

INTRODUCTION

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Christie enjoys hanging out at her neighborhood coffee shop, “Hot Java Lava.” She enjoys the music, the atmosphere, and the international blend of customers who drop in to sit, sip, and chat. “I love the *spiritual* atmosphere they’ve created here,” Christie says.

Through the years, Barry has taken several martial arts and Eastern exercise classes at his local community recreation center. His current favorite is labeled “meditative yoga.” At first he admitted feeling a little weird following his instructor’s advice to spend the first half hour of class completely *freeing his mind*. But now Barry says, “I had no idea how peaceful . . . how *spiritual* . . . these relaxation techniques could be.”

Dr. Evans has made it a requirement that his *Spiritual Life 101* students spend considerable time in service projects to help the underprivileged in his college’s blighted inner-city area. At the outset of his course, Dr. Evans announced, “I can assure you the work you do helping the poor will be more *spiritually forming* than any activity you’ll encounter at your church!”

What is spiritual formation? Certainly both the term itself and the topic as a field of study have become popular discussion fodder in recent years. While many are actively involved in this “process” of study and discussion, others aren’t even sure what the term means—and for good reason! When beginning an investigation into the field of spiritual formation, it’s important to note that its most basic, historic tenets are as old as the early Christian

church, while other aspects of its development are as current as the latest three-day conference with “noted experts in the field.”

This volume explores the foundational underpinnings of spiritual formation and how spiritual formation as an academic discipline functions in several key arenas. Each of the contributors to this text teaches on the topic and/or labors in the field of vocational Christian ministry, with an emphasis on spiritual formation.

The Change Process: Physical and Spiritual

At the most basic, foundational level of any discussion on spiritual formation is the topic of change, and it is there we must start.

The ideas and patterns involved in the process of spiritual formation involve a Christian changing or maturing from one form to another. The idea of *spiritual* change can be illustrated by comparing it to another way in which humans desire change. Scores of us long to change our *physical* appearance. And change in the physical arena is similar to change in the spiritual realm.¹

Many North Americans are interested in changing the “form” of their bodies. People spend millions of dollars annually on exercise programs, diet pills, and health club memberships. Weight-loss books continually top the best-seller lists. And now, liposuction, plastic surgery, and a drastic technique called “stomach banding” are becoming routine for many. The fact that so many overweight people want to change their appearance or physical form has made the weight-loss industry an economic force all its own. People are desperate for physical change!

In a similar way, God desires that his children see change in their physical *and* spiritual lives. God desires nothing less than to transform or reformat our lives.² Change in one’s physical appearance is fairly easy to detect. When a person loses weight, clothes hang a little more loosely, muscles begin to appear where flab once reigned, and others take notice of the new slimmed-down appearance. However, changes in our inner condition—our character and our spiritual life—are not so easy to see. Change on the inside is often hard to detect and measure.

How do believers know whether they are becoming more and more like Jesus Christ? How do we measure or benchmark a maturing Christ follower? What are the telltale signs we could or should chart? Which “dashboard lights” should flash when authentic, Christlike change is occurring? And for those of us who plow in fields of vocational Christian ministry,

1. This is not to imply that the spiritual realm does not closely integrate with the physical also. A healthy, balanced approach to spiritual formation involves a focus on both our material *and* immaterial aspects.

2. Whether we like it or not, we’ve already been formed by our family of origin, life-style choices, habits and patterns of thinking, and influences from outside sources. What God longs to do is *transform* (Rom. 12:2) us into his habits and patterns of thinking and relating. Our minds need to be reformed by Scripture and the godly influence of fellow believers.

how do we know if and when those we are working with are learning and growing in the faith we are proclaiming?

Spiritual Formation Communities

Again, the most basic parameters of any discussion on spiritual formation must include the idea of life change. Inherent in the idea of spiritual formation is the notion that a particular person is being changed (formed) at the core of the person's being (spirit). Some of these changes can be seen immediately—like when a friend begins to practice kindness instead of anger. Other transformations take longer to notice—like when a person begins to understand the importance of practicing concepts such as stillness or gratitude before God in order to improve his or her patience or gratefulness.

The second most basic, foundational underpinning of the spiritual formation process is the idea of *other persons*, or those in one's particular *community*. That is, change for the Christian does not normally involve change that occurs in isolation from others. The change we seek is not change for change's sake. And the change we seek is not solely for self-improvement. Christians are to be *in process* and undergoing renovation so that the individual believer is able to influence and interact with *others* in a more Christlike manner. Christians are *in process for influence*.

Purpose of This Book

A primary purpose of this volume is to introduce and explore the subject of spiritual formation for those who have not read widely in the field or studied the topic in depth. In the first section, we begin by exploring the *foundational* aspects of spiritual formation. What is the philosophy and theory informing the discipline? What does the Bible have to say about this discipline? The second section is devoted to several key *functional* aspects of this field of study. How is spiritual formation practiced? How does it work in our congregations, ministries, and schools and in our daily lives?

It is helpful to understand at the outset that spiritual formation is not defined by one particular approach. It is not a specific twelve-step program, an ongoing accountability group, or a specific study of a biblical passage or a theological doctrine (although all of these disciplines and more may be involved at times). It is not closely tied with one particular denomination or a specific group of Christians. While spiritual formation means different things to different groups and definitions are agreeably difficult to arrive at, at the very least we can state the following two principles with conviction. First, *spiritual formation is the holistic work of God in a believer's life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ*. And second, *the change or transformation that occurs in the believer's life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others*.

Formation as Change

Change is not optional for the believer in Jesus Christ. It's tragic when a small child does not grow and mature into adolescence and adulthood. Everyone knows something is not right when a child does not learn to walk, talk, or function on his own. Similarly, developmental change is certainly expected for the growing Christ follower. To encourage the early followers of Christ in Corinth toward the process of life change, the apostle Paul wrote,

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are *being transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18 NASB, emphasis mine)

One glorious day all those who have placed their trust in Christ (justification) will enter into God's presence (glorification) and enjoy a long-awaited pilgrim's rest. But until that day, each of us who places faith in Jesus Christ and is living out the life of faith here on earth is being (present tense) transformed (sanctification) into the image and likeness of our Savior. The term for this change process is *spiritual formation*, and a description and discussion of the activities and habits that inform the change are the topic of this book.³

The Terms Spiritual and Formation

One way to arrive at what we mean by spiritual formation is to define the terms and provide understandable "flesh" to the sometimes overly academic "bones." By using the term *spiritual*, we are referring to the dynamic, holistic, maturing relationship between the individual believer and God, and between the individual believer and others (both believers and unbelievers). It is a dynamic interaction in that there is movement. The relationships involved are not static. Since God is spirit, the inherent nature of the relationship is primarily immaterial, yet carried out in our bodies.⁴

Another reason why the relationship is described as dynamic or interactive is because the relationship should be continually growing, improving, and maturing. All Christian believers should be growing while learning what it means to live by faith and follow Jesus Christ on a daily basis.

3. We have chosen to use the popular term *spiritual formation* because of its wide use. However, one could also accurately label this process Christian formation, spiritual transformation, or Christian transformation. Theologians use the Latin word *sanctus* (holy, set apart for service) and label the process of growth toward Christlikeness *sanctification*.

4. Jesus' original disciples physically walked and talked with him as they carried out their religious apprenticeship. While today's Christians do not physically interact with Jesus of Nazareth, we follow the scriptural mandate to closely interact with the corporate body of Christ; that is, we should live in authentic Christian community with our believing brothers and sisters. The Christian is not to live in isolation.

When we use the term *formation*, we mean the ongoing process of the believer's actions and habits being continually transformed (morphed) into the image of Jesus Christ. Make no mistake: maturing as a Christian is a process. It is not a second step, a higher plane, a sacred blessing, or a lightning bolt moment when God invades and brings the Christian to a perfected place. A lifelong transformation is set into motion when one places his or her faith in Jesus Christ and seeks to follow him (discipleship, apprenticeship). Notice how the apostle Paul uses the idea of lifestyle transformation (process) when he writes:

Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed* to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. (Rom. 8:29 NET, emphasis mine)

And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18 NET, emphasis mine)

Do not be conformed to this present world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Rom. 12:2 NET, emphasis mine)

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is *formed* in you . . . (Gal. 4:19, emphasis mine)

Individual and Corporate Aspects of Growth

In the current renewal of spiritual formation programs, classes, and small groups, one of the key elements making this fresh movement attractive is the intentional attempt to include both the individual and the corporate aspects of maturity in Christ. Evangelical leaders believe in the importance of the Christian becoming individually conformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. And they take seriously those admonishments that call the believer to mature and grow in Jesus Christ. But problems arise when an overemphasis is placed on the individual believer—apart from his or her Christian community.⁵

In addition to individual growth, we also must seriously consider the many scriptural admonishments calling for growth *in* and *within* the body

5. Much of the current evangelical discussion surrounding Christian growth emanates from an individualistic and privatized viewpoint. How many times have we seen books or seminars titled: *You and Jesus*, *You and Your Bible*, or *You and Your Growth*? However, the New Testament exclusively speaks of growth in community, so that the “you” is in a second-person plural form. The New Testament approach would have these same topics read: *You All and Jesus*, *You All and Your Bible*, or even the southern colloquial form, *Y'all and Your Growth*.

of Christ as well. The Christian life is not to be lived in isolation but in interaction with other believers, as well as nonbelievers. Christian growth and maturity is best measured by those who know us well.

In other words, all believers should be growing as individual believers *in community*. This means Christians should find their place of service and participation within the larger, corporate body, the church. This is why a helpful spiritual formation program or study requires one to carve out an intentional time or space to be spent with other people in an attempt to provide a context for real life change. While spending time in solitude is necessary, even vital, life change happens best in the context of authentic, biblical community.

Many of the New Testament writers, picking up where Jesus left off, use the metaphor of the body to describe the church. The church is a living organism made up of mutually supporting members who interact with each other in highly interdependent, not independent, ways. Real Christian growth is always growth “in the body.” There are no healthy “lone rangers,” or isolated Christians, in the church. The goal is to know and to be known by other believers.

A Sports Metaphor

I enjoy golf. I have played for many years. No one ever masters golf, yet one can improve and grow as a golfer. What would it take for me to grow and learn as a golfer? Well, for one I need to be actively involved in the game. I may decide to take lessons from a professional or someone who is developmentally further along in the game. Second, I need to practice. I can't transform my golf game by wishful thinking or by hoping I can score better. I need to pick up my clubs, get out on the golf course, and practice.

No one would think it odd if I even set aside a specific time each week to practice, say, every Wednesday afternoon. Finally, I need to check in with others to see how my game is progressing. I need to play a round of golf with friends or possibly enter a tournament to see if I am maturing as a golfer.

And so it is with the Christian life. Spiritual formation involves the believer's intentional attempt at setting aside sacred spaces (intentional times) for God to bring about life change. It is healthy to regularly meet with other believers for prayer, confession, or accountability. Using *lectio divina*⁶ or practicing spiritual disciplines⁷ is not a quick fix or a shortcut to Christian

6. *Lectio divina* (lit. “words from God” or “sacred readings”) is a historic spiritual discipline that invites the reader or hearer of a particular Scripture passage to contemplate or even meditate on a specific word or phrase from the passage in an attempt at carrying the thought throughout the day and seeking to implement the idea into one's life (see Ps. 1:2). It is critical that meditation be done with Scripture. Nowhere does the Bible advocate “clearing” or “emptying” one's mind. These are pagan notions.

7. For a helpful overview of spiritual disciplines, see Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1999).

growth. In the same way no one would question my motives in practicing for golf or taking lessons from a professional, Christians need feel no shame in admitting we need help from others in implementing the life change we seek.

Growth Comes from God

God is the one who enables and brings about the change. However, all believers are called to seek to implement life change *with others*. This is why the relationship between the believer and the Holy Spirit is dynamic, interactive, and purposeful. Salvation is more than justification alone or escaping the penalty of sin. For too long, salvation has been defined only as going to heaven, not hell, after death. Salvation also includes the process of sanctification and yielding to God in order to avoid the power, not only the penalty, of sin. You were not saved to escape from this world and dwell in a cave or sit on a pole somewhere. When God is ready to bring you into his presence (glorification) to escape the very presence of sin, he will do it in his good time. But until then, Christians are to be about the business of growth and mission in the world. Christ followers are called to become salt and light in the world.

God's Work, Man's Cooperation

Theologians often wrestle with using the right language to describe how a person comes to faith in Christ. Obviously, God calls, or woos, the lost person. And yet, in a mysterious way, the individual is also responsible to respond to the call, to respond in faith. This call and response is as valid in the process of sanctification (the resultant life of salvation) as it is in the process of justification (the moment of salvation).

God continually calls the individual believer into a deeper, more mature walk of faith. God uses his Word, his church, other believers, circumstances, prayer, and a host of other vehicles to bring individuals and communities of believers into close, intimate relationship. The Scriptures warn that an individual believer can “grieve” the Holy Spirit because of wrong choices or sin (Eph. 4:30).

In addition, believers are continually admonished to grow, to walk worthy, to not stumble, to press on, and to run the race. We are told to work out our salvation, and to strive, to yield, to obey, and even to be holy.

So then, the process of spiritual formation (the believer becoming more like Christ) is a mysterious outworking of *both* God's initiative and involvement over time *and* a concerted response or action plan by the individual believer who fully understands that growth graciously proceeds from God. And again, the process of spiritual formation certainly involves the individual, yet it takes place in community and with others. The “bride” of Christ is not an individual believer but instead is the collection of believers called “the church.”

Spiritual Formation and Marriage

Another metaphor that illustrates this dynamic relationship between God and the believer is seen in the picture of marriage, the relationship the apostle Paul called a mystery or illustration of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:23–33). In a marriage relationship, each partner must work at growing closer to the other. Each partner should learn what the other loves and appreciates. Any marriage relationship that is not growing and maturing quickly becomes routine and stagnant.

In my marriage I can choose to work at serving well or at being served. Over time I may begin to view my spouse as one who has been put on the planet to meet my needs and bring me happiness. Or, hopefully, I begin to see myself as one uniquely called upon and graciously gifted to joyfully serve my spouse regardless of the response or outcome—my own happiness being a potential by-product.

Jesus Christ calls all who would follow him to *take up their cross*. That is, Jesus Christ asks each of us to die to our own individualistic and privatized dreams, desires, and life plans and humbly and sensitively follow him into new avenues of relationship and service in the Christian kingdom. He asks us to allow him to form us and shape us into his own desired ends. Since God is Creator, he has at his disposal any means necessary to eventually bring about this type of close conformity. Are you up for the spiritual formation challenge?

Toward a Definition

Since this is an introduction to spiritual formation, we must begin with a working definition that will hold us in good stead as we explore the many subtopics related to our larger topic. Spiritual formation, then, is *the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ—accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community*.

This process should not be divided into the spiritual and physical, or private and public, or secular and sacred. It involves the integrated, whole person—one's manner of thinking, habits and behaviors, and manner of relating with God and others—and it should result in a life of loving God and loving others well.

Introducing the Contributors

The unique contribution this interdisciplinary book makes is twofold. First, it is penned from a thoroughly evangelical stance. Since the contributors hold to the inerrant, authoritative, revealed Word of God and are convinced of its primacy in relation to truth and its standard of authority as a rule for living, they believe spiritual formation should never be practiced in isolation from Holy Scripture. Second, this book emphasizes the individual believer being rooted in and surrounded by an authentic, biblical Christian community (God's people), and this community involvement is held to be of utmost importance.

We may be so bold as to assert that the New Testament writers do not encourage the believer to seek growth in isolation or to see formation occur only individually. Jesus always called individuals to join with others who had taken up his kingdom cause as a “way of life.” Can you imagine your thumb growing individually, apart from the rest of your hand?

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a part of the body of Christ and are connected to the other members of the body. We are to grow in relation to, not apart from, the other members. The body metaphor is not simply a catchy way of describing Christianity—it is Christianity! It is the manner in which God designed his kingdom program to operate. We are not called to carry our cross in isolation. We are not called to growth in isolation. We are not called to maturity in isolation. We are called to growth *in the body*. We are called to become spiritually formed *as a body*.

Chapter Previews

In the opening chapter of the foundational section, Jonathan Morrow develops an evangelical theology of spiritual formation, which underpins the process as a whole. He then examines how God spiritually forms believers into the image of Christ with the essential resources of God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s people (the church).

Next, Richard Averbeck, a leading figure in the evangelical spiritual formation movement, shows us how to “look life squarely in the face” by living a life of worship. He writes about worship and spiritual formation because “life looks different when we look at it with God at the center of our vision.”

Then two skilled biblical exegetes lead us into the text of Scripture to ensure we remain grounded in revealed truth. Old Testament scholar Gordon Johnston writes on how the Hebrew word *edah* (community) functioned before the appearance of the Messiah and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. And rounding out our foundational section, prolific New Testament scholar Darrell Bock shows the key role the Spirit of God plays in forming and transforming the people of God. He focuses his attention on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

With a strong foundational emphasis as backdrop, we develop the functional aspects of spiritual formation in part 2. Christian educator Klaus Issler writes on the importance of internal obedience. These “matters of the heart” are often ignored in evangelical circles or dismissed as being “too mystical.” Following in a similar vein, Reid Kisling demonstrates the vital connection between character development and spiritual formation. He focuses his research and writing on the most significant aspects of character and character development, which are self-transcendence, self-directedness, and cooperativeness.

Next, Bill Miller explores the proper motivation for all true spiritual formation work: love. He shows how much of what passes for Christian maturity is in reality nothing more than “sin management.” Leadership development expert Andy Seidel writes on the importance of an individual

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knowing fully his or her own identity in Christ—even before any leading of others is undertaken in the name of “ministry.”

Field educator George Hillman provides a vocational emphasis with an intriguing chapter on calling and service in the body of Christ. Certainly every member of the body is a minister, but how does one know whether to enter into ministry as a vocation? The chapter by Hillman and the creative writing of Gail Seidel help answer that pressing question by calling the reader to examine his or her own “life story.” One can often see where God is leading an individual believer over time, by sensitively listening and looking at where God has already led in the past.

Finally, pastor Harry Shields takes us inside the walls of the local congregation to show how public preaching impacts spiritual formation. He argues that the Word of God proclaimed can be one of the primary means God uses to bring about significant life change.