

Components of Spiritual Formation

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Spiritual formation is about the 1) development of a person's spirit and 2) growth of an intimate relationship between a person and God.

Of course, one reads historical and modern literature extensively to develop these ideas, including scripture. And there are conferences each year on topics related to spiritual formation so we can interact and help critically evaluate our ideas. I developed a manual for a graduate class on Spiritual Formation and have taught this class in eight countries and spoken on the subject hundreds of times. I have given 15 papers and published articles on this topic for 23 years.¹ All this has led me to some conclusions about spiritual formation.

First, some historical context is useful. The process of coming to be like Jesus Christ in character and conduct has been a focus of theology and church teaching in many ages. It has occurred with different names, most of which refer to essentially the same process: life in Christ, growing in Christ, discipleship, sanctification, holiness, Christ in us, walking in the Spirit, the

¹ I previously wrote:

The Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit (ETS Southeast, 2009),
Conceptual Foundations for Theosis (American Theological Inquiry, 2:2, 2009),
Epistemology and Spirituality (EPS Southeast, 2006),
Discipleship and Spiritual Direction (ETS Southeast, 2005),
Christ in Us: the Hope of Glory: Christology and Spiritual Formation (ETS National, 2003),
Philosophical Foundations for Spirituality: Putnam's pragmatic realism and theistic realism
(EPS Southeast, 2001),
On Loving God with Heart and Mind (EPS Southeast, 1998),
The Ontological Foundation of the Work of the Holy Spirit in the Believer (EPS Southeast,
1996),
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual Growth (ETS Southeast, 1996),
Structures of the Spirit (ETS Southeast, 1994),
Levels of Belief (Philosophia Christi, 14:2, 1991),
Realistic Theism and the Foundation of Spiritual Life (EPS Southwest, 1988),
Growth to Maturity in Christ (ETS Southwest, 1988),
How to Become a Disciple (International Leadership Council, 1988),
A Biblical Model for a Doctrine of the Christian Life (ETS Southwest, 1987).

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Spirit-filled life, transformation, spiritual growth, spiritual formation, and theosis (Lossky, 1957; O'Leary, 1991; Myendorff, 1992; Rakestraw, 1997)

Second, the desired outcome of the process is that we become like Jesus in many ways (Bridges, 1991; Ortberg, 2002). The history of spirituality and the title under which the formation occurs is not as important as the actuality of the process. This formation culminates in the person here on earth becoming more and more like Jesus. Peter says, "you will become partakers in the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4). John says, "You will be like him" (I John 3:2). Paul says, "You will be conformed to Him" (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:21) and "We are being transformed into the same image" (II Cor. 3:18). The Lord controls the process, the timing and the outcome. If we are changed spiritually, there cannot fail to be a change in our life and the culture around us (Smith, 2009). Spiritual transformation leads to character and social transformation. This present paper presents my conclusions regarding the second of four components (elements; steps) in this process. I will briefly address the first component, then concentrate on the second.

I. Step One: the Focus of Spiritual Discipleship

There are two foci for a believer: who I can be for Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit here and now; and who I will be when I am with him and like him (Clinton, 2003; 2009) The goal of spiritual formation, Christlikeness, is briefly describe above. In practice we can begin the day by prayer (Martin, 1995). Commit the day and the events to the Lord. Seek his wisdom for each person with whom you will meet. As you go from event to event be conscious of thinking to yourself, "what would most draw people to Jesus or most honor him in this situation? What does He want me to do in this situation?" As we maintain this constancy of walk with the Lord over an extended period of time it leads to intimacy (Curtis and Eldridge, 1997) and it become second nature to us and eventually becomes the normal pattern of our life (Willard, 1999). It is a constant awareness of the omnipresence of the Lord with us, by His spirit (Blaising, 1988; Bright, 1991). Life becomes a continual conversion from the old way of life in the world's influence to the way of life taught in the Bible and given by the Holy Spirit.

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As we develop a deep walk with Jesus we are able to listen to him guide us, to respond to people and events from our spiritual nature rather than our material or social or emotional nature, and to see the people and events in our lives as his work around us, which ministers both to us, to those we encounter, or to whom we witness (Koh, 1995; Greear, 2002). Every moment of every day is lived in his presence. In most people this practice takes years to develop (Chan, 1988; Perrout, 1922).

We humans find ourselves thrown into a hostile world, we hide (even from ourselves and the problems of existence), we deny. We create false hope, definitions, and solutions, which never satisfy. We fill the world with our mistakes. We even hide from the infinite in the facticity of the daily life; we purposefully lose ourselves in the busyness of life.

Life involves us in science and the social sciences. These lead us to philosophy. Philosophy leads us either to despair or to theology. Despair leads us to death. Theology leads us to God. God saves us and returns us to life, to give ourselves, as did our brother, to seek and to save the lost. Life leads us to despair or to God, as Ecclesiastes said.

We are invited to enter into the fellowship of the godhead; to participate, to become Christ like, to become partakers of the divine nature. We are even told that this has always been our destiny. We are told that we were created in love, we were made to have and show the divine image - just as Christ shows both the divine and the human images. The Father, in love, calls us; the Son, in love, gives Himself for us and leads us in the dance of life; the Spirit lovingly draws us to Christ, and to the maturity of the fellowship.

We are:

Wonderfully created,

Tragically fallen,

Redeemed with love,

Destined for glory.

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All people have an orientation toward relating to God which is worked out in their lives in their value commitments and religious practices (Rahner, 1968; Molnar, 1965; O'Donnell, 1994; O'Donovan, 1995). The fact of this subjective and sometimes reflective experience and the accompanying personal and social objective experience is common to all people (Lawrenz, 2000), although the specific content may be different for each person. The analysis of this spiritual experience usually focuses on the objective religious experience we can discern in our own lives (Grounds, 1984). There is also an inner personal component of one's own spirit and its needs and capacities, and the drawing of the Holy Spirit leading us toward faith in God and Jesus (Richardson, 2006; Stafford, 1996).

If our goal is to become like Jesus then each step of our growth needs to focus on him. If our daily life, or our devotions (Nowen 1986; 1992), or our Bible study, or even our spiritual disciplines (Richardson, 2006) focuses on anything other than Jesus, this distracts us from the central focus. But each of these areas or disciplines, with the correct spiritual focus, can be used to bring us to Jesus.

II. Step Two: Passive Elements: Allowing Jesus and other people to minister to me

Part of our spiritual growth and most of our spiritual relationship is his work in us, and the work of the body of Christ as he leads them to minister to us. We need to allow this to happen. Verses like "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2) are in passive voice: Allow yourself to be transformed. There is a person who is working to transform us to Christlikeness, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is free to move and act as the Lord wishes (John 3); and often surprises the leaders of the church (Acts 10-11). Spiritual life is God's to give, since He is the creator of life, and comes to us by the redemption Christ provided.

When we appeal, in our spirit, to the "work ethic" that says we need to take care of ourselves or provide for ourselves, as though we were alone and fully responsible, we lose the opportunity for Jesus and his brethren to minister to us.

This ministry to us occurs in four ways.

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A. My own spirit

Some writers contend that the human spirit is a composite of the emotional, intuitive, and conceptual aspects of humanity. Others think that the biblical references lead us to the tripartite definition of body, soul, and spirit. If the soul is the psyche or conscious mind of a person, then the spirit is the capacity of the person to relate to other people's spirits, to angelic or demonic spirits and to God. Other people identify the spirit in the New Testament with the heart in the Old Testament (and occasionally in the New Testament). All these approaches agree that each human has a spirit.

If the spirit in a person is unavailable, that is, the person cannot relate to other people or to God in this way, this may be synonymous with being spiritually dead. When we are spiritually alive then this capacity is made alive within us. Our spirit is energized by the Holy Spirit as part of coming to Jesus by faith.

Knowing our spiritual nature and developing our depth is another factor. All humans share in the quest for spirituality, truth, meaning. All people are seeking happiness and fulfillment in life. Life eventually teaches us, in agreement with Ecclesiastes, that nothing of created nature will fulfill us. Seeking the meaning of life in things leads to emptiness. Many people settle for what their culture or society offers them, that is, the status quo of religiosity, an outward religious life with no inner spirituality. Some counselors want to help people become well adjusted to a fallen world. A few people seek for a different or deeper interpretation of life. Some seek for more social, or more personal, forms of understanding human purpose. These real life quests for meaning sometimes surpass the more philosophical or speculative quests (Ratzinger, 2005) in spiritual intensity. The speculative quests often have more intellectual vigor; but often result in less actual conversion or growth.

The theological and practical problems in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit are: the drawing of the Holy Spirit; the human and divine elements in the process of coming to faith; the initial salvific work (drawing) of the Spirit; regeneration; the assurance of the believer; the nature

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of the new creation in the believer; the relation of justification, adoption, and sanctification, the means of sanctification, and the work of the Spirit versus the person in all of these (cf. Clinton, *The Role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual Growth*, 1996).

First, He works in our spirit and our mind to free us from the bounds of sin so that the Word we hear in the Gospel falls upon receptive ears. As we hear the Word, the Spirit also leads us to respond by believing the Word and trusting in Christ by faith. These actions of the Spirit enrich both our subjective and objective experiences.

All these actions are led by the Spirit; He is sovereign. He works directly and as He wishes through people, circumstances, community and the Word. If we do come in faith to Jesus Christ, we can gladly say, "God led me to His Son and to an eternal salvation." We know that no good lies within us and that the active work is the Spirit's, based on the choice of the Father and the previous work of the Son. Our part in salvation is passive, we allow it to happen, we do not resist. If we do not come to Christ at this time, we know that the cause is that we resisted or quenched the work of the Spirit; which He is sometimes pleased to let us do (Eph. 1 and 4). As faith is present in the heart and regeneration takes place, the Spirit takes up residence (indwelling) and begins the work of sanctification: making us holy, like Jesus.

Because of the various tensions in the doctrine and practice concerning the presence and work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, it is important to clarify our common ground and to examine the scripture for the more definitive passages regarding convictions, persuasions and opinions (cf. Scholes and Clinton, 1991), which help set parameters on our understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual life and growth. Any side, or all sides, may be wrong in their biblical interpretation.

There are some biblical facts held by all orthodox groups (Pourrat, 1922). For example, God gives spiritual life. It is the recognition of this presence of God, acting in the life of Cornelius (Acts 10-11) that led the church to "quiet down and glorify God" because He had "granted to the Gentiles the repentance which leads to life." The reality of spiritual life, created by the Holy

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Spirit, is the true spiritual and biblical test of unity in Christ, and thus should be the test of fellowship (Clinton, 1996). Do I see Christ working in you? Do you see Christ working in me (Wilkerson, 2009)? As a test or evidence of spiritual life, we have substituted the test of correct doctrine, usually based on the Nicene creed, or as protestants of one of the three great reformation traditions: Lutheran, Calvinist, or Free Church. For Catholic and Protestant alike this substitution of doctrine for life goes back to the time of the council of Nicea, in 325, when the identity of a Christian was tied to holding correct doctrine, rather than expressing the reality of spiritual life, which was the test for the first 300 years.

B. Historical teaching

The history of Christian teaching about spiritual formation begins in the Gospels. Matthew and Luke show Zacharias and Mary having encounters with angels. This presumes the capacity of humans to have such interactions. Jesus knows what the work of his true father is. John says the Word who is God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus calls his disciples and all people to worship in spirit and in truth.

Concerning growth and maturity, Paul use a metaphor of milk and meat. He expects the Corinthians to have grown to sufficient maturity that they are ready for the meat of the faith. A time is calculable for this milk phase, two years from the time Paul planted the church until he wrote the letter. Paul expects adult believers who come to Jesus to be ready for meat within two years of their conversion. This expectation points to a specific understanding of what is included in the new believer follow-up process and initial discipleship process and a belief that it can readily be accomplished in two years. Meat is for the mature.

John use three stages of children, young men, fathers. Children are rejoicing that they have come to know God and their sins are forgiven. Young men are facing sin and evil and striving against it, using the Word of God as their main source, like Jesus did in the temptation. When he describes fathers in maturity John uses the same phrase in two references: you know

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Him who has been from the beginning. This reflects a much deeper personal knowledge of God which has resulted in a level of intimacy. Mature believers know and walk with God.

C. The Body

Most of us are familiar with the “one another” passages in the New Testament which often describe the moral and spiritual rule concerning the duties we owe to other people in the body. Paul goes further in Ephesians 3. The Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise (v. 6) and that every family in heaven and on earth derives its name from the Father. We jointly come from the Father, we come together into one body in Christ.

In Exodus 33:12ff Moses, having just received the law, asks God how he and the people will be known as different once they enter the promised land. God responded, “My presence will go with you.” Moses had not imagined that God might withhold His presence and he responded, “If your presence does not go with us, then do not lead us up from here.” Moses would rather be in the wilderness with God than in the promised land without Him. The presence of the life of God is the sign of spiritual life. In this approach orthodoxy is measured by spiritual life and by agreement with biblical teaching in life and practice.

We have the genesis of a test in Acts 11 and 15. In Acts 10-11 the Holy Spirit's leading of Peter to preach the gospel to Cornelius is clear, and the resultant presence of the Holy Spirit was sufficient to quiet down the more “hard line” Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The Spirit leads and teaches Peter, and he leads and teaches the church. This took place in AD 40.

Later, approximately AD 49 at the Jerusalem council, after searching the scripture, praying together and listening to each other, James summarizes, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials . . .” (Acts 15:28). There are essentials we should agree on and honor; in all other things we should have freedom to practice the faith within each of our cultures (Balraj, 1997). Again, the Spirit is present to lead and teach the people, through leading and teaching the elders (Clinton, 2004).

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The Holy Spirit creates spiritual life and shows His presence. He leads the elders in decision-making and this bears character and spiritual fruit in the believers. The test is spiritual life discerned by the wise counsel of Spirit-led elders.

D. God

For those who already have begun intimate contact with true spiritual reality, that is, a life of faith and grace through Jesus Christ, the life quest is to walk deeper with Christ and to experience more of God in daily life. It is not that God is hidden, at least most of the time. It is that we need to find ways to see Him in life, to touch Him in prayer or contemplation, to experience Him in our spirit or through life experiences (e.g., books by Foster, 1978ff). Willard (1999, chapter 2) has made the point that most of us simply need to understand what the presence of God is like and how to observe what is already around us. But the heart is rarely satisfied for long with the observation of the hand of God in nature or the providential actions in our behalf. Hearts yearn for fellowship. We will return to this below in the discussion on indwelling.

Each person also has the capacity to have his personal spirit directed (i.e., led or strongly influenced initially, only later can there be absolute control) by another spirit. In common literature this is known as being influenced or possessed by another spirit. In a philosophical sense it is the reality that another spirit can so influence my spirit that I can be led to obey the other spirit as though it were my own. In this case, I am not the source of the spiritual direction (Willard, 2009). Nor am I merely responding to an external influence over which I have significant control. This is a middle ground where great influence is exerted on my spirit to lead me to act a certain way or to believe a certain way, which, if I do not resist it, will eventuate in my acting in keeping with the direction of the indwelling spirit. Sometimes a great teacher can have this effect (Evans, 2003). Sometimes it may be part of spiritual warfare, from either side (Barnhouse, 1965).

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If the indwelling (or, prior to a spiritual or reflective commitment on my part to allow the indwelling, influencing) spirit is God's, then we have arrived at the biblical case of being led by the Spirit of God. If the indwelling spirit is an evil spirit, then we have a case of demonic influence or possession.

Once a situation of full indwelling (surrender of control; dedication; submission) has occurred, the source of spiritual direction and decision will be the secondary spirit, until this direction is actively resisted. Thus, the person who is filled with the Spirit is one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and continues to be influenced by the Spirit at the affective level, the reflective level and at an emotional level. In a case of demonic possession, the person is indwelt by and receives direction in value and reflection from an evil spirit.

In the case of God's Spirit, we are told that while the filling --that is the active influence-- can be resisted, the indwelling itself is permanent. In the case of an evil spirit, the influence can be resisted but the indwelling/possession probably is not reversible by the person. It is reversible by the Holy Spirit.

It is our joyful expectation that God will lead us to faith and lead us to victory (Scazzero, 2009). The initiative is from God. Our part is to receive and believe. Passive does not mean inactive.

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III. Step Three: Active Elements: What I can do to contribute to growth

- A. Conversion
- B. Commitment
- C. Disciplines
- D. Self-Evaluation

IV. Step Four: Oneness with self, brothers and sisters, and Jesus

- A. Integration of Self
- B. Oneness with spiritual brothers and sisters
- C. Oneness with the Trinity
- D. Holistic growth

Conclusion

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