

Toward a Definition of Spiritual Formation

By Jeffrey P. Greenman & Donald Goertz

In recent years across a wide spectrum of Christian denominations there has been a proliferation of interest in the topic of “spiritual formation” and a resurgence of the practice of “spiritual direction.” What do these important, but sometimes elusive, terms mean? What are the biblical and theological contours of “spiritual formation”? How does “spiritual formation” relate to “spiritual direction”?

In this article we attempt to elucidate the working definition of spiritual formation that shapes Tyndale Seminary’s approach to the subject.¹ In our required course in spirituality, in our Spiritual Formation major within the Master of Divinity degree, and as we prepare men and women to serve as spiritual directors, we are guided by a statement that reads: *“Spiritual formation is the continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith for the sake of the world.”*

The place to begin is with the observation that spiritual formation is understood as an ongoing process for Christians. Spiritual formation is not a “program” or “project” or “course” that is completed in a few weeks, but rather is a lifelong process of transformation. While there can be decisive steps forward or dramatic spiritual insights in a moment, the focus here is on fostering the gradual and progressive movement into spiritual depth and personal growth. Faith in Jesus Christ sustains a lifelong journey toward spiritual maturity or wholeness found in him. This process cannot be reduced to learning how to “do things for the Lord” because it is primarily a matter of cultivating an intimate relationship with God. This is a continuous challenge, “running the race with perseverance” (Heb. 12:1). For this reason, the statement refers to the dynamic of “continuing response.”

The process of spiritual formation is not defined by someone’s search within themselves for spiritual health, but rather by a “continuing response to the reality of God’s grace.” From this perspective we see that spiritual formation is not the product of human effort or personal willpower, but a matter of God’s own initiative and God’s decisive action. In theological terms, “grace” speaks of the unmerited gift of God’s love and mercy, shown supremely in Christ’s death and resurrection. Our definition seeks to reflect the biblical logic of divine grace that is exemplified in the truth that “we love, because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). As Christians, our vocation is to respond in faith, trust and obedience to the Good News that we have received in Christ, and to welcome God’s transforming power into our lives.

Divine grace speaks not merely of a past reality by referring backward to an experience of salvation; grace also is a present reality that informs the current experience of the Christian life. God’s grace has shaped us, and is “shaping us” from day to day, and will shape us in the future. What are we being shaped into? The goal of spiritual formation is to be transformed “into the likeness of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). Because being “conformed to the image of his Son” is the ultimate purpose of God’s saving work through the cross and resurrection, “becoming like Christ” means participating in the salvation accomplished by Jesus—knowing Christ in the “power of his resurrection” and in

“the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Phil 3:10). Being “conformed to Christ” means embracing a way of life given a distinctive shape expressed in obedience to God and marked by self-sacrifice and humble service of others, the kind of life that Jesus demonstrated during his earthly ministry.

The definition explains that becoming like Christ happens “through the work of the Holy Spirit.” It is God’s own work, through the Spirit, to bring about Christ’s character in us, and it is our calling to cooperate with God in this process. Participation in the life of Christ, by the Spirit, reproduces the character of Christ in his followers. The distinctive virtues of Christian faith are the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

This sort of transformation of heart, mind and spirit is not something that can be accomplished satisfactorily by individuals in isolation. Spiritual formation involves personal spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, confession, fasting, and biblical meditation, as well as corporate participation in the congregation’s shared life of worship, fellowship, teaching and service. For this reason, our definition asserts that spiritual formation takes place “in the community of faith.” Christians belong to one another as members of Christ’s body, which becomes the communal context for mutual encouragement, mentoring, and accountability. This commitment runs contrary to the highly individualistic tendency of contemporary North American culture.

The definition concludes with the affirmation that the appropriate result of spiritual formation is the Christian’s active participation in serving God and sharing in God’s work in the world. The phrase, “for the sake of the world,” reminds us that personal growth or spiritual depth involves not merely loving God, but loving our neighbours as ourselves (Lk 10:27). As people who are sent out into the world as witnesses to Christ (Jn 20:21), the mark of a genuine spiritual formation is our capacity to reflect Christ as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14). Growth into the likeness of Christ accompanies our participation in Christ’s mission to the world, in the power of the Spirit.

“Spiritual direction,” an ancient ministry of the church, is undertaken by men and women who serve as guides for the Christian’s journey of faith. Spiritual directors accompany Christians in their pursuit of “spiritual formation” as we have described it. While there is value in spiritual friendships and ongoing Christian fellowship, the term “spiritual direction” usually refers to a more formalized, structured and intentional relationship. Through regular meetings, a spiritual director (or guide, or mentor) provides discernment, accountability and encouragement to a person seeking a disciplined response to God as someone who desires to grow spiritually, to discern God’s presence in their lives, to read God’s voice and to discover intimacy with God in prayer. These goals distinguish spiritual direction from counselling or therapy.

May 2005

¹ The definition was drafted collaboratively by Gladys Chan, Jeffrey Greenman, Donald Goertz, Alan Grills, Kaarina Hsieh, David Sherbino, and Geri Schinkel.

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