways we live, our relationships, and our connection with the Spirit of God. So in that sense we are always involved in "Spiritual Formation" whether we are conscious of the process or not. On the other hand, when that formation is a result of engaging with the Holy Spirit, we call it "Christian Formation" because our spiritual formation is then specifically directed toward becoming more Christ-like. As Christians, we need to learn how to be intentional about these things so that we are continually formed in ways that are consistent with our new hearts, rather than in ways that are harmful or destructive to our souls.

Christian growth is a lifelong journey of learning to live well in a broken world. Along the way there are many ways to veer off course. If we become too passive, nothing changes, since growth is not automatic. But neither is it the result of our direct effort, because we cannot change our character through an act of the will or by trying really hard to be different. Still, there is something that God requires of us, as "formation" is by definition the way we are shaped experientially. So while the Holy Spirit dwells in us and is prepared to grow us up, he does not transform us without our active participation. Our task is this: to discover what is our part in connecting with and interacting with the Spirit of God, so that God can do his part and do in us those things we cannot do. After God has changed our heart and mind, we can then live more Christ-like because of who we are instead of trying to override who we are.

### Traditional Models of Discipleship

One of the most confusing barriers to discovering how to participate well with the Spirit actually comes from the very religious training that was supposed to help us! Many Christians today have adopted models of discipleship that look somewhat like this:

- Christian Education (ethics, doctrine, Bible knowledge)
- Will Power (fighting your inner urges to do wrong and making yourself do things you don't want to do)

-Trying HardÂ (your best effort to crank out Christian-like behavior)

The problem is that this approach to the Christian Life simply does not work for very long! Instead, we end up either feeling self-righteous about our apparent success, or more commonly, feeling defeated because we can see we are not the kind of person we think we ought to be. In truth, this approach to Christianity has much more in common with life under the Law than it does with life in the Spirit. Even if we ask the Spirit to help us, our hearts remain committed to a way of life that depends heavily on our own understanding of what God expects of us, and our own attempts to perform what we think is required.

### Living From a Transformed Heart

Instead of trying to coerce ourselves into doing what we think we should be doing, what if we first had a change of character, so that God's way of doing things simply came more naturally to us? Motivation would no longer be an issue. Our will would already be aligned with good things so we wouldn't have to struggle so hard against the old nature. Things like studying the Bible would become much more life-giving and relational, a reminder of who we are and whose we are, instead of an attempt to work out a long list of rules for good and bad behavior. In short, we would be much more prepared to act in a way that is consistent with the new heart that God gave us, because we would have become the kind of people we were created to be. As Dallas Willard has suggested, instead of teaching people how to do merciful acts, what if we train them to become merciful people?

To restate our task: our main job is to learn how to engage with the Spirit of God in ways that are life-changing, so that we become more and more prepared to live out of the new heart that God gave us, and less and less out of our old life patterns and values. It's a bit like trying to grow apples. If we tried to manufacture apples by assembling a pile of organic material and attempting to rearrange the molecules to make apples, we would find the process frustrating and the goal impossible. But if we plant the right kind of tree, water and fertilize the ground, and protect the tree against invading insects and disease, the apples will form quite well without our having any idea how the tree is able to do such a thing. So also with spiritual growth. If we learn to abide in the vine, we will discover that we can bear fruit that is qualitatively better than anything we could produce by direct effort.

### Our Part

So what is our part? Well, without trying to evade the question, a full explanation is very difficult, because so much of what we need to know can only be learned experientially, and not from a printed page. And any summary description of the process is easily misunderstood or dismissed as either too trivial or something we already tried and failed at. But at the risk of being too brief, we will try to point the way. Please refer to our bibliographies and other resources for a more complete coverage of this issue.

Put briefly, some of the more important aspects of Christian Formation are :

- Learning to discern the voice of God
- Developing a conversational prayer life (instead of one-way prayers)
- Building a genuine relationship with God through interacting with him
- Rearranging our lives to make time and space for this relationship

Learning to engage with the Spirit of God as a personal Mentor, allowing him to reveal our flaws as well as our new identity and his way of seeing us and our lives

This is the soil in which new life can take root and grow. Engagement with a Holy God is the only true source of life-giving transformation. This is not a cognitive achievement, or a carefully followed ethical system, but an authentic, experiential relationship.

Finally, we are not meant to learn this on our own. We must make this journey with others. We need to learn from those who have gone before us, who have built or are building this kind of relationship with God. We can then share our joys and frustrations with them and engage with God together as a community.

"May he give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you" (Eph.1:17-18 NIV)

<http://kingdomformation.org/formational-theology/introduction-to-christian-formation/>

<http://kingdomformation.org/formational-theology/v-i-m/>

-Daniel

**Re: Christian Spiritual Formation - posted by narrowpath, on: 2017/3/19 17:47**

I browsed through this man's website a bit.

Much of it sounds true on the surface but there is a lot of subtle error which makes it all the more dangerous.

He discounts the traditional and original means such as bible study and doctrine in favor of "directly interacting with God"

"Spiritual Formation" is presented as a sort of "technique" to acquire spiritual growth.

Richard Foster and the late Dallas Willard have coined this sort of new theology which is very much in line with what the proponents of the emergent church teach; just a bit more subtle with a nice wrapping of some orthodox theology.

Spiritual Formation is a covert mystical counterfeit that appeals to the young and educated. Spiritual Formation encourages people to seek God within themselves. They promote meditation after the Eastern religion fashion, inner silence and directly engaging with the Holy Spirit. They encourage people to follow the desert fathers teachings and form monastic circles and establish rules like the catholic orders.

The bible teaches discipleship. Repentance, self-denial.  
We are to be in the world and not of the world.

The bible gives us clear, simple and practical instructions for Christian living:

Acts 2:42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer.

We are to practice and teach discipleship. Christ is formed in us as we follow His teaching. Spiritual Formation is taking a process that the Holy Spirit would perform in us into our own hands. This is where the confusion comes from.

There are other sources that expose in much more detail the errors of this movement.

**Re: - posted by AbideinHim (), on: 2017/3/19 22:32**

I have never heard of "Spiritual formation" before, but I believe that there is a great deficiency within the Body of Christ of knowing the Holy Spirit as our teacher, and the One who has been sent by God to lead us into all truth.

I agree with the article that we must spend more time waiting on God in His presence. Jesus said that His sheep would hear His voice.

There are many denominations that place great value on the Word of God, and this is right, but there is little emphasis on being led by the Spirit of God.

We need both the Word of God and the Spirit of God if we are to grow to spiritual maturity, and without the Word of God being part of us, then the Spirit of God has nothing to work with. The Spirit and the Word will always agree. The living Word is Jesus Christ, who is the Word made flesh.