

Spiritual
Formation *as if the*
Church Mattered

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Growing in Christ through Community

JAMES C. WILHOIT
FOREWORD BY DALLAS WILLARD


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In memory of

Tim Phillips
1950–2000

A friend from whom I learned much

Contents

List of Figures	8
Foreword by <i>Dallas Willard</i>	9
Preface	13
1. Formation through the Ordinary	15
2. Curriculum for Christlikeness	38
3. Foundations of Receiving: Formation by Grace for the Broken and Thirsty	57
4. To Foster Receiving in Community	81
5. Foundations of Remembering: Letting the Cross Grow Larger	104
6. To Foster Remembering in Community	114
7. Foundations of Responding: Love and Service to God and Others	147
8. To Foster Responding in Community	161
9. Foundations of Relating: Spiritually Enriching Relationships of Love and Service	177
10. To Foster Relating in Community	186
Appendix: Assessment Questions	205
Notes	211
Scripture Index	221
Subject Index	227

1

Formation through the Ordinary

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Jesus, in Matthew 28:19–20 NLT

I know of no current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan and practice for teaching people to do “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”¹

Dallas Willard

It takes time, and the penetration of the truth, to make a mature saint.²

Richard F. Lovelace

Spiritual Formation: The Task of the Church

Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period. It represents neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body of Christ. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to form. Our charge, given by Jesus himself, is to make disciples, baptize them, and teach these new disciples to obey his commands (Matt.

28:19–20). The witness, worship, teaching, and compassion that the church is to practice all require that Christians be spiritually formed. Although formation describes the central work of the church, and despite a plethora of resolutions, programs, and resources, the fact remains that spiritual formation has not been the priority in the North American church that it should be.

A safe food supply, clean drinking and recreational waters, sanitation, and widespread vaccinations have improved the quality of our life. These interventions have eliminated diseases like smallpox and polio. These advances, and scores more, are part of the fruit of the public health movement that came to fruition in the twentieth century. I take many of these for granted, assuming that they are just part of life, but in many parts of the world they are not widely present. Currently 250,000 children die every year from measles, a disease easily prevented through vaccinations. We take for granted public health initiatives of the last century that have had measurable, positive social benefits. In medicine, the two tasks of prevention and cure must work hand in hand. Cures may provoke media attention and buzz; however, it is the preventative and public health interventions that generally provide the real “bang for your buck.” Likewise, spiritual formation makes its greatest contribution through quiet, hardly noticeable, behind-the-scenes work that places an emphasis on “prevention” and equipping rather than just on crisis interventions or headline-grabbing public conferences and programs.

Consider the effects of the painstakingly established public health infrastructure in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Since 1900, the average lifespan of persons in the United States has lengthened by greater than 30 years; 25 years of this gain are attributable to advances in public health.”³

The quiet and seemingly ordinary work of public health has made a tremendous difference in our life expectancy and in the overall quality of life. When one looks at the list of the CDC’s “Ten Great Public Health Achievements,” they appear so reasonable that their implementation seems to be obvious to all. For the list includes now widely accepted “best practices” like vaccination, motor-vehicle safety, safer and healthier foods, and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard.⁴ Yet society implemented these strategies, which seem so commonsensical today, only after long struggles, careful science that established their efficacy, and the slow and ongoing work of public education.

Some years ago a young physician summarized his medical-care trip to Central America by telling of the long days he worked caring for patients. He concluded his story by saying that he was convinced that he could have done more long-term good with one hundred meters of PVC pipe. So many of the people he treated suffered from medical conditions that

were the result of the village's contaminated water supply—a problem that could have been easily remedied.

In this chapter, I want to begin to identify what the spiritual formation equivalent of safe drinking water and vaccinations might be. What are the patterns in Christian community life that make a positive contribution to spiritual formation? What are the community practices that we can so easily overlook or underutilize, but that help create a climate of formation in a church?

For many years I have been listening to the stories of how faithful people have grown in grace. These accounts pulse with deep drama. I've realized that Paul was not using hyperbole when he told the Galatians, "I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). These stories are unique—unique as the people who tell them—and I want to be careful not to simply reduce their amazing tales of grace to a few abstract principles. However, themes and patterns do emerge when we look at the stories as a whole. While patterns of formation emerge, there does not exist anything approaching a "technology of spiritual formation." Formation remains a messy and imprecise business, where character, wisdom, and faith play a far greater role than theories and techniques. Ironically, one value of engagement in deliberate formation is that it drives us to prayer because it reminds us, more than popular how-to books do, that true formation comes from grace and by grace, channeled through our humble efforts. This is not to deny what others have observed, that "spiritual formation in Christ is an orderly process."⁵ Spiritual formation is certainly a multifactorial process that requires us to constantly ask God what we should be doing, rather than relying on our power and skill.

COMMUNITY SPIRITUAL FORMATION COROLLARY 1

All persons are formed spiritually. It may be in either a positive or negative direction. This formation may involve the cultivation of virtues that promote trust in God and foster social compassion or may leave persons wary, self-protective, and unable to promote the welfare of society.

Either-Or

The influential twentieth-century philosopher-educator John Dewey complained that educators were constantly guilty of "either-or" thinking. Instead of recognizing the need for both experience and educational content in schools, he said these writers tended to emphasize one at the

Christian Spirituality—The Ongoing Results of Formation

Widely Shared Patterns in Stories of Spiritual Growth

- 1. Christian spirituality begins with a response to the call of Spirit to spirit.** Issues that appear to be primarily psychological in nature often have a deeper spiritual significance. The first steps of response to the call of Spirit to spirit are often not consciously spiritual.
- 2. Christian spirituality is rooted in a commitment to Jesus and a transformational approach to life.** Christian spirituality is not simply a state; we do better to think of it as a process.
- 3. Christian spirituality is nurtured by the means of grace.** Scriptures, prayer, the sacraments, and Christian fellowship all serve as media through which we may uniquely receive grace.
- 4. Christian spirituality involves a deep knowing of Jesus and, through him, the Father and the Spirit.** Christian spirituality is grounded in knowing, not knowledge. Knowing God requires that we believe that God wants to be known. While God reaches out to us, he is also boundless mystery. Christian spirituality involves the grounding of the human spirit in the divine Spirit.
- 5. Christian spirituality requires a deep knowing of oneself.** People who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will be equally afraid to look deeply and personally at God. It is important to remember that self-knowledge is simply the means, not the end, of Christian spirituality.
- 6. Christian spirituality leads to the realization of the unique self that God ordained each of us should be.** Properly understood, the denial that is a part of Christian spirituality is not of self but of false selves. Christian spirituality does not call for the renunciation of humanness, trading humanity for divinity. It does not make us less human but more human.
- 7. Christian spirituality is uniquely developed within the context of suffering.** Openness to suffering is really openness to life. Suffering is an inevitable part of life, and if we are to be open to any of life, we must be open to it all. Openness to life means living it with willingness, not willfulness. Christ is the epitome of life lived with willingness.
- 8. Christian spirituality is manifest by a sharing of the goodness of God's love with others and in care for his creation.** Christian spirituality involves participation in God's kingdom plan for the restoration of the totality of his creation.
- 9. Christian spirituality expresses the goodness of celebration in Christian community.** Celebration and community are the unmistakable marks of mature Christian spirituality.

continued ►

Summary: If spirituality is our response to deep foundational yearnings for meaning, identity, connections, and surrender, what part of our psychological functioning could possibly be excluded from such a quest? If anything is excluded from our spirituality, it will by necessity become a dissociated part of ourself, detached from the rest of our life. Whether this be our body, our unconscious, our emotions, our intellect, our sexuality, or any other part of ourself, the result is always the same—a fragmentation of personhood and an encapsulated spirituality. Christian spirituality either makes us more whole or, if it is contained in some limited sphere of our being, furthers our fragmentation. Only wholeness is worthy of being associated with the Spirit of Christ, who empowers, directs, and gives name to the experience we have been calling Christian spirituality.

Adapted from Care of Souls by David G. Benner. Used by permission.⁶

expense of the other. We could count the same as true for writers about the Christian life. In the next three sections we will look at three sets of images of the spiritual life: nurture (agriculture, gardening, human growth, intimacy), the journey (race, battle, struggle), and death and resurrection (dying with Christ, being born again). To capture the complexities and nuances of Christian spiritual formation, the biblical writers employed these images, and we would do well to honor their emphasis on nurture, training, and resurrection.

Images of Christian Life and Nurture

Jesus and John the Baptist challenged their hearers with the need to produce good “fruit” (Matt. 21:43) and “fruit” originating in a true repentance (3:8). Jesus used a maxim in fruit growing to show how one can judge a person’s character: “A healthy tree produces good fruit, and an unhealthy tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. . . . Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit that is produced” (7:17–18, 20 NLT). Jesus illustrated how our heart condition affects our response to the gospel by his parable of the sower and the seed. When he explained the meaning of it to his followers, he told them, “But the good soil represents honest, good-hearted people who hear God’s message, cling to it, and steadily produce a huge harvest” (Luke 8:15 NLT). The image of Jesus as the true vine (John 15) vividly communicates the spiritual truth that we need to stay spiritually connected to Christ. Incidentally, we often misread this image as being just about “me abiding in Jesus,” when the actual

image and language has a strong community focus: when the branches are connected to the vine, a marvelous crop of grapes is produced. The concreteness of agriculture makes the more abstract subject of spiritual formation less abstract and more comprehensible.

The biblical writers also used agriculture to capture part of the interplay between human and divine in formation. This is seen when Paul described the work he and Apollos did and then asserted that “God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor. 3:7 Message) is the true cause of all the spiritual growth. Yet in saying this, he does not diminish the importance of their participation. Agriculture requires sustained and systematic work performed at the right time and carried out with an experience-based expertise, but all human efforts are subject to weather, pests, disease, and war. Agriculture illuminates the beautiful symmetry between God and his people that is at play in the process of spiritual formation. Therefore, we go about our formation work doing what we can and being prayerfully receptive, especially about those areas outside our direct influence.

“You happen to be God’s field in which we are working” (1 Cor. 3:9 Message). The field is the primary location of the work of farming. To flourish, a field must be cultivated, planted, tended, watered, protected, and harvested. The illustration is a communal or population-based image. The farmer is more concerned with the total crop than with one individual plant. In many of the New Testament agricultural images, the focus is on the big picture, on how abundant the harvest is, and not just on the output of a single plant. Nevertheless, there must be a both-and emphasis on the individual and the group in spiritual formation.

Images of Christian Life as Journey and Struggle

Paul uses imagery drawn from the Hellenic games to illustrate the need for training and discipline in the Christian life.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24–27)

The emphasis of this race image is a call for Corinthian believers to adopt the singular focus of a trained athlete who follows Christ. In Philippians 3:13–14 Paul describes his own athletelike straining to pursue Christ well. “The image of ‘straining forward, . . . press on toward the goal’ evokes the picture of the racer who looks neither to the left nor to the right to

check the progress of the competition or be swayed by any diversion.”⁷ In the Pastoral Epistles the imagery is developed further: the importance of rigorous training (1 Tim. 4:7–8), endurance (4:8), following the rules so that one is not disqualified (2 Tim. 2:5), and winning an imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:25). The emphasis in this set of images is on the need for training, discipline, and rigor.

Satan was soundly defeated at the cross as Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15 NIV), and yet biblical writers recognized that Satan is still active and a great cause of distress for Christians. He is busy in his constant work of accusation (Rev. 12:10) and “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8 NLT). We now live between the time of the cross and the final victory. The church is called to wage battle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). This struggle against the dark spiritual forces is both a corporate responsibility and a personal one for every Christian.

A concern about the battle imagery for sanctification is that often it is presented in a way that emphasizes struggle and risk such that a life of grace-dependency is diminished. Not many writers are as adroit as John Bunyan in *The Holy War* in capturing the reality of this spiritual struggle without minimizing the place of grace in the midst of the struggle. The armor-of-God imagery from Ephesians is full of battle, struggle, alertness to Satan’s craftiness, and God-given grace/power. We are told from the outset of this passage that we are to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” (Eph. 6:10), and the description “whole armor of God” (6:11) reminds us that the armor is of God’s design. God gives the battle armor to those he has called, but apparently the armor could just sit and gather dust. Ephesians therefore admonishes us to “take up the whole armor of God” (6:13). As would be true for a first-century soldier, most of the armor is defensive. The only offensive weapon is Scripture, here described as the sword of the Spirit (6:17).

At an individual level the battlefield is the human heart. In Proverbs we are admonished, “Guard your heart, for it affects everything you do” (Prov. 4:23 NLT). The heart/soul is the center of our being and where our growth is solidified. We are warned not to give a “foothold to the Devil” (Eph. 4:27 NLT) and instructed to wage war against “the Devil’s strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–4 NLT). The picture here is of a territorial battle that is being keenly contested. The battle will turn as we or the enemies are able to secure footholds and establish strongholds. Again, our temptation may be to see the battle merely in individual terms, but Jesus declared that the “gates of hell shall not prevail against” the church (Matt. 16:18 KJV), the corporate might of the body of Christ.

Images of Christian Life and the Resurrection

The death-rebirth pattern is an archetypal paradigm present through the pages of the Bible. The pattern shows itself in the flood (Gen. 6–9), as God destroys the entire world, except for Noah’s family and selected animals, and then brings forth life on the earth out of the barrenness of the destruction. Poignantly summarizing the image, Noah plants a vineyard: “After the Flood, Noah became a farmer and planted a vineyard” (Gen. 9:20 NLT). In the exodus, the people of Israel experience a rebirth, after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, when they escape from the deathlike grip of bondage, moving out to worship and serve God. The pattern is immediately repeated in the death zone of the wilderness, followed by the birthlike entrance into life in the promised land. This imagery “from death to rebirth underlies most of the OT, preoccupied as it is with lament giving way to praise, servitude to freedom, exile to return.”⁸

Certainly the central image of resurrection in the New Testament is that of Jesus’ death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. The victory of death secured by the resurrection event is the basis of the Christian’s claim to new life. Jesus described the Christian’s regeneration as a person being born again (John 3:1–8). When we trust Christ for salvation, God makes us alive. “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5). The central Christian initiation ceremony of baptism symbolizes death and rebirth. Paul says that believers are “buried” with Christ: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).

This imagery of death and resurrection is often missing in much contemporary spiritual formation literature. The absence of these radical and supernatural components can reduce spiritual formation to little more than religious self-help. This is unfortunate because these are the images reminding us that true formation is first and foremost the work of our forming God. Jesus’ death and resurrection make our true formation possible and provide the grace we need to experience true spiritual change.

These three image families—nurture, journey and struggle, and death/resurrection—capture many of the essential elements of spiritual formation. Though in our personal devotional lives we may find that certain images resonate more deeply with us, it is important in our teaching ministry that we provide a balanced treatment of these images. Other people may be at a point where a cluster of images other than our favorites may help to illuminate the path they need to travel. Additionally, the

“whole counsel of Scripture” uses these multiple images in a way that safeguards us from promoting an imbalanced approach to the spiritual life. An effective way to evaluate a community’s Christian formation practices is to review the comprehensive set of formation images found in Scripture and compare those to the images used in its worship, teaching, and discipleship.

What Spiritual Formation Is

The Gospel orients us not so much to an object as to a person. The Gospel, then, is not so much belief *that* as it is belief *in*.⁹

Kenneth J. Collins

Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. I need to highlight a few implications in the definition. First, I described it as an intentional process to distinguish it from the broad sense in which spiritual formation refers to all the cultural forces, activities, and experiences that shape people’s spiritual lives. In this book I am interested in exploring the more intentional and deliberate side of spiritual formation—what is taught and sought more than merely caught. Second, I have described it as communal because the Christian life is best lived in community, where worship, fellowship, and service are practiced, and spiritual formation takes place in, through, and for community. Spiritual transformation must extend beyond the individual to the church, the family, and society.

Third, I described spiritual formation as a process, thereby implying that formation is a long-term, lifelong venture, and that it results from a multidimensional ministry, not just a technique or program. Consequently, while small groups, teaching, accountability structures, and individual spiritual practices can all have a role in spiritual formation, no single dimension of church life can carry out this task alone. Fourth, the focus of spiritual formation is becoming more like Jesus. Fifth, we can never accomplish this through our own power; we need the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

COMMUNITY SPIRITUAL FORMATION COROLLARY 2

Christian spiritual formation: (1) is intentional; (2) is communal; (3) requires our engagement; (4) is accomplished by the Holy Spirit; (5) is for the glory of God and the service of others; and (6) has as its means and end the imitation of Christ.
