

Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What it is and How it Might be Done

"... until Christ be formed in you." (Gal. 4:19)

"Spiritual formation" is a phrase that has recently rocketed onto the lips and into the ears of Protestant Christians with an abruptness that is bound to make a thoughtful person uneasy. If it is really so important, not to mention essential, then why is it so recent? It must be just another passing fad in Protestant religiosity, increasingly self-conscious and threatened about "not meeting the needs of the people." And, really, isn't spiritual formation just a little too Catholic to be quite right?

We could forget the phrase "Spiritual formation," but the fact and need would still be there to be dealt with. The spiritual side of the human being, Christian and non-Christian alike, develops into the reality which it becomes, for good or ill. Everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education. The only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one. We need to take a conscious, intentional hand in the developmental process. We need to understand what the formation of the human spirit is, and how it can best be done as Christ would have it done. This is an indispensable aspect of developing a psychology that is adequate to human life.

The reason for the recent abrupt emergence of the terminology into religious life is, I believe, a growing suspicion or realization that we have not done well with the reality and the need. We have counted on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer, and have counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian. But, for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others.

Most statistical measures and anecdotal portraits of Evangelical Christians, not to mention Christians in general, show a remarkable similarity in the life-texture of Christians and non-Christians. Even among clergy, simple rest in and obedience to Christ is not something to assume without special indications; thus, we should look carefully at the whole issue of spiritual formation, especially to identify the essence of the gospel and the eternal kind of life that may correspond to it.

Too often spiritual formation is regarded as a catch-all category that conveys little specific information. Gerald G. May writes, "Spiritual formation is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction."¹

It is useful, therefore, to speak of "spiritual formation" by distinguishing three different meanings or moments. First, identifying certain activities as "spiritual" work or exercise, one can think of spiritual formation as training in these special spiritual activities. Certainly, this is a large part of what is found in many cases to mean "priestly formation," or the "Spiritual formation" of the priest, as spoken of in Catholic literature, with the recognition that such formation goes

beyond overt behavior and deeply into the inner or spiritual life of the individual. Marcial Maciel's *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests*² is an excellent treatment of spiritual formation as it bears upon the vocation of the priest.

The Protestant counterpart is the outward behavior of the successful minister, pastor, leader, or fulltime Christian worker. Spiritual formation can be thought of as the training that makes individuals successful in the aforementioned roles. Although it is recognized that the heart must be right, if one is successful enough in certain outward terms, very likely no further inquiry will be made. And, if something is known to be lacking on the inside or in the private life of the worker, as is often the case among those on a Christian staff, it may well be overlooked or justified for the sake of the ministry.

Occasionally, today one also finds those who think of spiritual formation in terms of practicing spiritual disciplines. This is a relatively recent development among Evangelicals. The disciplines are regarded as part of the process of spiritual formation—which is not an altogether bad idea—or as the practice of spirituality, and formation is regarded as whatever it takes to bring us to where we are able to engage rightly in a life of spiritual disciplines. In any case, one way of thinking about spiritual formation is to identify it by references to certain specifically religious practices. Often such practices are spoken of today as "a spirituality."

Secondly, spiritual formation may be thought of as the shaping of the inner life, the spirit, or the spiritual side of the human being. The formation of the heart or will (which I believe is best taken as the 'spirit') of the individual, along with the emotions and intellect, is therefore the primary focus, regardless of what overt practices may or may not be involved. Here, what is formed is explicitly the spiritual dimension of the self. We speak of *spiritual* formation in this case precisely because that which is formed (the subject matter shaped) is the spiritual aspect of personality. Of course, it is assumed that there will be effects in the realm of overt practice.

Thirdly, spiritual formation may be thought of as a shaping by the spirit or by the spiritual realm, and by the Holy Spirit and other spiritual agencies involved in the kingdom of God, especially the Word of God. We speak of spiritual formation here because the means (or agencies) that do the shaping of the human personality and life are spiritual.

Now, we need to recognize that spiritual formation in all of these senses is not necessarily a *Christian* spiritual formation. Spiritualities abound on all sides, and we are fast coming to the point where we have a spirituality of practically everything. A recent television commercial for a certain kind of truck starts out with a man saying that a truck is "a spiritual kind of thing," and he goes on to talk about the special meaning it gives to life.

I believe that spirituality is the arena in which specifically Christian faith and practice will have to struggle desperately in the coming years to retain integrity. All other 'spiritualities' present themselves as equal under such slogans as "interfaith" and "ecumenism," terms that increasingly apply to all religious cultures, not just to the branches of Christianity.

The 12-step programs, often the bearers of great good from the viewpoint of obvious human need, are currently doing much to place anti-Christian, or at least achristian, spiritualities solidly in the midst of Christian congregations and lives. Also, the push for inclusivism presupposes that all cultures are equal, and how can that be unless the corresponding religions are too? Moreover, if lifestyles are equal, must they not be equal *morally*? And how can you fault whatever religion is practiced in them if they are morally equal?

How, then, are we to think about spiritual formation that is faithful to the gospel and to the nature of that eternal life which is present in Christ and given to us with him?

Let us begin with practices, overt behavior. Spiritual formation in Christ is oriented toward explicit obedience to Christ. The language of the Great Commission, in Matthew 28, makes it clear that our aim, our job description as Christ's people, is to bring disciples to the point of obedience to "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Of course, this assumes that we ourselves are in obedience, having learned *how* to obey Christ. Though the inner dynamics are those of love for Christ, he left no doubt that the result would be the keeping of his commandments. "Those who have my commandments and keep them, they are the ones who love me. And they who love me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love them, and will manifest myself to them" (John 14:21).

Much of the current distress on the part of Western Christianity over how to conduct our calling as the people of Christ derives from the fact that the goal and measure of Christian spiritual formation, as described previously, is not accepted and implemented. This has long been the case, of course, reaching back for centuries. But it may be that the modern world's challenge to the Church has not been equalled since its birth.

In the face of this challenge, 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." Very few even regard this as something we should actually try to do, and many think it to be simply impossible. Little wonder, then, that it is hard to identify a specifically "Christian" version of spiritual formation among Christians and their institutions. As we depart from the mark set by the Great Commission, we increasingly find it harder to differentiate ourselves *in life* from those who are non- or even anti-Christians.

Now, of course, spiritual formation in this sense cannot be done by focusing just on actions or practices. That way leads to legalism, failure, and death, as Jesus made very clear in his "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5:20). But this does not mean we must surrender the behavioral aim set up by Christ himself. We teach people to do "all things whatsoever" by shaping their hearts to love Christ and his commandments, and by training their entire personality (soul, mind, body, and to some degree even environment) to side with their new heart or spirit, which is the creative element of the self that we also call the will. To *will* (*thelein*; Rom. 7:18) is important, if not crucial. But the *person* acts, and more is involved in action than willing.

Indeed, the 'spirit' or heart may even be eager (Matt. 26:41), but unless the flesh or embodied personality as a whole is trained to go with it and support it, the follow-through in action will not occur, or will not reliably happen, or may even be in direct conflict with the spirit or will: "What I hate I do!" (Rom. 7:17). While the spirit or heart is the ultimate source of life (Prov. 4:23), we do not *live* there. We live in our body and its world. Christian spiritual formation works *from* the spirit or will and from its new life "from above." But its work is not done until we have put off the old person and put on the new (Eph. 4; Col. 3).

This is an active, not passive, process, one that requires our clear-headed and relentless participation. It will not be done for us; however, we cannot obey Christ, or even trust him, by direct effort. What, then, are the indirect means that allow us to cooperate in reshaping the personality—the feelings, ideas, mental processes and images, and the deep readinesses of soul and body—so that our whole being is poised to go with the movements of the regenerate heart that is in us by the impact of the Gospel Word under the direction and energizing of the Holy Spirit?

These means are, primarily, the disciplines for life in the Spirit: solitude and silence, prayer and fasting, worship and study, fellowship and confession, and the like. These disciplines are not, in themselves, meritorious or even required except as specifically needed. They do, however, allow the spirit or will—an infinitesimally tiny power in itself that we cannot count on to carry our intentions into settled, effectual righteousness—to direct the body into contexts of experience in which the whole self is inwardly restructured to follow the eager spirit into ever fuller obedience. This is the second meaning or moment in Christian spiritual formation.

The processes of spiritual formation thus understood require precise, testable, thorough knowledge of the human self. Psychological and theological understanding of the spiritual life must go hand in hand. Neither of them is complete without the other. A psychology that is Christian, in the sense of a comprehensive understanding of the facts of spiritual life and growth, should be a top priority for disciples of Jesus, particularly those who work in the various fields of psychology and who consider it an intellectual and practical discipline. No understanding of the human self can be theoretically or practically adequate if it does not deal with the spiritual life.

Of course, spiritual formation in the second emphasis only works because of the third and final moment: formation *by* the Spirit of God in Christ. This comes initially and mainly through immersion in and constant application (John 8:31; 15:7) of the *word* of Christ, his gospel and his commands that are inseparable from his person and his presence: "The words that I speak to you," he said, "are spirit and life" (John 6:63). But it is the movement of the Spirit in the spiritual formation of the individual personality that transforms the roots of behavior throughout the soul and body of the believer which goes beyond simply hearing and receiving this word. Thus, when we have put on the new person—and we must *act* to do this, as it will not be done for us—we find the outflow of Christ's character from us to be, after all, the fruit of the spirit.

The movements of the spirit of Christ in the embodied personality are often identifiable, tangible events. Frequently they come in the form of individualized 'words' from Christ to his apprentices who are involved in kingdom living. He is our living teacher, and we are not asleep while we walk with him. Spiritual formation in Christ is not simply an unconscious process in which *results* may be observed while the One who works in us remains hidden. We actually experience his workings. We *look* for them, expect them, give thanks for them. We are consciously engaged with him in the details of our existence and our spiritual transformation.

However, it is not the immediacy of such experiences that tells us that it is the Spirit of God in Christ by whom we are being formed. Rather, the proof, if not the comfort, lies in the persons we become and the deeds that flow from us. The tree is known by its fruit. When the Spirit who forms us causes us to love Jesus Christ above all and to walk in his example and deeds (1 Pet. 2:21-23), when it upholds us in *obedience*, then we know that he is the Spirit by which we are formed (2 Cor. 3:17). And with this knowledge as our framework, we may also take comfort in the immediate feeling of the movements of the Spirit in our personalities, lives, and surroundings.

Spiritual formation in Christ is accomplished, and the Great Commission fulfilled, as the regenerate soul makes its highest intent to live in the commandments of Christ, and accordingly makes realistic plans to realize this intent by an adequate course of spiritual disciplines. Of course, no one can achieve this goal by themselves, but no one *has* to. God gives us others to share the pilgrimage, and we will be met by Christ in every step of the way. "Look, I am with you every instant," is what Jesus said; and it is also what he is doing.

We must stop using the fact that we cannot *earn* grace (whether for justification or for sanctification) as an excuse for not

energetically seeking to *receive* grace. Having been found by God, we then become seekers of ever fuller life in him. Grace is opposed to earning, but not to effort. The realities of Christian spiritual formation are that we will not be transformed "into his likeness" by more information, or by infusions, inspirations, or ministrations alone. Though all of these have an important place, they never suffice, and reliance upon them alone explains the now common failure of committed Christians to rise much above a certain level of decency.

At the core of the human being is will, spirit, and heart. This core is reshaped, opening out to the reshaping of the whole life, only by *engagement*. First, engagement is to act with Christ in his example and his commands: "If you love me, keep my commands," he said, "and I will ask the Father to send you another strengthener, the Spirit of truth" (John 14:15-17). The engagement must come first, followed by the helper insofar as obedience is concerned; as we try, fail, and learn, we engage with the spiritual disciplines. We add whole-life training to trying. We recognize that religious business-as-usual, the recommended routine for a "good" church member, is not enough to meet the need of the human soul. The problem of life is too radical for that to be the solution. We enter into activities that are more suited to our actual life condition and that are adequate to transform the whole self under grace, allowing the intention to live the commands of Christ to pass from will to deed.

Christian spiritual formation understood in this way is automatically ecumenical and inclusive in the sense that those thus formed, those who live in obedience to Christ, are thereby united and stand out as the same in their obedience. The substance of obedience is the only thing that can overcome the divisions imposed by encrusted differences in doctrine, ritual, and heritage. The lamp that is aglow in the obedient life *will* shine. The city set on the hill *cannot* be hid. Obedience to Christ from the heart and by the spirit is such a radical reality that those who live in it automatically realize the unity that can never be achieved by direct efforts at union. It is not by effort, but by who we *are*: "I am a companion of all those who fear Thee" (Ps. 119:63, 74).

Some years ago, ecumenism attempted to center around the confession of Christ as Lord. Little came of it because, in the manner to which we have been accustomed by history, the attitudes and actions of real life were left untouched by such a profession. But actual obedience to Christ as Lord would transform ordinary life entirely and bring those disciples who are walking with Christ together wherever their lives touch. Christians who are together in the natural stream of life would immediately identify with one another because of the radically different kind of life, the eternal kind of life, manifestly flowing in them. Their mere non-cooperation with the evil around them would draw them together as magnet and iron. Any other differences would have no significance within the unity of obedience to the Christ who is present in his people.

Now, unfortunately, the other differences (cultural, social, denominational, and even personal) are the ones that govern the disunity of those who nevertheless identify themselves as Christians. Usually the power of these differences are tangibly at work when professing Christians from different groups are together. I cannot really imagine that this disunity would continue if all were centered in actual obedience to Christ. Set the clear intention and implementation on this aim, and all else follows. Without that, what else really matters? Heaven matters, of course, and attaining it surely does not depend upon attaining maturity in Christ. But to plan on that as a course of action, or to teach it as the normal Christian pattern, is quite another matter, one hardly to be recommended by anyone who actually has confidence in Christ.

The proper Christian *exclusiveness* will also be largely taken care of, I believe, by Christian spiritual formation centered on obedience to Christ from transformed personality. This will have the exclusiveness of "the God who answers by fire." Let the other spiritualities be equal to that which flowers into obedience to Christ if they can, and let the others themselves

be the judges. "Their rock is not like our Rock, our enemies being the judge" (Deut. 32:31).

The real issue relating to exclusiveness is whether or not the Christian actually has a relationship with God, a presence of God, which non-Christians do not have. Apart from Christian spiritual formation as described here, I believe there is little value in claiming exclusiveness for the Christian way.

The realization of this may be what is reflected in the current mass abandonment of the exclusiveness of Christianity that is going on among Western Christians now, especially in its academic centers. Why should one insist on the exclusiveness of Christianity if all it is is one more cultural form? But let the reality of Christian spiritual formation come to its fullness, and exclusiveness will take care of itself. If the homosexual, the witch and the warlock, the Buddhist and the Muslim, can truly walk in a holiness and power equal to that of Jesus Christ and devoted followers, there is nothing more to say. But Christ himself, and not Christianity as a form of human culture, is the standard by which 'we' as well as 'they' are to be measured (Acts 17:31).

Perhaps this auspicious occasion in the life of a leading Evangelical training center is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves: Are we seriously and realistically about the business of Christian spiritual formation as measured by unqualified love of Jesus Christ, and as specified by the 'job description' of the Great Commission? How does our work, what we *really* do, actually relate to the charge he has left us. How much of what goes on in ourselves, our local assemblies, our denominations, and our schools is dictated only by "vain conversation received by tradition from our fathers and mothers"? (1 Pet. 1:18).

Suppose we were to engage in ground-zero planning—planning which, armed with the best theological and psychological understanding, considers only the aim without attempting to salvage or justify what is already in place through previous efforts. How much of what we now do would then be omitted? How much of what we now omit would then be done, if *all* we were trying to do was bring ourselves and others "to do all things whatsoever I have commanded you"? This question is surely put to each of us individually, as well as to all our institutions and programs, by the one who said: "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?" (Luke 6:46).³

NOTES

¹See p. 6 of May's *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (Harper 1982). ([back to text](#))

²New York: Alba House, 1992. ([back to text](#))

³For further discussion of the matters discussed in this article, see my *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1988.