

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Definition

Prairie Bible Institute has accepted the definition of spiritual formation as *the Holy Spirit-directed process of Christ being formed in us¹ for the sake of God's glory and the benefit of others.*

Spiritual formation is rooted in and a result of God's grace. God initiates the process of spiritual formation.² God enables the continued process.³ God provides everything that is necessary for godliness.⁴ God will complete the process of sanctification.⁵ God desires a human response of faith and obedience to His grace.⁶ A reversal of this order of God's grace and humanity's response is always a religion of self-effort. God's grace is the starting point for all spiritual progress. Humanity is entirely dependent on God for growth.

The following articulates the principled paradigm. Each paragraph will first state one principle and then briefly give explanation of meaning to this principle.

Spiritual formation is centered in a relationship with the Triune God.

This relationship is profoundly illustrated in the relationship of Jesus to His disciples. Additionally, relationship is evidenced in examples such as the Vine and Branch passage⁷, in the High Priestly prayer of Christ⁸, and in the believer's relationship of child to a Father.⁹ Therefore, spiritual formation is significantly conditioned by depth of relationship. There is no substitute for authentic relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual formation is primarily a process.¹⁰

Conversion is more likened to the beginning rather than the completion of spiritual growth. There are crisis points of faith in the Christian life. However, although there are significant and identifiable spiritual crisis events, at the center of formation is relationship with God, which is a life-long journey. Christians have not arrived at a destination but are on this journey. The process of progression needs to be embraced.

To be "filled with the Spirit"¹¹ is distinct from yet related to spiritual maturity¹².

The new believer has the ability to live in step with the Spirit. He/she is expected to live in submission to the Spirit. This dependence and submission should characterize normal, everyday relationship with Him. However, the new believer cannot be spiritually mature. Maturity cannot be micro-waved. It is not instantaneous. Maturity comes with time, out of spiritual life that is nourished by an increasing experiential knowledge of Christ.

Spiritual formation has a God-ordained process.

God has provided a pathway for the journey. The final authority for the pathway of Christian experience is not experience but the Word of God as found in the Bible. This God-directed pathway is not opposed to grace but in fact provides for the ways of grace in our lives.

The believer is entirely dependent on God and the power of His waves of grace in order to grow. However, the believer must follow the knowledge, practices, and skills that He supplies. One cannot simply do whatever one chooses and assume that growth will happen. The believer will grow only as he/she follows God's pathway for growth.

Spiritual formation has no simplistic formula.

"I will never be able to reduce life with God to a formula for the same reason I cannot reduce my marriage to a formula. It is a living growing relationship with another free being, very different from me and yet sharing much in common."¹³ MacDonald writes, "...what I discovered was that there are no shortcuts, no gimmicks, no easy ways to cultivate an intimacy with God and attain the resulting passion that should carry one through life's journey."¹⁴

Spiritual formation takes intentionality.

The Christian does not grow automatically or easily. There is no “floating” into maturity. Intentional decisions and commitments must be made that are consistent with the methods of grace. The believer should intend to grow. The authentic Christian is called to passionate and deliberate involvement in the journey. Yet in this process entire dependence is on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual formation takes place within spiritual battle, trial, suffering¹⁵, and conflict. The enemies of the world¹⁶, the flesh¹⁷, and the devil¹⁸ assault the believer. Willing perseverance and joyful contentment through spiritual warfare, interpersonal conflict, and personal suffering are an integral part of being formed in the image of Christ.¹⁹

Spiritual formation includes personal responsibility of the individual believer.

While spiritual formation is simultaneously a profound manifestation of God’s gracious action, it is at the same time a human responsibility before God to grow. This seeming paradox with God’s grace and human responsibility is seen in Philippians 2:12-13 which states, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Paul declares that it is “God who works in you”. But Paul also instructs the Philippians to, “work out your salvation.” This is not to work *for* but to work *from* salvation.

Passivity is one of the greatest dangers and difficulties to spiritual growth. Growth is not a passive result of what someone else does to the believer or for the believer. Growth requires active involvement. Each individual has the opportunity to choose or reject participation in experiences conducive to growth and development. “We would much rather pray, ‘Lord, make me godly,’ and expect him to ‘Pour’ some godliness into our souls in some mysterious way. God does in fact work in a mysterious way to make us godly, but he does not do this apart from the fulfillment of our own personal responsibility.”²⁰ This principle does not suggest that spiritual growth is a simple matter of the will and pulling up one’s spiritual bootstraps. The Christian is dependent on God for His divine enablement, but is also responsible and not passive in this process of growth.

Individual Christians are at different places in the spiritual formation journey.

The Bible identifies three places of growth on the road to maturity. The Apostle John identifies children, young men, and fathers (1 John 2:12-14). Each person is an individual created in God’s image. Each Christian is at a unique place of commitment, faith development, and has a unique life history. However, the Christian is not limited to a certain place of maturity but rather responsible to progress in the Christian experience. The writer to the Hebrews addresses the believers who have failed in this responsibility. “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” They were still infants in the process when they should have been maturing.²¹

The goal of spiritual formation is twofold. First, it has an ultimate purpose of glorifying God.²² There is also a proximate goal of developing the image of Christ in the believer.²³

Christ is the exact representation of the Father²⁴ and brings Him both glory and pleasure. The image of Christ then is the ultimate reality of human wholeness. The Christian is to develop His character and live His priorities. Christlikeness is the goal of spiritual development. One of the greatest gifts God has given is the opportunity for spiritual growth. But however much we have matured, there is always more beyond. It is in this that we find the adventure of living. There will always be new, unexplored dimensions of His person beckoning to us. By contrast, the goals of spiritual formation do not focus on getting the believer into heaven, enabling the believer

to live a carefree life, or to equip the believer to feel good.

Spiritual formation is holistic.

That is, all of life is spiritual. The Lordship of Christ applies to all of life and all of life equally.²⁵ This includes all matters of common life such as career, education, family, citizenship, finances, and recreation. There is no “god-box” compartmentalization that is practically possible. Therefore, the believer has responsibility for development as whole a whole person – the physical, mental, emotional, social, and all aspects of life. This also calls for integration of all of life in the process of discipleship.

Spiritual formation is only possible in relationship within the Body of Christ.

The individual Christian cannot mature in isolation from the Body. This is shown in passages such as Ephesians 4:11-16. It is only as each part does her/his work that the Body grows. We cannot be independent and autonomous lone rangers in our pursuit of God and growth. The body of Christ is designed so that we need one another to help us in the pilgrimage of obedience as developing disciples. Discipleship is a relational process. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4: 20, 21)

Authentic spiritual formation will result in service to God and others.

The Greatest Commandment, as given by the Lord Jesus, is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” The Greatest Commandment also includes, “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). The disciple will have the love of Jesus for his neighbour and the life of Jesus will flow through the disciple toward his/her neighbour. There can be no wholeness in the image of Christ that does not reflect in relationship to others (Romans 12:5). Love for others through acts of service is a vital link in the spiritual formation process. Gratitude for the finished and continuing work of Christ for us compels us to co-operate with His commitment to serve others.

Spiritual disciplines are crucial to spiritual formation.²⁶

Rumford describes a spiritual discipline as “An act or behaviour that is deliberately chosen and intentionally practised in order to focus on God and grow in obedience in the Christian life.”²⁷ These disciplines are means and not the end. But they are important means to place us in a posture of willingness to receive God’s transforming grace, develop habits of godliness, help us to be sensitive to God, and to sustain us in the journey of faith. In themselves, spiritual disciplines are not legalism although Christians can allow them to become that in their lives. Spiritual exercises are not optional with respect to development of the spirit.

Spiritual formation is possible only through denial of self.

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”²⁸ Denial of self is not self-rejection. Nor is it simply a denial of things – not simply saying “no” to something in life, be that evil or good. One of the great dangers in the process of spiritual formation is that of self-mortification as one more technique or “job” for those who wish to save their own lives. Such practices become exercises in self-righteousness. Denial of self is the condition of the heart in which one has given up the control. Life as normally understood, where the object is securing self, promoting self, indulging self, is set aside. This condition gives opportunity for God to exchange the self-life for the life of Christ.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Galatians 4:19 - My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,
- 2 Romans 5:6-9, John 3:16
- 3 Titus 2:11-14
- 4 Ephesians 1:2-14, 2 Peter 1:3
- 5 Philippians 3:20-21, 1 John 3:2
- 6 Romans 5:1, Ephesians 2:8-9
- 7 John 15:1-17
- 8 John 17: 20-26
- 9 Romans 8:12-17
- 10 Romans 12:1-2, 2 Peter 3:18, Ephesians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Hebrews 12:14
- 11 Ephesians 5:18
- 12 1 John 2:12-14, Hebrews 5:11-6:1,
- 13 Philip Yancey. *Reaching for the Invisible God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000.) pg. 183-184
- 14 Gordon MacDonald. *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion*. (Nashville, TN: Oliver-Nelson, 1986.) Pg. 11
- 15 Hebrews 5:8,9; James 1:2-4; Ephesians 6:8-10; 1 Peter 2:19ff
- 16 1 John 2:15-17
- 17 Romans 7:7-25
- 18 Ephesians 6:10-18
- 19 This is vividly illustrated by the faith journeys of the saints in Hebrews 11.
- 20 Jerry Bridges, *Pursuit of Godliness*. Pg. 42
- 21 Hebrews 5:11-14
- 22 This concept of God's glory is explained well by John Piper in *Desiring God*.
- 23 "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8:29); "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4: 12-16); "present everyone perfect in Christ." (Colossians 1:28); "...until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19)
- 24 Hebrews 1
- 25 Colossians 1:15-20, Matthew 28:18, Colossians 3:17-23, 1 Corinthians 10:31
- 26 Galatians 6:7-9, 2 Timothy 2:3-6, 2 Peter 1:5-7, Hebrews 5:14, Hebrews 12:14
- 27 Douglas J. Rumford. *Soul Shaping*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 1996.)
- 28 Luke 9:23

