Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered
Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered

Growing in Christ through Community

James C. Wilhoit

Foreword by Dallas Willard
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Formation through the Ordinary

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Jesus, in Matthew 28:19–20 NLT

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.”

Dallas Willard

It takes time, and the penetration of the truth, to make a mature saint.

Richard F. Lovelace

Spiritual Formation: The Task of the Church

Spiritual formation is the task of the church. Period. It represents neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body of Christ. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to form. Our charge, given by Jesus himself, is to make disciples, baptize them, and teach these new disciples to obey his commands (Matt.
28:19–20). The witness, worship, teaching, and compassion that the church is to practice all require that Christians be spiritually formed. Although formation describes the central work of the church, and despite a plethora of resolutions, programs, and resources, the fact remains that spiritual formation has not been the priority in the North American church that it should be.

A safe food supply, clean drinking and recreational waters, sanitation, and widespread vaccinations have improved the quality of our life. These interventions have eliminated diseases like smallpox and polio. These advances, and scores more, are part of the fruit of the public health movement that came to fruition in the twentieth century. I take many of these for granted, assuming that they are just part of life, but in many parts of the world they are not widely present. Currently 250,000 children die every year from measles, a disease easily prevented through vaccinations. We take for granted public health initiatives of the last century that have had measurable, positive social benefits. In medicine, the two tasks of prevention and cure must work hand in hand. Cures may provoke media attention and buzz; however, it is the preventative and public health interventions that generally provide the real “bang for your buck.” Likewise, spiritual formation makes its greatest contribution through quiet, hardly noticeable, behind-the-scenes work that places an emphasis on “prevention” and equipping rather than just on crisis interventions or headline-grabbing public conferences and programs.

Consider the effects of the painstakingly established public health infrastructure in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Since 1900, the average lifespan of persons in the United States has lengthened by greater than 30 years; 25 years of this gain are attributable to advances in public health.” The quiet and seemingly ordinary work of public health has made a tremendous difference in our life expectancy and in the overall quality of life. When one looks at the list of the CDC’s “Ten Great Public Health Achievements,” they appear so reasonable that their implementation seems to be obvious to all. For the list includes now widely accepted “best practices” like vaccination, motor-vehicle safety, safer and healthier foods, and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard. Yet society implemented these strategies, which seem so commonsensical today, only after long struggles, careful science that established their efficacy, and the slow and ongoing work of public education.

Some years ago a young physician summarized his medical-care trip to Central America by telling of the long days he worked caring for patients. He concluded his story by saying that he was convinced that he could have done more long-term good with one hundred meters of PVC pipe. So many of the people he treated suffered from medical conditions that
were the result of the village’s contaminated water supply—a problem that could have been easily remedied.

In this chapter, I want to begin to identify what the spiritual formation equivalent of safe drinking water and vaccinations might be. What are the patterns in Christian community life that make a positive contribution to spiritual formation? What are the community practices that we can so easily overlook or underutilize, but that help create a climate of formation in a church?

For many years I have been listening to the stories of how faithful people have grown in grace. These accounts pulse with deep drama. I’ve realized that Paul was not using hyperbole when he told the Galatians, “I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). These stories are unique—unique as the people who tell them—and I want to be careful not to simply reduce their amazing tales of grace to a few abstract principles. However, themes and patterns do emerge when we look at the stories as a whole. While patterns of formation emerge, there does not exist anything approaching a “technology of spiritual formation.” Formation remains a messy and imprecise business, where character, wisdom, and faith play a far greater role than theories and techniques. Ironically, one value of engagement in deliberate formation is that it drives us to prayer because it reminds us, more than popular how-to books do, that true formation comes from grace and by grace, channeled through our humble efforts. This is not to deny what others have observed, that “spiritual formation in Christ is an orderly process.” 

Spiritual formation is certainly a multifactorial process that requires us to constantly ask God what we should be doing, rather than relying on our power and skill.

**Community Spiritual Formation Corollary 1**

All persons are formed spiritually. It may be in either a positive or negative direction. This formation may involve the cultivation of virtues that promote trust in God and foster social compassion or may leave persons wary, self-protective, and unable to promote the welfare of society.

**Either-Or**

The influential twentieth-century philosopher-educator John Dewey complained that educators were constantly guilty of “either-or” thinking. Instead of recognizing the need for both experience and educational content in schools, he said these writers tended to emphasize one at the
Christian Spirituality—The Ongoing Results of Formation

Widely Shared Patterns in Stories of Spiritual Growth

1. Christian spirituality begins with a response to the call of Spirit to spirit. Issues that appear to be primarily psychological in nature often have a deeper spiritual significance. The first steps of response to the call of Spirit to spirit are often not consciously spiritual.

2. Christian spirituality is rooted in a commitment to Jesus and a transformational approach to life. Christian spirituality is not simply a state; we do better to think of it as a process.

3. Christian spirituality is nurtured by the means of grace. Scriptures, prayer, the sacraments, and Christian fellowship all serve as media through which we may uniquely receive grace.

4. Christian spirituality involves a deep knowing of Jesus and, through him, the Father and the Spirit. Christian spirituality is grounded in knowing, not knowledge. Knowing God requires that we believe that God wants to be known. While God reaches out to us, he is also boundless mystery. Christian spirituality involves the grounding of the human spirit in the divine Spirit.

5. Christian spirituality requires a deep knowing of oneself. People who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will be equally afraid to look deeply and personally at God. It is important to remember that self-knowledge is simply the means, not the end, of Christian spirituality.

6. Christian spirituality leads to the realization of the unique self that God ordained each of us should be. Properly understood, the denial that is a part of Christian spirituality is not of self but of false selves. Christian spirituality does not call for the renunciation of humanness, trading humanity for divinity. It does not make us less human but more human.

7. Christian spirituality is uniquely developed within the context of suffering. Openness to suffering is really openness to life. Suffering is an inevitable part of life, and if we are to be open to any of life, we must be open to it all. Openness to life means living it with willingness, not willfulness. Christ is the epitome of life lived with willingness.

8. Christian spirituality is manifest by a sharing of the goodness of God’s love with others and in care for his creation. Christian spirituality involves participation in God’s kingdom plan for the restoration of the totality of his creation.

9. Christian spirituality expresses the goodness of celebration in Christian community. Celebration and community are the unmistakable marks of mature Christian spirituality.

continued ➤
Summary: If spirituality is our response to deep foundational yearnings for meaning, identity, connections, and surrender, what part of our psychological functioning could possibly be excluded from such a quest? If anything is excluded from our spirituality, it will by necessity become a dissociated part of ourself, detached from the rest of our life. Whether this be our body, our unconscious, our emotions, our intellect, our sexuality, or any other part of ourself, the result is always the same—a fragmentation of personhood and an encapsulated spirituality. Christian spirituality either makes us more whole or, if it is contained in some limited sphere of our being, furthers our fragmentation. Only wholeness is worthy of being associated with the Spirit of Christ, who empowers, directs, and gives name to the experience we have been calling Christian spirituality.

Adapted from Care of Souls by David G. Benner. Used by permission.

expense of the other. We could count the same as true for writers about the Christian life. In the next three sections we will look at three sets of images of the spiritual life: nurture (agriculture, gardening, human growth, intimacy), the journey (race, battle, struggle), and death and resurrection (dying with Christ, being born again). To capture the complexities and nuances of Christian spiritual formation, the biblical writers employed these images, and we would do well to honor their emphasis on nurture, training, and resurrection.

Images of Christian Life and Nurture

Jesus and John the Baptist challenged their hearers with the need to produce good “fruit” (Matt. 21:43) and “fruit” originating in a true repentance (3:8). Jesus used a maxim in fruit growing to show how one can judge a person’s character: “A healthy tree produces good fruit, and an unhealthy tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. . . . Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit that is produced” (7:17–18, 20 NLT). Jesus illustrated how our heart condition affects our response to the gospel by his parable of the sower and the seed. When he explained the meaning of it to his followers, he told them, “But the good soil represents honest, good-hearted people who hear God’s message, cling to it, and steadily produce a huge harvest” (Luke 8:15 NLT). The image of Jesus as the true vine (John 15) vividly communicates the spiritual truth that we need to stay spiritually connected to Christ. Incidentally, we often misread this image as being just about “me abiding in Jesus,” when the actual...
image and language has a strong community focus: when the branches are connected to the vine, a marvelous crop of grapes is produced. The concreteness of agriculture makes the more abstract subject of spiritual formation less abstract and more comprehensible.

The biblical writers also used agriculture to capture part of the interplay between human and divine in formation. This is seen when Paul described the work he and Apollos did and then asserted that “God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor. 3:7 Message) is the true cause of all the spiritual growth. Yet in saying this, he does not diminish the importance of their participation. Agriculture requires sustained and systematic work performed at the right time and carried out with an experience-based expertise, but all human efforts are subject to weather, pests, disease, and war. Agriculture illuminates the beautiful symmetry between God and his people that is at play in the process of spiritual formation. Therefore, we go about our formation work doing what we can and being prayerfully receptive, especially about those areas outside our direct influence.

“You happen to be God’s field in which we are working” (1 Cor. 3:9 Message). The field is the primary location of the work of farming. To flourish, a field must be cultivated, planted, tended, watered, protected, and harvested. The illustration is a communal or population-based image. The farmer is more concerned with the total crop than with one individual plant. In many of the New Testament agricultural images, the focus is on the big picture, on how abundant the harvest is, and not just on the output of a single plant. Nevertheless, there must be a both-and emphasis on the individual and the group in spiritual formation.

**Images of Christian Life as Journey and Struggle**

Paul uses imagery drawn from the Hellenic games to illustrate the need for training and discipline in the Christian life.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24–27)

The emphasis of this race image is a call for Corinthian believers to adopt the singular focus of a trained athlete who follows Christ. In Philippians 3:13–14 Paul describes his own athletelike straining to pursue Christ well. “The image of ‘straining forward, . . . press on toward the goal’ evokes the picture of the racer who looks neither to the left nor to the right to
check the progress of the competition or be swayed by any diversion.”

In the Pastoral Epistles the imagery is developed further: the importance of rigorous training (1 Tim. 4:7–8), endurance (4:8), following the rules so that one is not disqualified (2 Tim. 2:5), and winning an imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:25). The emphasis in this set of images is on the need for training, discipline, and rigor.

Satan was soundly defeated at the cross as Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15 NIV), and yet biblical writers recognized that Satan is still active and a great cause of distress for Christians. He is busy in his constant work of accusation (Rev. 12:10) and “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8 NLT). We now live between the time of the cross and the final victory. The church is called to wage battle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). This struggle against the dark spiritual forces is both a corporate responsibility and a personal one for every Christian.

A concern about the battle imagery for sanctification is that often it is presented in a way that emphasizes struggle and risk such that a life of grace-dependency is diminished. Not many writers are as adroit as John Bunyan in *The Holy War* in capturing the reality of this spiritual struggle without minimizing the place of grace in the midst of the struggle. The armor-of-God imagery from Ephesians is full of battle, struggle, alertness to Satan’s craftiness, and God-given grace/power. We are told from the outset of this passage that we are to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” (Eph. 6:10), and the description “whole armor of God” (6:11) reminds us that the armor is of God’s design. God gives the battle armor to those he has called, but apparently the armor could just sit and gather dust. Ephesians therefore admonishes us to “take up the whole armor of God” (6:13). As would be true for a first-century soldier, most of the armor is defensive. The only offensive weapon is Scripture, here described as the sword of the Spirit (6:17).

At an individual level the battlefield is the human heart. In Proverbs we are admonished, “Guard your heart, for it affects everything you do” (Prov. 4:23 NLT). The heart/soul is the center of our being and where our growth is solidified. We are warned not to give a “foothold to the Devil” (Eph. 4:27 NLT) and instructed to wage war against “the Devil’s strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–4 NLT). The picture here is of a territorial battle that is being keenly contested. The battle will turn as we or the enemies are able to secure footholds and establish strongholds. Again, our temptation may be to see the battle merely in individual terms, but Jesus declared that the “gates of hell shall not prevail against” the church (Matt. 16:18 KJV), the corporate might of the body of Christ.
Images of Christian Life and the Resurrection

The death-rebirth pattern is an archetypal paradigm present through the pages of the Bible. The pattern shows itself in the flood (Gen. 6–9), as God destroys the entire world, except for Noah’s family and selected animals, and then brings forth life on the earth out of the barrenness of the destruction. Poignantly summarizing the image, Noah plants a vineyard: “After the Flood, Noah became a farmer and planted a vineyard” (Gen. 9:20 NLT). In the exodus, the people of Israel experience a rebirth, after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, when they escape from the deathlike grip of bondage, moving out to worship and serve God. The pattern is immediately repeated in the death zone of the wilderness, followed by the birthlike entrance into life in the promised land. This imagery “from death to rebirth underlies most of the OT, preoccupied as it is with lament giving way to praise, servitude to freedom, exile to return.”

Certainly the central image of resurrection in the New Testament is that of Jesus’ death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. The victory of death secured by the resurrection event is the basis of the Christian’s claim to new life. Jesus described the Christian’s regeneration as a person being born again (John 3:1–8). When we trust Christ for salvation, God makes us alive. “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5). The central Christian initiation ceremony of baptism symbolizes death and rebirth. Paul says that believers are “buried” with Christ: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).

This imagery of death and resurrection is often missing in much contemporary spiritual formation literature. The absence of these radical and supernatural components can reduce spiritual formation to little more than religious self-help. This is unfortunate because these are the images reminding us that true formation is first and foremost the work of our forming God. Jesus’ death and resurrection make our true formation possible and provide the grace we need to experience true spiritual change.

These three image families—nurture, journey and struggle, and death/resurrection—capture many of the essential elements of spiritual formation. Though in our personal devotional lives we may find that certain images resonate more deeply with us, it is important in our teaching ministry that we provide a balanced treatment of these images. Other people may be at a point where a cluster of images other than our favorites may help to illuminate the path they need to travel. Additionally, the
“whole counsel of Scripture” uses these multiple images in a way that safeguards us from promoting an imbalanced approach to the spiritual life. An effective way to evaluate a community’s Christian formation practices is to review the comprehensive set of formation images found in Scripture and compare those to the images used in its worship, teaching, and discipleship.

What Spiritual Formation Is

The Gospel orients us not so much to an object as to a person. The Gospel, then, is not so much belief that as it is belief in.

Kenneth J. Collins

Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. I need to highlight a few implications in the definition. First, I described it as an intentional process to distinguish it from the broad sense in which spiritual formation refers to all the cultural forces, activities, and experiences that shape people’s spiritual lives. In this book I am interested in exploring the more intentional and deliberate side of spiritual formation—what is taught and sought more than merely caught. Second, I have described it as communal because the Christian life is best lived in community, where worship, fellowship, and service are practiced, and spiritual formation takes place in, through, and for community. Spiritual transformation must extend beyond the individual to the church, the family, and society.

Third, I described spiritual formation as a process, thereby implying that formation is a long-term, lifelong venture, and that it results from a multidimensional ministry, not just a technique or program. Consequently, while small groups, teaching, accountability structures, and individual spiritual practices can all have a role in spiritual formation, no single dimension of church life can carry out this task alone. Fourth, the focus of spiritual formation is becoming more like Jesus. Fifth, we can never accomplish this through our own power; we need the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Community Spiritual Formation Corollary 2

Christian spiritual formation: (1) is intentional; (2) is communal; (3) requires our engagement; (4) is accomplished by the Holy Spirit; (5) is for the glory of God and the service of others; and (6) has as its means and end the imitation of Christ.
Biblical Images of Spiritual Formation

Christian life and nurture. These images emphasize the gradual but certain changes that mark the Christian life that results from nurture. The dominant metaphor used here comes from the growth seen in plants and animals that are well cared for. Also included in this group are images of the interior. In an age obsessed with beauty and impression management, the spiritual life invites us to cultivate and attend first to our interiors.

Potter and clay. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8).

Apprentice/disciple. “An apprentice does not lecture the master. The point is to be careful who you follow as your teacher” (Luke 6:40 Message).

Vine and branches. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Hunger and thirst. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

Famine/drought. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

Growth. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6–7).

Human growth. “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

Plants. “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:7–8).

Heart/soul. “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).
Christian life as journey and struggle. These images capture the call for personal responsibility, action, and discipleship that mark the Christian life.

Journey. “You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ” (3 John 6–7). Early Christians were known as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2).

Coming home. “At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord” (Zeph. 3:20).

Brokenness. “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3).

Athletics. “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor. 9:25).

Putting on and taking off. “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom. 13:12). “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12).

Images of battle and struggle. “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:11–12).

The race. “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

Christian life and the resurrection. Basic images to the Christian formation are those of rescue, love, redemption, and justification. While these words have come down to us as theological terms, they are rooted in concrete images like freeing a slave or being declared not guilty in a courtroom. At the heart of these images is God’s initiative who, because of his love, has freed us from that which enslaved us.

Redemption. “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters” (1 Cor. 7:23).

Passover. “Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).
I was nurtured in programs that tended to see Christian education, discipleship, and spiritual formation as things “that happened after the gospel was preached and believed.” The diagram below captures how my mentors related the gospel and patterns of Christian nurture.

**Birth**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Salvation</th>
<th>Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unbeliever</td>
<td><strong>Gospel</strong></td>
<td>Believer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discipleship**

In this view, the gospel contained both the indictment of our sin and the announcement of hope through the cross—a message the unbeliever certainly needed to hear. This “gospel as pre-discipleship” was vividly set forth in a sermon I read recently. The pastor described the gospel as the sure foundation and basement on which we are to build our spiritual house through discipleship/learning. There is a good measure of truth in this, but what is dangerous is when we think the gospel is merely the door by which we enter Christianity, something we leave behind as we grow spiritually. The other disturbing element of this sermon was its emphasis on “my building my house,” while little emphasis was placed on grace. Like so many sermons, it seemed to say: God saved me (gospel); now I need to make myself holy (discipleship).

The gospel must permeate any program of Christian spiritual formation. Returning to the cross in awareness of our sin, rebellion, and
Formation through the Ordinary

brokenness is the bedrock of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation’s relation to the gospel looks more like this:\(^\text{10}\)

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{Birth} & \text{Unbeliever} & \text{Salvation} \\
\text{G O S P E L} & \text{Believer} & \text{Death}
\end{array}
\]

Figure 2. Gospel for spiritual formation

Much of our failure in conceptualizing spiritual formation comes from our failure to keep the gospel central to our ministry. Too often people see the gospel as merely the front door to Christianity, or worse, “heaven’s minimum entrance requirement.”\(^\text{11}\) A bifurcation of salvation into a grace-filled regeneration followed by a human-striving sanctification leads to so many spiritual sorrows. The gospel is the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. It is not merely what we need to proclaim to unbelievers; the gospel also needs to permeate our entire Christian experience.

*The Gospel and the Christian*

I remember as a young adult having the gospel explained to me in terms of a bridge diagram. In this diagram a chasm separates God and humankind. This gap is the result of sin and is so enormous that humans cannot bridge it through their own efforts and good works. The person
who presented it to me did so with great gusto and drew various human bridges (e.g., morality, religion, piety, and good works) on the blackboard and showed that all fell short of crossing the gap.

![Figure 4. Bridging the gap](image)

The gospel, as I came to believe, was chiefly about bridging this gap. The cross fills the gap perfectly and provides a way to traverse the great chasm. This is certainly true, “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim. 2:5). Part of the glorious news of the gospel is that we do have a mediator, and peace with God is possible through the cross of Jesus Christ. God, in his love, has bridged the gap fully and invites us into fellowship with him. In this picture, however, the person who has crossed the spiritual gap is still running. The cross seems to become a means of transportation rather than God’s means of transformation. That was my story: running, doing, serving, but thinking very little about the cross on a daily basis. In Lovelace’s words, I was one of those Christians who did not “know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.”

What I did not know then is how hard it is to really live with a sense that the cross fills this gap. The person who showed me this diagram said something like, “Jim, this is true, just like $2 + 2 = 4$. It’s not about emotions, and you just have to believe it.” Not quite. All of my observed
reality supports the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. Yet, much in my life does not seem to support “Jesus paid it all.” My inborn pride rebels at this. The pain and guilt that is a bitter fruit of my sin mocks the atonement. Our society, which increasingly ties our worth to productivity, trains us to deny the cross. Learning that the cross is big enough is a lifelong vocation.

From personal brokenness and reflection I have come to see that the gospel is not simply the door of faith: it must also be a compass I daily use to orient my life and a salve I apply for the healing of my soul. It is in returning again and again to the cross that we receive the grace that transforms us.

The metaphor of a gap between God and humans that needs to be bridged is surprisingly widespread. For instance, the chief priest of ancient Rome was called pontifex maximus, literally, the chief bridge builder. The sense of a divine-human gap is a universal spiritual intuition; even when people deny having this sense, they live as though they must bridge the gap. However, we must be careful to express the reality of this gap in deep spiritual terms. I have sat with people who had little sense that they were sinners but felt deep agony over their inability to walk free from addictions. A gap was present in their life, but they did not understand it as the classic “sin gap.” Rather, it was more akin to a hunger for true freedom.

Many Christians have learned the right answer, “Jesus paid it all,” yet live with a nagging sense of shame and guilt. In times of spiritual counsel I frequently listen to persons who can declare the abstract power of Christ to forgive, heal, save, and restore, and yet they are ravaged with guilt and have no perception of God’s love. Such people need to learn to rest in their identity as a child of God.

**Community Spiritual Formation Corollary 3**

The gospel is the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. It is not merely what we need to proclaim to unbelievers; the gospel also needs to permeate our entire Christian experience.

I remember hearing as a child the story of a single woman who had adopted an orphan boy from Germany. His parents had been killed during the war, and his postwar experience was horrific. While the woman loved her son deeply, it was only in adulthood that he finally began to love her as a son should. His adolescent years were marked by detachment and rebellion, bringing his long-suffering mother great pain and embarrassment. The death of his parents and the betrayals his family had experienced made it so hard for him to live as a son rather than as an orphan. We are beloved children who regularly “don’t get it” and live
Paul on Preaching the Gospel

“To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you . . . hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (Rom. 1:7–15).

Who do we usually think about preaching the gospel to?
- Non-Christians

Who is Paul writing to?
- Roman Christians: “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints. . . . Your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (1:7–8).

Who is Paul eager to preach the gospel to?
- He wants to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome: “hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (1:15).

What is surprising about this?
- We tend to think that the gospel is just for non-Christians.

Why do Christians need to hear the gospel?
- Over time we simply tend to wander from the truth. As God said to his people through Jeremiah, “You love to wander far from me and do not follow in my paths” (Jer. 14:10 NLT).
- All of us have idols at hand, which we use as substitutes for the cross to gain divine favor. The problem of the Galatians is a problem all of us face: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6 ESV).

Why does Paul want to preach to Christians?
- He wants to encourage them and strengthen them spiritually. “I can share a spiritual blessing with you that will help you grow strong in the Lord. I’m eager to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. In this way, each of us will be a blessing to the other” (Rom. 1:11–12 NLT).

What is the gospel?
- The power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). “It may well be said that, in Paul’s view, Jesus Christ is the gospel.” The gospel contains the power to become a Christian and is the source of grace/power needed to live the Christian life.

Questions adapted from Discipling by Grace by World Harvest Mission. Used by permission.
instead as spiritual orphans, constantly trying to earn God’s love and establish our worthiness.

For years, when I read passages like Romans 1:15—“I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome” (NIV)—I assumed it meant that Paul wanted to come and hold an evangelistic campaign in conjunction with the church in Rome. Indeed, he was an evangelist, but he also had a deep burden that those who were already believers should hear and live by the gospel. He goes on to say that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (1:16). Salvation describes the complete process of redemption (from turning to Christ through our sanctification and eventual glorification). The gospel contains the power to become a Christian and is the source of grace needed to live the Christian life.

It is clear from the book of Acts and his letters that Paul was committed to the ministry of the gospel in his work. An essential part of spiritual formation is guarding the gospel from the idols and false gospels that are constantly present in our culture and in all of our lives. What was true for Paul, “You are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6–7 NIV), is also true for us: the gospel is under attack.

True spiritual formation will always carry out a twofold task in relation to the gospel. One is the preaching and teaching of the gospel to promote a depth of understanding, greater trust, and spiritual cleansing and healing. This is the mission of actively presenting the gospel so that people can engage it and use it in their lives. Paul describes the effects of this ministry when he says that as the gospel “is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God” (Col. 1:6). The language shows that we do not simply learn the gospel when we are converted and then move on from there. For Paul, the gospel continually works in us as we understand more and more of its truth and respond to it. The gospel is at work as we seek to live out its teaching on speaking the truth, turning away from lust, diminishing racially biased judgment, and focusing assessment on character and competence. The gospel calls us to discipleship and contains the power to enable us to follow Christ.

The complementary action to proclaiming the gospel is that of confronting the false gospels and idols, which are always present in our lives. In Galatians we see an example of this. Peter and the apostles had insisted that Gentile believers adopt Jewish cultural forms in order to be “real” Christians, thus maintaining their attitudes of racial superiority. As a result, evangelism, worship, and fellowship suffered. Paul
confronted Peter and the apostles about it, calling them to repentance. But when Paul rebuked Peter, he did not say, “Your attitude of racial superiority is immoral” (though it was). Rather, he said, “They were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). The gospel was not growing and bearing fruit in the church because in this area they had not understood God’s grace in all its truth. The gospel of grace should end the self-justifying behavior of cultural pride, a form of works righteousness in which the human heart seeks to use cultural differences as measurements of personal worth. Paul applied the gospel, and the result was a renewal, a great leap forward for the church.

In much of the popular writing on spiritual formation there is a tendency to convey a very stunted view of the gospel. We get the idea that what unbelievers need is the gospel, and then, once they accept Christ as Savior, they move on to “needing discipleship,” which consists of learning about Christ, developing the fruit of the Spirit, learning how to have a quiet time, and so forth. However, the picture that the New Testament gives is remarkably different. We must remember the description of the gospel as the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. Often we do not really understand all the vast implications and applications of the gospel. Only as we apply the gospel more and more deeply and radically—only as we think out all its truth—does it bear fruit and grow. The key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is the persistent rediscovery of the gospel. All our spiritual problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. This is true for us both as a community and as individuals.

The primary motivation behind formation involves understanding the gospel and seeing its fruit grow in our lives. Spiritual formation is a result of the gospel ministry because the way a non-Christian becomes a Christian and the way we grow as Christians are actually the same—believing the gospel more and more. In our culture of self-improvement, which has turned spirituality into a narcissistic pursuit, it seems vital that we do not see spiritual formation as just another route to personal empowerment. Spiritual formation is first and foremost about the gospel. As Peter reminds us, we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge” of the gospel (2 Pet. 3:18), not sit passively in it or take it for granted. Let the power of the gospel transform God’s church and his people.

**Spiritual Formation Happens**

I am encouraged by George Gallup’s survey research that finds a sizable group of persons in the United States who have been so transformed by the gospel that others can notice their constructive behavior. He observes that these “highly spiritually committed” people—in addition to the
Formation through the Ordinary

spiritual practices of prayer, forgiveness, and Scripture reading—exhibit laudable social virtues. “These people are much more concerned about the betterment of society. They’re more tolerant of other people. They are more involved in charitable activities. And they’re far, far happier than the rest.” Imagine the benefits to a society and to the witness of the reality of God’s kingdom if these numbers were increased. Since I first read Gallup’s observation some fifteen years ago, I have been engaged in a quiet “saint hunt.” I am looking for people whose spiritual practices and gospel virtues are patently evident. Part of my purpose in writing this book was to report patterns of formation I have observed in what often appeared to be haphazard and messy, real-life spiritual development. I have asked, “What consistent circumstances, patterns of communal nurture, and experiences helped produce many of these genuine, godly folk I have met?” I have sought to learn what contributed to the transformations of the people who have grown in grace.

Meanwhile, I have also witnessed a disquieting trend. So many initiatives aimed at spiritual formation seem to have lost their bearings and have settled for secondary goals. We’ve learned a new terminology while maintaining the old lack of healthy spirituality. Sadly, many of these spiritual formation programs seem like third-rate manufacturers that crank out mediocre products and never seem to catch on that their manufacturing processes are finely tuned to consistently produce shoddy goods. Yet one must conclude that the program is perfectly designed to bring the disappointing results it consistently gets. As Dallas Willard reminds us, “Your system is perfectly designed to produce the results you are getting.”

In summary, real spiritual formation is taking place all around us. Yet most of our Christian peers are not being deeply changed by the gospel in ways that result in Jesus’ promised lifestyle of peace, service, and spiritual authority. Our culture and, sadly, many churches seek to squeeze us into the mold of merely being nice and seeking a sensible consumer-oriented faith that meets our needs and avoids offending anyone else.

God and Formation

The practices of faith are not ultimately our own practices but rather habitations of the Spirit, in the midst of which we are invited to participate in the practices of God. Craig Dykstra

The Bible opens with a description of God’s formative work in creation: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). And creation, we read, involved a formation process. God created
the stuff of the universe, but “the earth was empty, a formless mass” (1:2 NLT). And God was at work forming his creation. The image of God personally forming humankind furthers this picture: “The Lord God formed a man’s body from the dust of the ground” (2:7 NLT). The personal creative activity of forming humankind established a bond between God and the first human, Adam. God deepened the bond by preparing a garden, where “he put the man whom he had formed” (2:8). God also “formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air” (2:19). The creation—personally fashioned, crafted, and formed by God—pleased the Artist/Creator: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31).

The contrast between the formless primordial cosmos (1:2) and the harmony of the properly formed creative order (1:1–2:25) is an implicit reference point throughout Scripture. God established precedence for formation. Where other religions view good and evil as eternal constants, Scripture presents God as eternal, in contrast to sin, which is a parasitic and temporary condition bent on unraveling and destroying creation.

I have found the term spiritual entropy helpful to describe the tendency toward spiritual decay, disunity, and dysfunction that is present in our world. God’s love/grace acts powerfully against the entropy in the world.18

Love/grace is the powerful force that works against entropy, the basic negative spiritual force in our world. We see how it works in a friendship. Unattended, a friendship will dissolve, but when all parties invest in a friendship through time, trust, and care, it will flourish. We keep a marriage healthy and growing by investing time and energy in it.

God’s formative process continues on throughout history. With the entrance of sin into the world, God’s formative work took on a redemptive cast as well. In contrast to the formative work of God, chaos/entropy characterizes the rebellion against his rule. Paul later anchors his rebuke of the Corinthians for their disorderly worship by an appeal to God’s character: “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33 NASB). Chaos marks “any society, culture or institution that divorces itself from the one ‘who holds all things together’ (Col. 1:17). The connection between spiritual bankruptcy and the decay of the moral/spiritual order is a recurring prophetic theme.”19 The biblical worldview recognizes an ever-present spiritual entropy at work in the fallen world, which requires God’s intervention and formative activity. We do not accomplish spiritual formation simply by setting up programs and writing policies. There is nothing “once for all” about formation. It is ceaseless because entropy, sin, the flesh, and our idols never rest in their battle against the human soul and God’s kingdom claims on it.
The difficulty of the divine work of formation is illustrated in the events of the exodus. While Moses is on the mountain meeting with God, we read that his brother Aaron “took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf” (Exod. 32:4). The event represents a sad but constant reality in Scripture. God’s invitation is to shalom, to peace, to wholeness, but instead of accepting his transformative formation, humans choose to form idols that meet our pressing needs. A theme running through the whole biblical narrative is the constant human rejection of God and ambivalence toward his grace-filled invitation for humanity to be formed (actually transformed) from our brokenness into his beloved children. Humans generally elect the expedient route of forming idols, whether actual or conceptual, instead of submitting to God’s gracious formation.

All of our work in spiritual formation must be set against the backdrop of the God who forms us in love. Spiritual formation is part of God’s ongoing work of creation. God actively sustains the physical world through Christ: “In him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17); Christ “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Thus God’s love gives the world the only order we know. As we think about spiritual formation, we must remember that all positive formation in the world has its origin in God’s love for humanity. Christian spiritual formation has a specific goal and unique means provided by the cross and the incarnation, but it shares, with all positive formation, the power of love overcoming spiritual entropy/decay. “Let us love one another, for love comes from God” (1 John 4:7).

**Formation Is Universal**

All persons are being shaped spiritually: their heart or spirit (the core of their being) is undergoing formation. Dallas Willard describes the universal nature of formation as “a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admired of persons have a spiritual formation. Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed.” The formation may be in either a positive or negative direction. It may involve the cultivation of virtues that promote social harmony and care or may leave persons wary, self-protective, and unable to promote the welfare of society.

Christians have frequently concluded that since the presence of social virtues does not necessarily indicate a sustaining faith in God, their cultivation is of little spiritual value. This belief has contributed a sad chapter to our social witness and downplayed some important strategies for personal growth. All persons of good will, Christian and non-Christian, should celebrate the presence of virtues that promote a society of shalom.
and justice. I recall a conversation I had with a missionary couple who were distressed by fellow Christians who made an effort to recycle household waste. To them, it seemed to be a pointless activity because it had no direct salvific benefit and promoted the idea that we could improve society apart from God; they thought that such labor was being “wasted in nonkingdom work.” While they represent a small minority, this couple illustrates a tendency to bifurcate formation into that which is radically Christian and beneficial and that which is ordinary and of little importance. Such orientation comes very close to Gnosticism.

We need to see that all true formation has it origins in God, who through Christ is reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18–20). We must be very sober about the power of sin, but we need to see Christ, who “sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command” (Heb. 1:3 NLT), as being behind growth in virtue, in love, and in justice. This has a very practical implication. It means that Christians may avail themselves of avenues of change that promote the presence of gospel virtues. Our change does not come in two forms: good Christian church-based change and ordinary change. All true formation has its origin in God, and we must humbly receive it as a gift. I have seen well-meaning Christians reject programs designed to help develop life skills simply because they were “not Christian.” We must be discerning, but much of what contributes to our positive spiritual formation may be ordinary activities that, when humbly received from God, are used to weave the wonderful tapestry of our formation.

For Further Reading


the presence of spiritual immaturity in the evangelical church can be attributed to an inadequate theology of conversion.

