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Perspectives on the Church in the 21st Century

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Perspectives in Spirituality

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Common Ground Journal (*CGJ*) is a publication of the CanDoSpirit Network, and is published twice annually as a resource for Christian congregations seeking to understand and faithfully live out their calling as the people of God in the world. The primary audience for CGJ is thoughtful Christians in congregations who are catalysts for growth within their own churches.

CGJ is devoted to the development of strong, faithful churches whose life and ministry grow out of the church's nature as the people of God. They are organized and led in a manner consistent with their nature and mission. They continually ask, "What does it mean to be a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world today?"

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- Articles that present insights from congregations attempting to live out their identity as the people of God in world

- Articles based on responsible qualitative research designed to inform a local congregation's understanding of its life and ministry

- Articles that raise questions that the Christian community needs to explore in becoming the people of God in the world

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From the Editor

By Paul Bramer

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The church has entered into especially challenging and stimulating times. The tectonic shift from modernism to postmodernism, while still in process, is raising fundamental questions about many things we may have thought were settled. Phyllis Tickle and others are referring to this shift as "The Great Emergence" (Tickle 2008) and see it as similar in proportion to the 16th century great Reformation, the 11th century Great Schism, and the rise of monasticism in the 6th century, movements within the church which were also responses to profound intellectual, social, and cultural developments.

One movement within this emergence is a renewed appreciation of the role and nature of spirituality and spiritual formation. Spiritual formation seeks to address the malformation that our world works on us (Rom. 12:2) and to bring into alignment our deep God-given desires with God's provision. It is concerned with the inner dispositions and external behaviors that develop from communion with and fidelity to God; that is, it is concerned with the development of Christ-likeness, the *telos* of the Christian life, as Paul the Apostle writes, "until we all…become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). This is a comprehensive and life-long undertaking accomplished by the Spirit of God and mediated through the life, gifts, and practices of the church community.

The publication of Richard Foster's *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth* (Foster 1978) is a marker and motivator of contemporary Protestant spiritual formation and most of the articles in this issue reference him; the work of

Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre 1984; Murphy, Kallenberg, and Nation 2003) supplied a philosophical undergirding. In the ensuing years, a flood of books, conferences, and courses explored and expanded on the twin themes of spiritual growth and spiritual practices, notable among which have been Dallas Willard's books *The spirit of the disciplines: Understanding how God changes lives* (Willard 1988) and *The divine conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God* (Willard 1998) and those of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith such as *Practicing our faith: Ways of life for a searching people* (Bass 1997) and *Practicing theology: Beliefs and practices in Christian life* (Volf and Bass 2002).

While the shape of the new era from the viewpoint of common culture is far from settled, some themes of the emerging church are discernible in the distinguishing marks of spiritual formation. "We turn our backs on the superficiality of modern culture and plunge into the depths by making use of the classical disciplines," writes Foster (Foster 1985, 247). Wholeness, authenticity, and intimacy with God are aims of spiritual formation. There is a changing emphasis from simply teaching the correct things in propositions for assent to the more holistic development of virtues through transformative practices within a narrative framework. Individuals and groups are on journeys to recover the neglected fields of the Spirit's work symbolized as moves from the "head" to the "heart," with contemplative, charismatic, and pietistic forms and/or to "hands," manifested in missional and social justice concerns. In contrast to modernism's "delight at the disappearance of the old" (Childs 2000, 17), ancient and classical practices and symbols are being recovered. The role of Scripture is another related theme: perhaps the biggest challenge for the church today is how it is going to "read" the Bible. Each author in this issue addresses one or more of these themes.

The crisis of meaning brought on by post-modernism and the church's challenge to speak into the contemporary mindset and to engage in spiritual formation is the subject of the essay by Evan Howard, director of the Spirituality Shoppe, an Evangelical Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Our dangerous levels of dependence and addiction to technology and media call for "unplugging" practices. Ruth Haley Barton, director of The Transforming Center, a ministry of spiritual encouragement to pastors and Christian leaders, gives us an overview of a number of such practices, especially focusing on Sabbath. Calum Macfarlane, chaplain and Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology at Briercrest College, looks at the application of the classical disciplines, focusing on silence and solitude, in the spiritual formation of adolescents. The power of commitment to community and practices, in particular the willingness to be still and listen is highlighted by Jan Bros, founder and pastor of the innovative Abbey Way Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Our celebrity-obsessed society that has us aspiring to be an "Idol" or voting for one needs the antidote of authentic worship which Rory Noland, worship consultant and director of Heart of the Artist Ministries discusses. The extreme individualism in the western world ironically results in both social atomization and herd mentality; the need to rediscover true community and in that context engage in spiritual practices for the cultivation of Christian virtues is outlined by Jim Wilhoit, drawn from his inauguration and installation lecture for the Scripture Press Chair of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College. Michele Junkin, a pastoral counselor and Christian adult education consultant, gives us helpful examples of formational programs within a developmental perspective. Finally, we have a trio of essays on the role of Scripture in spiritual formation. Christianity, and especially evangelical Protestantism, continues to affirm the authority of Scripture and the

formational value of reading and studying it; however, how Scripture is understood and employed is being renegotiated: David Brisben, chair of the Division of Biblical Studies at John Brown University, presents a first-stage research study on how evangelical Christians understand the status of the Old Testament; Agnes Makau-Olwendo, formerly faculty at Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya, reflects on the importance of contextualization in spiritual formation and Bible study; and Fred Guyette, reference librarian at Erskine College and Seminary, gives us four perspectives on spiritual formation drawn from the Gospels.

We need ways of quieting the surface of our lives while stirring up their depths. We need ways by which we can walk the pilgrim path while staying vitally connected to the community of believers. We need to separate ourselves from the world spirit that is in our culture while staying redemptively engaged with society. We need weapons of warfare that are not like the coercive means of the world. We need ways of receiving divine strength and orientation so that we do not become fatigued and confused in our ministries of justice, compassion, and mercy. We need to affirm and enjoy our spirituality without rejecting or belittling our essential physicality. We need to learn how to die to ourselves while at the same time become renewed. We need ways to meet those of other religious faiths on common territory while testifying to the unique work of Christ. We need to transcend our limited time and space to come into sympathy with creation and the human race. We need ways to be changed by God so that we are able to live in communion and co-operation with him, so that we can see with his eyes and act with his love. In short, we need means of experiencing God's grace, love, wisdom, and power that are ours in Christ Jesus. Many have found that spiritual formation, including adopting classical spiritual practices and adapting them to meet the needs of our current culture,

are keys to the way forward. While more subjects could be explored (e.g., the many ways of praying, the role of discernment and spiritual direction and small groups, new ways of structuring community, the reengagement with ancient Christian teachers), the thoughtful and passionate articles in this issue will move us forward in our understanding and commitment to this approach to ministry in the church.

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About the Editor

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Spiritual Formation and the Meaning of Life

By Evan B. Howard

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Abstract

This article explores the dialogue between our sense of the meaning of life and our approach to spiritual formation in the context of postmodernity. Within the context of a postmodern crisis of meaning, persons and groups (congregations included) struggle to find where and how they fit, and the ordinary ease of formation into life is lost. While it might appear that a Christian approach to meaning in a postmodern world would involve a simple restatement of "the Gospel," our current crisis and the Christian Scriptures both demand a deeper re-appropriation of a Christian philosophy of the meaning of life. Christian spiritual formation directs attention toward those processes by which individuals and communities become more fully conformed to the life and will of Christ, fostering the embodiment of a meaning of life. A renewed vision of the Gospel and the meaning of life will suggest a number of practices for individuals and communities by which participation in the life of the Godhead might be fruitfully explored today.

Postmodernity and the Crisis of Meaning

Western culture (at least) is experiencing a crisis of meaning. The 2005 Microsoft Encarta Dictionary defines "crisis" as

> 1. dangerous or worrying time: a situation or period in which things are very uncertain, difficult, or painful, especially a time when action must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown; 2. critical moment: a time when something very important for the future happens or is decided

Among others (e.g., Borgmann 1992; Harvey 1990) I believe that Western culture is at a critical moment. We live in an uncertain and difficult time, more so than the ordinary uncertainties of other times and places. The future of Western culture may well emerge in a special way within the events of the next few generations. We are living in a crisis of *meaning*, a time of uncertainty and re-definition regarding the very frameworks within which we understand and live our lives. But what do we mean by "meaning"? And what does it mean to be in a crisis of meaning?

"Meaning" has to do with how things fit together. How do my family, my job, my beliefs, and my passions fit together? What are they all "about"? In times of stability of meaning people have a sense of how things fit. The ancient Greek warrior, for example, grew up understanding the process of achieving an immortal name (fame that would live past your death). This was accomplished through learning particular skills, the proper leadership of family, the ways of honoring and appealing to the gods, and the balance of self-control and explosive action. Culture in general, and specific institutions within the culture, *formed* you into this life. And the farm, the family, the language all *fit* into this life. You knew where you stood. That was, until the end of antiquity.

Our sense of the meaning of life emerges from an interplay of (1) our perspective on the nature of things in general, (2) our most fundamental values, and (3) the social systems that surround us, and (4) the particulars of the life we are living. When we have a stable sense of the meaning of life there is a degree of continuity between these. When life is *too* stable (cultures do calcify, of course) everything fits too rigidly and we want to break free. We cry out that things do not necessarily "mean" what everybody says they mean. When there is a "crisis of meaning" we are not sure how things fit or where we stand.

And this is where we are today. College students are uncertain of the purpose of modern education. What is it *for*? Children of divorce or abuse grow up and wonder why we value the modern nuclear family model. The dream of scientific progress is perceived by many as a nightmare. Our concepts of health, government, and even our sense of 'self' is in transition. Our beliefs, values, and social systems are all uncertain. And these are not the ordinary shifts of viewpoints that drift from decade into decade. We are all in a crisis of meaning. A crisis of meaning is a crisis of *formation* as well: we are unsure how things

fit together and, consequently have nowhere to *form* ourselves. We do not know how to relate to our land, to our jobs, to our communities, to our nations, to our God.

And this is not just a matter of clever theory. You see it every day, everywhere. Consider boredom. The current epidemic of perceived boredom is, in part, a symptom of our crisis of meaning. It is hard to put real energy into life without an end in view. Consider commitment. Commitment is hard to come by when I don't have a place to stand. The word, "whatever" captures the mood. Commitments are shallow, commitments fluctuate. Consider words. Just to let you know, I don't believe words any longer. Words are tools in the hands of the spin-masters, manipulated to serve someone else's ends. Words tell me nothing. How you live tells me everything. Consider home. I have left home (it is no longer livable), but I have no*where* to go. I just go. I toast commotion and emotion and compassion and fashion (when it's new). I measure a year in minutes and in love (both tangible enough to be grasped). Time and space are where I am here and now.

Now consider church. "Here I am desperate for a sense of the meaning of *this* life, here and now, and all I hear from church are words about some other boring life playing harps after I die. I am a believer and have been burned again and again by "church." I am an unbeliever who peeks in the church to see something so foreign I can't find a way in. The old churches are dead and the new churches are plastic spin machines. What's the use (the meaning) of this institution anyway?"

Our culture is in a crisis of meaning, and this crisis of meaning affects every area of our lives--even our congregations. Clearly, if Christianity is to have anything to say to contemporary culture, it will have to think about the meaning of life.

Philosophy, Theology and the Meaning of Life

On the one hand, it might seem that this postmodern crisis of meaning is the perfect window of opportunity for the Christian evangelist. People are confused about how things fit, about where they stand. Christians have answers. One might think, then, that all that is needed is to tell folks how things fit, to show them where to stand, and it's all solved. We have given them the meaning for life.

Philosophers sometimes summarize the options regarding the meaning of life into a threefold choice: (1) nihilism: there is no meaning to life, (2) self-creationism: we create our own meaning(s) out of the life we live, or (3) theism: meaning is given by God (see Morris 1999, 285–92). With this outline in mind, the Christian response to a seeker might begin by pointing out the weaknesses of nihilism and self-creationism. Then, having demolished the non-theistic options, one would then offer "the Gospel": humans are eternally separated from God because of sin. Christ came to pay the debt of death for us and now we can have peace and forgiveness here on earth and life in heaven after we die. Such is the meaning of life.

Now while there is nothing really *wrong* with this reply, my conviction is that we need something *more*. Indeed, I think that both the contemporary crisis and the Christian Scriptures themselves encourage us to re-appropriate our own faith on these matters, specifically as it applies to the meaning of *this* life. My suspicion is that in doing so we will find ourselves sympathizing here and there with each of the above three options.[1]

What does our faith teach us about our life here on earth? First we learn that humans are special creations of God. We celebrate this life on earth with other creatures,

[1] In this section I am summarizing parts of my chapters on "Christian Experience" and "The Divine-Human Relationship" in Evan Howard, *The Brazos introduction to Christian spirituality* (Brazos Press, 2008).

bearing the image of God. There is a kind of richness about human life that makes humans unique among all God's creations. We have a special role as covenant partners with God, joining with God in the rule and care for this world. We also learn, however, that things are not entirely well here. Our unfaithfulness toward God leads us into sin. Social systems perpetuate pain and suffering. Satan and his evil forces subject humankind to distortion and destruction of life. Whereas things on earth were meant to "fit" just right, and where we were meant to know where to stand, there *is* a fundamental *nihilism* present in the twisted character of earth as we know it. In the eyes of faith we can (and must) appreciate *both* the beauty and the ugliness of it all, the meaning and the nihilism of life.

Our faith also teaches us that humans are in relationship with God right here on this earth. All humans are the recipients of God's self-disclosure, and human choices make a difference. Again and again in Scripture we find people and communities being given critical choices, choices which determine the meaning of their lives. God invites us into life. We respond. God responds to our response. Meaning is created from that interaction. Clearly there is a profound *self-creationism* inherent in the Christian Gospel, especially in times of crisis. The exodus, the settling of the promised land, the exile, the birth and life of Christ, the coming of the Spirit of God—these are times when something very important for the future is decided. Yes, the sovereign hand of God is present in the midst of these times. But we would be distorting the message of the Scriptures regarding the meaning of this life not to recognize the real place of human action in the midst of history. And we can, therefore, expect that in one sense, especially in a time of transition, we will be called upon to forge our own meaning in the context of the concrete realities

of our time. Our relationship with the meaning of God is navigated through our struggle with this life.

But the Christian message does not end here, in the midst of broken dreams and the human struggle for meaning. The Christian message is a message of *theistic* hope. God in Jesus comes bringing healing to the sick, welcome to the marginalized, and freedom for the oppressed. Yes, Jesus died for our sins. There is forgiveness offered to us here on earth and heaven offered when we die. But the restoration through Christ and the Spirit offers us so much more. There is renewal of mind. There is healing of the heart. There is the reconciliation of relationship. There is the overthrow of Satan. And, in the end, there is a new heaven and a new earth. In the *end* we are not in heaven playing harps. We are on earth "reigning with him forever and ever" (Rev. 22:5). The meaning of life is how we treat our land. The meaning of life is our relationship with our neighbors. The meaning of life is the mending of your wounds. The meaning of life is friendship with the Almighty God.

And so, in the meantime--and in this critical meaning-time--perhaps a helpful Christian approach to the meaning of life is to honor the complexity and richness of it all. The nature of things is that they are not always going to make sense. Things don't fit. "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" The nature of things is that we participate in our meaning. God invites us into that act of life. The nature of things is that, thanks to Christ, we live in a world of hope: hope for a very grand restoration.

Spiritual Formation

Our culture is in a crisis of meaning. And this crisis of meaning is having its effects everywhere, even in church. While it might seem natural to respond to this crisis of meaning with a simple statement of the Christian Gospel, what I am suggesting is that

this crisis--as well as Christian Gospel itself-- begs us to enlarge our understanding of the Christian approach to the meaning of this life on earth. And when we do this we discover a "full Gospel" that sympathizes with all human struggle for meaning but also looks forward to a rich breadth of restoration found in Christ. But what does all this have to do with Christian spiritual formation, or with practices such as meditation, fasting, solitude, or service?

I define *Christian spiritual formation* as "the intentional and semi-intentional processes by which believers (individuals and communities) become more fully conformed and united to Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling" (Howard 2008, 268). While Christian *trans-formation* describes the whole of the divine-human work of bringing humanity ever closer to the divine life and will, we use the term "formation" to speak of those steps we take to facilitate or respond to the divinely initiated transformation (Howard 2008, 229-65). These steps we take, these "processes" are both intentional and semi-intentional. We decide to make a practice of withdrawing once a month for a half a day of solitude. This is intentional. But formation is not only "taught" but also "caught." We attend church and learn something of the Gospel simply by means of the body movements associated with some of the elements of the service (kneeling, raising hands, making the sign of the cross, dancing, and so on). This is semi-intentional. Christian spiritual formation aims at intentionally and semi-intentionally helping individuals and communities take steps toward "conformity and union with Christ." It is not just about involvement in programs, it is especially about "maturity of life and calling." Christian spiritual formation is about helping communities and individuals to think like Jesus, to feel like Jesus, to act like Jesus. Author Dallas Willard speaks of these processes in terms of a threefold framework: vision, intention, and means

(2002). Let us now use Willard's threefold framework to explore how Christians might be "formed" within and into an enlarged meaning of life.

Spiritual Formation and the Meaning of Life

The *vision* of spiritual formation is that toward which we are formed. Throughout Christian history our vision of formation into union with Christ has been sharpened through a number of terms: holiness, perfection, the kingdom of God and others (for example, in the Christian East the term *theosis* or "deification" is used). Our faith and faith traditions offer general visions of spiritual formation toward which we might aim. But vision needs to go one step further. Vision needs to become *our* vision. What might it look like, right here and now, for this congregation, this individual, to embody "holiness" or "the kingdom of God"? What would happen if the Gospel were lived out in the concrete details of life right now? Or at least what might it look like if we were to takes real steps *toward* that end? When we practice prayerful meditation on the Christian Scriptures, or when we open ourselves to the challenges of listening fellowship with other believers, then we begin to discover a Christian meaning of life that takes shape in the midst of the nihilism and the self-creation and the hopes of a full Christian existence.

But spiritual formation into a meaning of life is not just a matter of finding a vision. The Christian vision is connected with appropriate *means*. Means are the ways we learn to practice meaning. It is not just a matter of program, but of practice. A "missions" church maintains a strong program of educating, sending, and supporting people in Christian ministries. A "mission*al*" church maintains a set of practices toward the wider community that appropriately expresses their identity as the people of God in the world. It is one thing for me to undertake a program of daily morning devotions because I think that is what "good Christians" should do. It is quite another for me to pay attention to my

body rhythms, the realities of my schedule and mood, and decide to have devotions once a week in a space and time where I can be alone and honest with God. The adoption of appropriate means provides customized ways into a particular Christian meaning of life.

The visions of theologies are everywhere. There are also many books that treat the personal and congregational practices and means of the Christian life (Bass 2004; Bass 1997; Foster 1998; Wilhoit 2008; Willard 2002). *Intention* is the neglected ingredient in spiritual formation. Willard treats intention by speaking of the place of trust and the need for decision. I wish to develop intention a bit further, for it is in intention that we invest ourselves into meaning. Intention involves finding, fostering, and keeping our motivation(s). How does our faith work when it is most authentic? What moods characterize our relationship with God at its best? Paying attention to such questions helps us secure our intention at the start of Christian maturity and at key steps along the way. The freedom to experiment also keeps us moored to a Christ-centered vision rather than to mere forms or particulars. Accountability with a loving community helps reveal progress and pitfalls. My friends might know that sometime of working in a backyard vegetable garden might be the most significant "means" through which I can find relationship both with God and this earth right here and now. But would I give myself permission to sneak away to the garden without their help? Finally, intention is where we prepare for the struggles of forging our own meaning of life in the midst of absurdities and chaos. Intention is the place where we "make a stand" in the presence of God and declare "*here* is where I will find meaning."

Contemporary Christian spiritual formation is the process through which we learn to embody and to model a fully Christian meaning of life in the context of a world suffering from a crisis of meaning. Here are three suggestions to illustrate how this could

work practically for personal and congregational practice. First, internalize your own vision of the Christian meaning of life. Ask yourself, "What does *my* life as a covenant partner with God involve right here and now on earth?" "How can *our* life as a Christian community express and explore God's loving reign in the concrete realities of where we are?" Learn to see God's heart, live God's heart, speak God's heart. This involves a practice of leisurely meditation. Make time for it. Second, if you are trying to explore what formation into a fuller vision of the meaning of life might look like, experiment with a small group. Some will "get it"; others won't; that's OK. The best congregational means for developing an embodied Christian meaning of life is to facilitate "communities of exploration," who have the freedom to change, explore, and fail. Third, learn from others who have navigated these waters before. Christians have been through many crises throughout history. We have much to learn from those who have gone before us. Soak yourself in the history of Christian monasticism, communities and individuals who have boldly gone where few have gone before in exploring ways of living out Christian meaning in the midst of terrible crises. Examine the reformations of the sixteenth century. The best and worst of Christendom is starkly visible in this period of time. And the reformation(s) are not just a matter of theology. How people are formed into union with Christ is central to the conflicts of the times. Explore the history of Christian revivals. See how the Christian faith changed and developed as the Spirit lead God's people through many difficult waters. By taking steps such as these we can make realistic progress not only of exploring a full Christian meaning of life in the midst of a crisis, but also of actually living this meaning in the midst of and for the sake of a hurting world.

Spirit-Formation into a Life Full of Meaning

There is one point I have hitherto neglected to treat. I have saved the most important point for last. Christian spiritual formation is the *Spirit's* formation. Yes, we pursue a vision. Yes, there are means we employ. Yes, we intend to invest ourselves in God's meaning for our life. Nevertheless, it is a work of the Spirit. Christian *Spirit-ual* formation. Christians have always lived in the tension between our sincere action and trust in God's sovereign hand. But we must never lose sight of the ministries of the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit hovers over the face of the disordered chaos at creation. The Spirit renews the face of the earth, gives life to the church, and unites believers in power and love. The meaning of life, in its most existential, here-and-now form, is the following of the leading of the Spirit of God. Consequently, our struggle to create meaning in the midst of the nihilism of life may be most fundamentally a struggle of prayer. "*Veni Sanctus Spiritus*" ("Come Holy Spirit") we cry. And in this cry, a personal cry for help, a community cry for revival, we look for the inflow of the tangible presence of God, whose presence in our midst forms the meaning of meanings.

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It Begins with You! How the Spiritual Formation of the Pastor Effects the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation

By Ruth Haley Barton

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Abstract
True spiritual leadership hinges upon the capacity to lead from our own transforming center. Before implementing spiritual formation in our churches or organization, we as leaders and ministers first need to step back and give serious attention to our own process of spiritual transformation. As the disciplines of rest, solitude, silence and self-examination are cultivated in the lives of leaders, we will be brought back from frenetic activity and dissipation to a quiet alertness to guidance from God and be in a better position to facilitate spiritual formation in the lives of others.

> *If you attempt to act and do for others or for the world without deepening your own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, you will not have anything to give others. You will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of your own obsessions, your aggressivity, your ambitions, your delusions and ends and means.* Thomas Merton (1965, 179)

I remember sitting in a staff meeting at a church I was serving; the purpose of the meeting was to talk about how we could attract more people to join the church. At one point, someone counted the requirements for church membership already in place and made the startling discovery that there were at least five time commitments *per week* required of those who wanted to become church members!

Outwardly, I tried to be supportive of the purpose for the meeting, but on the inside I was screaming, *Who would want to sign up for this?* I was already trying to combat CFS (Christian Fatigue Syndrome) in my own life and couldn't imagine willingly inflicting it on someone else. I had to admit that I, and the leaders sitting around the table that day, only knew one speed in life and that was full steam ahead—and we had been stuck in that speed for a very long time. It was clear to me that if we *as leaders* did not

establish saner rhythms for our lives, rhythms that would curb our unbridled activism and allow space for the work of God in our own lives, we would not have much of value for others. Furthermore, we would not be able to provide a realistic vision for a way of life that allowed time and space for the patient, plodding, and mysterious process of spiritual transformation.

Spiritual Transformation: More Than a Buzzword

Spiritual transformation has become a buzzword in Christian circles. The good news is that this renewed interest in spiritual formation speaks to our desire for more in the spiritual life: more than just head knowledge, more than rules that merely govern external behaviors, more than religious activity loaded onto lives that already feel unmanageable. The promise of spiritual transformation is intimacy with God that results in the satisfaction of the soul's deepest longings; the language of spiritual formation helps us name desires that are so deep and have so often been disappointed that many of us have given up trying to articulate them.

The bad news (or at least news that makes us uncomfortable) is that many pastors are seeking to respond to these longings by trying to lead their congregations into realities that they are not experiencing for themselves. They lack clarity about what spiritual transformation is and how it unfolds in the lives of real people. They think that because they have heard an inspiring message or read a few books, they are ready to lead others in the step-by-step process of entering into spiritual disciplines. With little experiential knowledge of the practices and processes that open us to deep and fundamental change, they apply the fresh language of spiritual formation to old discipleship methods that are for the most part dead in hopes that it will satisfy. While searching for a life-giving way of life for themselves, they are scrambling to put together strategies that will make other

people's lives work them. Spiritual formation is the latest bandwagon that everyone is trying to jump on—and no one wants to be left behind—but what do you if you are just not prepared?

Spiritual Transformation: Engaging the Process

I have come to believe that leaders need to step back and give serious attention to their own process of spiritual transformation before trying to lead others. The best thing any of us have to bring to leadership is not our preaching, our education, our strategic thinking, or our pastoral skills. *The best thing any of us as pastors and church leaders have to bring to leadership is our own transforming selves!*

Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us. It is an organic process that goes far beyond mere behavioral tweaks to deep fundamental changes at the very core of our being. In the process of spiritual transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God, from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self, from the ego's desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to the ability to do God's will even when it is foolishness to the world around us.

Lest we be tempted to view spiritual transformation as a glorified self-help project or an occasion for more activism, it is important for us *as leaders* to embrace the fact that this kind of change is not something we can produce or manufacture for ourselves—or anyone else for that matter! Spiritual transformation according to Pauline language is a gift from God that is full of mystery, much like the formation of an embryo in the mother's womb or the metamorphosis of the caterpillar in the cocoon. God guides the process and brings it to fruition; all we can do is to create the conditions in which it can develop. Transforming leaders are appropriately humbled by this realization and relieved

not to have to bear the heavy weight of changing themselves, or others. The transforming leader is faithful to do the one thing he or she *can* do by entering into the spiritual practices that create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place.

Sane Rhythms of Work and Rest

One of the earliest disciplines Jesus taught his disciples as they entered into their life in ministry was the importance of establishing a rhythm of working and resting that honored their humanness. Rather than getting caught up in their early excitement about being empowered to preach the good news, to heal the sick and to cast out demons (Mark 6), he help them not to get so full of themselves that they forgot they were human. He did not merely preach about rest and send them off on their own; he invited them to come away with him, giving them concrete guidance for finding time and space to deal with distractions. Even when the needs of the crowd pressed in, Jesus was resolute in guiding them towards a place of rest.

The issue of depletion is one of the most serious issues facing Christian leaders today. Many are completely unaware of the powerful undertow pulling them into the dangerous waters of spiritual, emotional and physical exhaustion. While all of us move in and out of the normal tiredness that accompanies a job well done, many are dangerously tired—plagued by a chronic inner fatigue that has accumulated over months and even years of time.

When we are dangerously tired, our way of life may seem heroic but there is a frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we have lost the ability to be present to God, to be present to other people and to discern what is really needed. The result is “sloppy desperation”: a mental and spiritual lethargy that prevents us from

the quality of presence that delivers true insight. Charles, a gifted physician illustrates the point:

> I discovered in medical school that if I saw a patient when I was tired or overworked, I would order a lot of tests. I was so exhausted, I couldn't tell exactly what was going on . . . so I got in the habit of ordering a battery of tests, hoping they would tell me what I was missing. But when I was rested—if I had the opportunity to get some sleep, or go for a quiet walk—when I saw the next patient, I could rely on my intuition and experience to give me a pretty accurate reading of what was happening . . .When I could take the time to listen and be present with them and their illness, I was almost always right. (Muller 1999, 5-6)

When we are deeply tired, we become overly reliant on voices outside of ourselves to tell us what is going on, and we react to symptoms rather than seeking to understand and respond to underlying causes. For some of us, the best thing to bring to our leadership is a more rested self, one who is able to bring steady, alert attention to our leadership.

Sabbath

Sabbath-keeping is the primary discipline associated with establishing sane rhythms of work and rest. It helps us to live within the limits of our humanity and to honor God as our Creator. It is the lynchpin of a life lived in harmony with the rhythms that God himself built into our world and yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live. Keeping a Sabbath honors the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment, and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. It begins with the willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and then to take steps begin to live more graciously within the order of things.

The first thing to recognize is that we are creatures and God is the creator. God is the only one who is infinite; I, on the other hand, must learn to live within the physical limits of time and space and the human limits of strength and energy. There are limits to my relational, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities as well. I am not God. God is the

only one who can be all things to all people. God is the only one who can be two places at once. God is the one who never sleeps—I am not. This is basic but many of us live as though we do not know it.

Sabbath-keeping is a way of ordering one's whole life to honor the rhythm of things—work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship and delighting in God and his good gifts, but the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make Sabbath possible.

Keeping a Sabbath may be the most challenging rhythm for leaders to establish because Sunday, in most churches, has become a day of Christian busy-ness, and of course, the busiest person on that day is the pastor! That just means that pastors need to set aside another day for their Sabbath. Alternatively, they might consider ordering their church's life so that everyone learns how to practice Sabbath. It could begin with worship but then everyone goes home, rests, and delights for the rest of the day because there are no other church activities. In that way, the pastor's commitment to Sabbath becomes a blessing for everyone.

There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our existence as human beings—physical and spiritual beings in a world of time and space. There is a peace that descends upon our lives when we accept what is real rather than always pushing beyond our limits. There is something about being gracious, accepting, and gentle with ourselves at least once a week that enables us to be gracious and accepting and gentle with others. There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God and resting into God that eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our doing. Sabbath-keeping helps us to live within our limits because on

the Sabbath, in so many different ways, we allow ourselves to be the creature in the presence of our Creator. We touch something more real in ourselves and others than what we are all able produce. We touch our very being in God. Surely that is what the people around us need most.

Solitude and Silence

One of the more sobering truths about life in leadership is that we can be very busy and look very important, yet be out of touch with that place in the center of our being where we know who we are in God and what he has called us to do—that place where we are responsive to the voice of God above all others. When this happens we are at the mercy of all manner of external and internal forces, tossed and turned by other's expectations and our own inner compulsions. These inner lacks then become the source of frantic activity that is completely disconnected from true wisdom and insight.

Solitude and silence are disciplines that provide us with a place to rest in God and listen to the voice of the One who calls us his beloved in quiet, sure tones. Many of us have been schooled in traditional "quiet time" approaches that often feel like another place of human striving and hard work—even when our activities are as lofty as Bible study, prayer and journaling. For Christian leaders in particular, it can become hard to distinguish between the work we do *for* God and time for us to *be with* God, resting in him and enjoying his presence. Scripture can be reduced to a textbook from which we gain information for being successful in ministry and prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity.

The metaphor in Psalm 131 of the weaned child resting against its mother, on the other hand, offers a delightful picture of the soul at rest in God. Much like the young child who has been so nourished by a loving mother that he or she can rest in trust and

love, solitude can be for us a time when we come to God with no agenda except to just be together in whatever state we're in. Here there is no need to put on airs. We do not have to try to make things seem better than they are or make ourselves appear to be someone we are not. We do not need to hold back squeals of delight, expressions of need or desire, tears of pain, sadness or disappointment. In such times, we rest in God by simply *being with God with what is* and allow God to love us in that place. The *experience* of God's unconditional love even (and perhaps most especially!) during those times when we are not doing anything, is our greatest human need. Such love then becomes the bed-rock of our being, the foundation of our true identity upon which our leadership is built.

Self-Knowledge and Self-examination

Without the regular experience of being received and loved by God in solitude, we are vulnerable to a kind of leadership that is driven by profound emptiness that we are seeking to fill through performance and achievement. This unconscious striving is very dangerous for us and for those around us. It will eventually burn us out since there is no amount of achievement that will ultimately satisfy the emptiness of the human soul. And the people we work with will eventually notice that they are mere cogs in the wheel of our own ego driven plans.

It takes a profound willingness to invite God to search us and know us at the deepest levels of our being, allowing him to show us the difference between the performance-oriented driven-ness of the *false* self and the deeper calling to lead from our *authentic self* in God. An elemental chaos is stirred up when we have stayed in God's presence long enough for pretense and performance and every other thing that has bolstered our sense of self to fall away. When we are stripped of external distraction in

solitude, we inevitably become aware of false patterns of thinking and being and doing that have lurked unnoticed under the surface busyness of our lives.

We may even begin to see how these patterns have mis-shaped our leadership. Perhaps we glimpse an ego-driven self that is bent on control and image management. Perhaps we see an empty self that is hungry to fill itself with the approval of others. Perhaps we glimpse a broken self desperately seeking to preserve the illusion that we have it all together. Or maybe we see a wounded self that has spent untold energy seeking healing where healing cannot be found.

This is a devastating awareness and one that stops us in our tracks. However, it is impossible to overstate how dangerous we are as leaders when we have not faced into this kind of self-knowledge and allowed the healing love of God to touch in that place. The journey beyond our false, adaptive patterns to living and leading from our authentic self in God is a harrowing one that is paved with truth-seeing and truth-telling. Nevertheless, it is eminently worth it because the truth ultimately sets us free to lead from our authentic self, compelled by truer motivations that God placed within us before the foundation of the earth.

Discernment

Beyond the chaos that is created by a more honest seeing of who we are in God's presence, a quietness descends that is pregnant with the presence of God. As we cultivate disciplines of rest, solitude, silence and self-examination in our lives, we find that we are brought back from the brink of dangerous exhaustion to a state of quiet alertness that is able and ready to receive guidance from God. A knowing comes, a still, small voice whispers, a gentle blowing of the Spirit can be felt and we are awake and alert enough to recognize it!

Beyond our normal patterns of trying to wrestle from God the wisdom we think we need, the gift of discernment is given as pure gift. Through the gentle but persistent nudging of the Spirit we begin to know what is called for in those places where we need wisdom—or we are restrained enough to wait until discernment is given.

The transforming leader is growing in awareness that the things that most need to be fixed, solved, and figured out in our lives will not be fixed, solved, figured out at the thinking level anyway. They will be solved at the *listening* level where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about things that are true (Rom. 8:16). This is the level at which God speaks to us those things that cannot be taught by human wisdom but can only be taught by the Spirit. It is the level at which spiritual discernment is given as pure gift (1 Cor. 2:12-13). It is the level at which perfect love casts out fear so that we are free to respond to the risky invitations of God (1 John 4:18). The leader who listens on these levels and leads from it is a different kind of leader indeed!

A Radical Choice

The choice to lead from that place where I *myself* am growing and changing in response to the presence of God in my life is a vulnerable approach to leadership because it takes us to a very tender place. It is a place where I do not have all the answers (because I am being more honest with myself and with God about my questions) and where I am not in control (because I am learning how to give up control to God). However, if I am willing to lead from my own transforming self, *I find that I finally have something real to offer others that actually corresponds to what they are seeking.* Furthermore, the *quality* of my leadership is decidedly different. Rather than leading from a place of being frenetically busy, I am leading from a place of rest in God. Rather than running on empty, I am leading from a place where my soul is being infused with the

presence of God. Rather than being subject to the inner compulsions of the false self and the outer demands of other people's expectation, I am learning to respond to God's call upon my life in ways that are congruent with the self he knew and brought lovingly into being.

True spiritual leadership hinges upon the capacity to lead from my own transforming center. This kind of leader is not perfect. But this kind of leader is person who has been met by God and is meeting God in life-transforming ways, and that is where their authority comes from. And a transforming leader is the kind of leader your congregation needs the most.

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Adolescent Spiritual Formation: Creating Space for God to Speak

By Calum Macfarlane

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Abstract
Adolescents are in need of a soteriology that properly addresses the doctrine of regeneration and a means to engender a pattern of living empowered by the Holy Spirit that encourages true self discovery, integration, and growth in Christ-likeness. The Christian spiritual disciplines offer a way of responding to both these challenges. Silence and solitude are used as examples of practices essential for adolescent spiritual formation.

I remember the first time I encountered the concept of the "spiritual disciplines" as an adolescent. I was at a teen summer camp in Northern Ontario in the late 1970s. It must have been very soon after the publication of Richard Foster's first edition of *Celebration of Discipline* (1978). I would have been eighteen years old, a regular youth group attendee with a certain kind of theological sophistication—the kind established by weekend youth conferences whose themes alternated between intricate discussions of dispensational eschatology and lectures on what not to wear (i.e., if Jesus were ministering in our day he would not, apparently, have worn blue jeans or have had hair below his ears or on his face). I must admit to having enthusiasm for the first topic—who could resist all those amazingly detailed colored charts of what was to come—and barely disguised disdain for the second. After all, I had the jeans and the hair and desperately longed for the day when the beard might be a possibility.

All of that to say that it was a shock to my adolescent theological sensibility when a visiting speaker at youth camp—who I am sure, as I reflect on it now, had just enthusiastically devoured Foster's book—suggested we all go off by ourselves to the

woods for four hours and experience God in silence! Exactly what does a sixteen-year old do with that? Well, the answer is, with the lack of preparation I received, not much. My time was spent lying on a sunny patch of Canadian Shield vacillating between an intense desire to experience a sense of God's presence which I had not previously known and frustration that this was all a silly waste of time that might be better spent getting to know the cute blonde from North Bay whom I had just met the day before.

Of course, I recognize more than three decades later that this was actually not a bad beginning—at least the first part. It awakened me to something that was missing. I was forced to wrestle with a longing that until that point had not been fully expressed. I had learned much about God in the years leading up to that summer; I had felt a need to turn to him for assistance, particularly a desire for assistance in avoiding hell; and I had learned much about what God expected from me by way of response to his gracious assistance. Nevertheless, somehow in the midst of all of those useful things to know, I had not yet experienced the living God himself. At least I had not experienced the living God in a way that satisfied my adolescent longings for him.

Those days are long gone but, as you can probably tell, not forgotten. Now I am that "guy," the enthusiastic middle-aged spiritual theology professor and Anglican priest who encourages his students to explore ancient, yet still fresh, ways of awakening to God's presence in their lives. I particularly focus on their need to draw apart from others in solitude and silence so that they might hear the voice of God's Spirit already active in them. So I require the freshman students in my spiritual formation class participate in the discipline of twenty-four hours of solitude and silence as part of the course requirements. As you might imagine, the responses as we review the syllabus at the beginning of the term are quite mixed. There are some who by their questions appear to be eager to engage

the project, but most of the others it seems range from being disinterested to being downright fearful. In spite of this initial reluctance, by the time we have finished the course and I read their journal entries from their time apart (I should probably mention that they are not graded on how well they experienced God in their solitude) the majority of my students do comment on how surprisingly refreshing and significant the exercise was. While these reports encourage me, I am left wishing that these freshmen had discovered, long before my class, the benefits of drawing apart to spend time alone with God and listen for his voice.

Without making too many disparaging comments about our practices as a church in North America, it has become clear to me over the past twenty-some years of teaching in a Christian college and working with youth in congregations that most of our church-going adolescents, even those who are vitally connected with the life of the church, seem to have been offered little encouragement to think of the classical spiritual disciplines, particularly solitude and silence, as necessary parts of their journey in Christ. The word "retreat" for most of them is synonymous with a high-energy weekend away filled with activity in the company of others.

This lack of encouragement is but a symptom of a broader problem in North American evangelical circles. There are a number of possible reasons why evangelicals have abandoned, or at least minimized the classic spiritual disciplines. In his keynote address at a recent Wheaton College Theology conference, Dallas Willard pointed to a view of the doctrine of justification which assumes a fullness of salvation and ignores, or at the very least, minimizes any need for regeneration as a necessary part of saving faith as being a key culprit in this abandonment. He said, "A view which takes salvation to be

the same thing as justification . . . forgiveness of sins and assurance of heaven based upon it, cannot come to see spiritual formation as a natural part of salvation" (Willard 2009).

When this weakened perspective on regeneration is combined with popular modern notions of adolescence as a time free from adult responsibility in which teens are given space to experiment and wrestle with issues of self-identity, it further diminishes the expectation that the central life focus of Christian young people will be to grow to look more like Jesus Christ. Of course, it must be recognized that a growing understanding of one's adolescent identity is an essential part of discovering who God is and is, then, an indispensable part of understanding one's identity in Christ. However, the truth is that most of our young people do not arrive at an integrated and Christ-centered view of themselves because they are not given the means to accomplish such a task.

That is not to say that they do not accrue information about themselves. Information about their identity is constantly streaming to them. There is no lack of variety of things to listen to and to watch in contemporary culture and adolescents are particularly sensitive to the often contrary messages washing over them. Kenda Creasy Dean writes this about the current challenges of adolescent self-integration:

> Today, channel surfing, split screens, hyperlinks, and hundreds of other momentary investments seem to challenge [Erik] Erikson's notion of an integrated identity while simultaneously underscoring his original insight: Adolescents do internalize the struggles of their historical moment, which is precisely why personal integration eludes so many young people in contemporary culture. (Dean 2004, 13)

These are two significant challenges for those who minister to adolescents: 1) the challenge of compassionately communicating to adolescents their need of a soteriology that properly addresses the doctrine of regeneration and 2) the challenge of engendering a pattern of living empowered by the Holy Spirit that encourages true self discovery and integration, as the adolescent becomes more like Jesus.

The Christian spiritual disciplines offer a way of responding to both these challenges. Prayer, the study of Scripture, silence, solitude, fasting, service, and so on, are the landscape that Christ's Spirit inhabits and any Christian, adolescent or otherwise, who seeks to know Christ and become like him. That we would postpone the introduction of these things until adulthood makes about as much sense as waiting until people mature into adults before teaching them to walk and talk. And yet, apart from a few experimental forays, most Christian young people would be unlikely to characterize their pattern of living as being guided by the disciplines listed above.

Adolescents, as any humans, hunger for a genuine experience of God and a true knowledge of themselves. The desire may be adolescent, even childish at times, but it is no less real for that. Young people require both guidance and space from those who minister to them. The framework offered by the spiritual disciplines provides both. Within the safety of these centuries-old practices, there is the freedom to discover the reality of God for oneself.

So here is the claim: adolescents need to learn to live and grow in the landscape of the spiritual disciplines if they are authentically to discover who they are in Jesus Christ. It is not a particularly new proposal but it is one that has not received much attention in our present culture. And although I am thankful for the work of Kenda Creasy Dean (1998), Mark Yaconelli (2006, 2008), Richard Dunn (2001), Steven Garber (2007) and others who are both writing and actively responding to these very issues, their voices are still calling from the margins of what is actually being practiced in the youth ministries of most North American congregations.

So, what might it look like if adolescents and those who offer them spiritual care took seriously the pattern of living offered by the spiritual disciplines? Let us take, for

instance, the disciplines of solitude and silence. In what ways would these particular disciplines aid adolescents in meeting the challenges of integration and differentiation that are essential for healthy self-identity while at the same time nurturing them on their journey in Christ? Inevitably, in answering this question, we will find ourselves straying into a consideration of the contribution of other disciplines because the classical spiritual disciplines are inter-dependent. For instance, one cannot master the study of Scripture while ignoring prayer or service and still hope to experience spiritual health. The goal of all the disciplines is to encourage and nurture a growing obedience to and intimacy with the person of Jesus Christ as we explore the mystery that our lives are now "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

As practiced by Christians, solitude and silence are disciplines that nurture attentiveness to the voice of God, they encourage us to quiet ourselves and aid in diminishing the external and internal noise that makes it difficult to for us to hear beyond ourselves. So, why are these important disciplines for adolescents? They are, because teenagers are always listening. Those of us who are parents and youth workers may be tempted to respond, "You are kidding, right!?" Nevertheless, it is true; adolescents are always listening because human beings have been created for response. Unlike the claim of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am"), the Christian's ground of being rests, more accurately, on *respondio ergo sum* ("I respond therefore I am"). It is in responding to God's initiative in our lives that we discover who we are. Teenagers are always listening, and always responding, but not always to the invitation of their Creator. They need to be taught how to distinguish God's voice amid the clamor of the world and their own incessant internal dialogue.

This is a central principle of growth in the Christian life: God speaks and it is our duty as human beings to listen. Think of Genesis chapter one: God spoke and out of nothing everything that is came to be. However, not only does God create with his powerful word, he also sustains everything by it. Everything in the universe keeps on existing because, as Hebrew 1:3 tells us, God continues to uphold all that is through Christ: "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word." God has spoken and God continues to speak and solitude and silence provide the opportunity and conditions adolescents need to hear his voice.

Having told adolescents that God speaks in many ways and potentially through everything, we should remind them that the primary information about him, them, and the world is the Bible. Feeding on God's word in the Bible is a key way that they learn properly to listen for his voice. Scripture is the vehicle that carries them to God. Olive Wyon wrote, "Prayer that is not supported by a deep, personal knowledge of God gained through 'feeding' on the word of God in the Scriptures, soon becomes thin and unsatisfying" (Wyon 1952, 75). So they need to learn not only to study the Bible but to pray it as well. Bible study is not prayer but it prepares them for prayer. Again, in Wyon's words, "A thorough knowledge of the bible does not constitute knowledge of God; we may know all the words but be ignorant of the Word" (Wyon 1952, 77).

Being regularly nourished by time spent studying and meditating on the Scripture not only continues to keep the heart of a teenager soft before the Lord it also provides a stability that allows him to maintain a steady consistency even in the midst of the trials of adolescence. In addition, as she gives herself to prayer that is fed by the word of God she

finds herself becoming more aligned with the will of God and with the direction that his Spirit is leading her and better equipped to respond to the Spirit's guidance.

Therefore, together, solitude and silence becomes the vessel that provides the space for God to speak to adolescents through his Word and in reflective prayer. If those of us who are responsible for their spiritual nurture fail to prepare and provide opportunities for adolescents to draw apart from others to hear from God then we should not be surprised when they respond to other voices and pattern their lives on messages that run contrary to Scripture.

The disciplines of solitude and silence also provide assistance for the adolescent in shifting from me-centeredness to other-centeredness. On the surface, this seems counter-intuitive. If the goal were to become more aware of the needs of others, why would we encourage our young people to draw apart from them? Because, one of the best fruits borne out of solitude and silence is the establishing of a new identity. As Henri Nouwen wrote in *Clowning in Rome,* "Solitude is a place of conversion. There we are converted from people who want to show each other what we have and what we can do into people who raise our open and empty hands to God in recognition that all we are is a free gift from God" (Nouwen 2000, 30). Solitude offers the adolescent the opportunity to discover who he truly is in Christ. In the silence that accompanies solitude, the demands of other voices, both external and internal, are stilled. He learns to discern the voice of God's Spirit and awakens to the reality that God's identity is not found in compulsively responding to the demands of his false self but in surrendering himself to the call of his true self, which is hid with Christ in God.

It is from this properly re-centered self that adolescents are empowered to reach out beyond themselves to embrace the needs of others. In dying to the false self that they

have begun to compulsively fashion to meet their needs, they become more fully aware of their created purpose, and their restoration to wholeness bears much fruit. Without dying to their false selves, teens are of little use to their neighbor. They are rendered incapable of embracing their neighbor's suffering. However, when in the power of God's Spirit they put to death their old false selves, they not only waken to their wholeness, they become equipped to draw their neighbor into that same wholeness.

Just a few days ago, a former student shared with me his experience during his freshman silent retreat: "I didn't experience anything earth shaking; I read through a few large chunks of Scripture and tried to listen for God's voice. But I noticed when I came out of that quiet time that I heard the world differently." That is certainly the hope that we hold out for our young people as they grow in Christ, that they will not only know God and themselves more fully but that they would also "hear the world differently."

So, how do we prepare for and offer these opportunities to today's adolescent? We do not have to think long before identifying some of the obstacles. I mentioned two at the outset of this article that I have experienced in my own teaching: disinterest and fear of the unknown.

Begin by creating a hunger for the experience of solitude and silence. This is best done by telling stories of our own and others' experiences with these disciplines. Then, invite them to take small steps. Before my spiritual formation class enters their twenty-four hour retreat they have had opportunity in the semester progressively to experience solitude and silence. I start with five-minute increments and expand the time from there. I also take the time to debrief the exercises, helping them recognize that the purpose of these exercises is to increase their attentiveness to God's voice and to learn that solitude

and silence are available to them even in the regular routines of their day. As Catherine de Hueck Dougherty reminds us in her book *Poustinia*,

> Deserts, silence, solitudes are *not necessarily places but states of mind and heart*. These deserts can be found in the midst of the city, and in the every day of our lives . . . They will be small solitudes, little deserts, tiny pools of silence, but the experience they will bring, if we are disposed to enter them, may be as exultant and as holy as all the deserts of the world, even the one God himself entered. For it is God who makes solitude, deserts and silences holy. (Dougherty 1975, 21-21 emphasis in text)

Prepare them for the obstacles they might encounter in solitude and silence: boredom, inability to focus, unrealistic expectations, and remind them that even the exercise of returning one's attention to God from various distractions is time well spent. Above all, be gentle. We cannot assume that every adolescent who experiments with silence and solitude, or any of the other spiritual disciplines, is going to emerge from those exercises instantly transformed. Spiritual growth, particularly the sort of transformation that occurs within the geography of the spiritual disciplines, is typically incremental. For some, their experience of God in solitude will be as refreshing as a plunge in the lake on a hot summer day; for others, the solitude may provide a furnace-like opportunity in which God's Spirit seeks to purify them for the journey ahead; and for yet others, it may be a wrestle in the dark that produces no immediate fruit but only discontentment and frustration. Be patient, ask them good questions, engage them in meaningful conversation and use the feedback you get from them—their elation, their contrition, even their frustration and dissatisfaction—as starting points to explore with them what they have yet to realize; that, to paraphrase Augustine, their hearts will be restless until they find their rest in God.

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Living the Abbey Way: An Experiment in Spiritual Formation and the New Monasticism

By Jan Bros

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Abstract
A three-year-old church plant in Minneapolis, MN, associated with the Evangelical Covenant Church, Abbey Way attempts to be purposely intergenerational and to center in shared spiritual practices and corporate rhythms versus programs or events. The community has adopted a number of practices and values that have characterized Benedictine monastic life. The key principles of commitment, stability, transformation, and obedience as lived out in this community are described.

Birthed in Enlightenment ideals, evangelical Christianity has focused on the personal power of choice. Reacting to lack of religious fervor found in the culture and church communities of the 1800s, the evangelical movement emphasized the individual's life in God over and above the corporate life of the faith community. As a call to personal commitment to Christ was a needed counter to the spiritual lethargy of the day, the movement, by its individualistic nature, failed to hold the intrinsic and necessary good found in Christ's gathered community. Today many evangelicals shun traditional forms of church, citing failure to find suitable communities of worship to support and nurture their spiritual life. They carry on this legacy of individualism in the lack of regular commitment and connection to their spiritual birth family.

As sociologist Alan Jamieson (Jamieson 2002) has noted a growing disenchantment with today's organizational church structures, there is also a counter surge of interest in the reformation of the church as highlighted by others such as church leader Alan Hirsch (Hirsch 2006). Google the phrases "intentional community" or "missional church" and you will find a myriad of resources and expressions in many

forms and styles. These are hopeful signs that the church is beginning to reclaim its understanding what it means to be the Body of Christ as a gathered community of faith.

One of the places of intersection with the old and new comes in what is called the new monastic movement. Rooted in ancient expressions of Christian community, born out of the church's early impulse for renewal and revival, the longevity of this deep seated longing has been tested by time. Men and women of various cultural backgrounds have found ways to create cloisters of learning and formation where Christian life and its principles could flourish. Traditionally, monasteries were places of prayer, learning, work, and service. With the revitalized interest in "being church" not just "doing" or "attending" church, new monasticism has created an outlet to rediscover the importance and meaning of Christian community.

Foundation

Abbey Way Covenant Church, a three-year-old church plant in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has adopted the practices and principles of the ancient monastic tradition. To create a container from which the life of God may grow, we have adapted the 1500-year-old Rule of Benedict as the foundational structure for our church community. Benedict's Rule describes "more a way of life and attitude of mind" (Chittister 1992, 15) that is grounded in biblical norms, finding expression in the company of others, than a detailed list of rules for the holy life. The Prologue to Benedict's Rule exhorts:

> Let us get up . . . at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say, "It is high time for us to arise from sleep (Rom. 13:11)." Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heavens that every day calls out its charge: "If you hear God's voice today, do not harden your hearts (Ps 95:8)" (Chittister 1992, 22).

Abbey Way finds its desire to follow Jesus' teachings deeply connected to the story of faithful God seekers through the centuries. We choose to align ourselves

alongside those who have live out their lives in commitment to a shared life like the monastics of old.

Practices

Abbey Way's model of faith community centers in shared spiritual practices and corporate rhythms versus programs or events. Like the monastery, we recognize our common disciplines are essential for the formation of our souls in Christ. With less energy put into developing and maintaining a wide range of ministry opportunities, more time is freed up to be together as a community of faith, sharing meals, prayer, study, and play, while releasing people in mission within the context of their neighborhoods and workplaces. We desire to create a way of living the Gospel life together that will sustain and nurture everyone regardless of age or spiritual development. We value the simplicity of common spiritual practices and strive to grow in them as a community.

A few months ago, my husband and I were visiting another Abbey Way family. While we were there, another family stopped by to bring a birthday gift to the young father of the household. It was late. The children needed to get to bed for school the next morning, but with the excitement of birthday wishes given a new energy emerged. We had not done our evening prayer for the night so we turned toward each other in that hour to pray. It might have been the spontaneity of coming together that marks this interaction so deeply in my mind. Yet I think it was the joy of our shared discipline bearing its ripest fruit that has was the evening's greatest gift. It was when we prayed, with young and old voices combining in a familiar prayer form, that God was so very present to all of us.

Evening Prayer is but one of the practices we hold as a community of faith. Some of the other disciplines Abbey Way chooses to incorporate into its rhythm of life include daily Morning and Evening Prayer and meditation (*lectio divina*); weekly gatherings for

worship, communion, meals, study, prayer and building relationships; monthly individual or group spiritual direction and communal discernment; and yearly a community and personal retreat and mission/service projects.

These practices help keep us centered in Christ. They help us to turn and return to our Lord in our daily life whether it be in the morning, evening or at noonday. We choose to follow the beat of this rhythm when we are alone and together, whether we are at a planned or gathering or a spontaneous one. It is in this way we make our selves available to God and others. We believe this sort of intentionality makes it possible for us to live a more meaningful life on both an individual and corporate level. Whether it is at our weekly meal and worship, in a spiritual direction group, with service to our neighbors, or on quiet retreat, we want to hear God and live faithfully in obedience to Him. The shared practices and rhythms help us to become what we desire to be.

Commitment

The participants of Abbey Way commit yearly to God and each other to live out the "abbey way" in their daily lives. Our vow of "I see you and I commit to you" acknowledges the need for both an external and internal consecration of habit and attitude that we believe is necessary to continue to grow in God through every season of our life. Our willingness to create space for deep and meaningful relationships demonstrates our understanding that a close relationship with God and healthy relationships are essential to spiritual growth. Even in our intentional commitment, we recognize that true relationship only happens over time and starts with the courage to be available, willing, and open. This posture leads to a true intimacy that is a foundation for obedience to God and service to others that looks like real Gospel engagement with one's whole being.

This commitment to each other and its fruit of intimacy can be tangibly seen in times of stress and struggle. One of Abbey Way's faithful recently experienced a medical emergency. Coming home from the hospital meant weeks of rest and recuperation in order for her body to heal. As a busy wife and a home-school mom, her normal days are full of activity and to do lists. All this stopped in a moment of time. Back filling the needed care for her and her four children, the community of Abbey Way moved into action. Those who had time gave; those who did not have time gave. More importantly in the midst of it all, she received the gift of love that others were offering to her. The helping came with no strings attached. Touching deep places inside, she wrote to me:

> I am so blown away by Abbey Way in this time of need. Can I tell you how people have given and given? Every day someone -- or two people -- from AW have helped our family. I am amazed! S. came one morning. D. had the kids one afternoon. You came and provided a cake! D. came and went garage sale shopping with Bethany. The S's came with a meal. R. was here tonight with a meal and stayed. C. watched the kids the night of the hospital. J. was there for me to cry out my frustrations and fears to. And many calls and flowers later, I am grateful. Grateful that these loved ones have given me time to rest. Grateful D. has not had to shoulder all of the work. Grateful that I have had some social outlet as to not go crazy. Grateful that the girls have been held. Grateful that God is using this time to show me many things about my struggle with rest and receiving. Grateful. (Dart 2009)

Not only was she deeply touched, others were changed because of their participation. In most settings the end product would be measured by the care for the sick or the injured. Here at Abbey Way we recognize that the whole community is built up, everyone experiences transformation, healing and new levels of intimacy, as they "see and commit" to each other in practical ways. We strive to live this both in our giving and receiving in every time and season of life.

Principles

This kind of shared life is sustained by three core principles that shape the church community of Abbey Way. These are stability, transformation and obedience. Held in tandem, these principles hold us in accountability before God and each other, creating a common way of life shared by all.

Stability: Willing to Be Still

> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ … (Eph. 3:16-18 TNIV)

Stability creates an environment to grow and mature, rooting us deeply within and without, through endurance and perseverance, with a particular community and location. It calls us to a committed way of life with a certain group of people for the long haul. Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger use these words to describe the same truth:

> Over and against the supposedly American freedom to choose whatever we want, and to be with whomever we want, which is actually bondage, because it does not free us for "the other"—the one who is truly different from us—God chose us in Christ, and chose our brothers and sisters in Christ for us. (Harper and Metzger 2009, 45)

Stability requires an interior stay with-it-ness when external or internal forces toss us about, making us want to flee. It is deeply rooted in God's faithfulness. God promises, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). It is because of God's abiding presence we are able to commit ourselves to each other in Christ.

Abbey Way claims this principle of stability as its own. Antidotal to non-committal and individualistic forms of church attendance, stability names the real work of creating a community that is readied to reflect the glory of Christ. As Abbey Way embraces stability as one of our core principals, we seek to create an accessible

embodiment of the Gospel, enabling others to find Jesus and experience new life in Christ.

Transformation: Willing to Change

> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Together we share a commitment to continued growth and change: to faithfully as individuals and a community answer Christ's call to "come and follow." *Conversatio morum*, a Benedictine term that could be translated "conversion of life," calls us to a lifetime of transformation. It admits as a people of God we are on the journey of continual conversion—turning and returning to God, dying and rising with Christ—until the end of our life here on earth.

> *Conversatio morum* invites us to on-going responsiveness to God and the people who God has named as companions on the journey. Esther de Waal in *Seeking God: The Way of Benedict* describes it this way:
>
> *Conversatio* is a recognition of God's unpredictability, which confronts our own love of coziness or safety. It means we need to live provisionally, ready to respond to the new whenever and however that might appear. There is no security here, no clinging to the past certainties. Rather we must expect to see our chosen idols successively broken. It means a constant letting go . . . a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort or other . . ." (de Waal 2001, 70)
>
> *Conversatio morum* coupled with the principle of stability, create a dynamic duo of Kingdom potential. When growth and change in Christ is embraced as a way of life within a particular place and with a particular people, the possibility of long-term internal and external impact increases. The power of these principles combined is what makes Abbey Way such a potent place for the Spirit of God's work to be seen and experienced.

Obedience: Willing to Listen

> My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me, Jesus. (John 10:27).

The heart of obedience is the word "listen." We choose as individuals and a community, to listen to God and to each other, honestly and openly engaging in

relationship, willing to submit ourselves in humility to each other and the values and practices of the community in Christ's name. At Abbey Way we desire to create a listening environment, so we can together discern God's voice and direction in our lives as individuals and as a community. As the Psalmist and the writer of Hebrews implore us, "Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Ps. 95:8; Heb. 3:5).

Living in a culture where individualism and independence is valued over and against Gospel understandings of community and connection in Christ, the principle of obedience helps hold our intentions to the things we value and the One we profess to truly love. We choose to practice "listening" and responding together to the "still, small voice" as heard in prayer, spiritual direction and in the "underneath places" as we converse with others.

At Abbey Way, each member plays an important role in helping create our shared life. All are valued and recognized as essential in our learning to hear God's voice whether it is in prayer, worship, work, play or service. As we make ourselves available to know and be known by others, holding in common the principle of obedience—listening to God and to each other—we create the possibility of learning what it truly means to submit to one another out of love for Christ.

Intergenerational

The story of the one's life in Christ is both personal as well as communal. This is both theological as well as practical part of our life at Abbey Way. We seek to be an intentional community of faith. We choose to be open and loving toward each other, recognizing it is a place where God's reflection can be seen. We believe the act of opening to and receiving each other is as much for our own continuing conversion as for

the health of the community. We believe everyone is an integral part of our faith community. We help each other keep our faith alive, fresh and vital.

In these past years, story after story has emerged of the internal transformation that has occurred as each person has chosen to remain present to "the other." After the initial commitment has been made, the work of staying attentive to the relationships that have been given becomes an active place for receiving God's mercy and grace in order to remain faithful to the community.

One of the places where our life together is most notable is in our making space for all ages. A few months ago a young family came and visited Abbey Way. They happened to sit with my son Isaac and his girlfriend Connie at dinner. This interaction would not be newsworthy if it were not for little six-year-old Z. sitting next to I.. Z. is a delightful young girl with much to say about the world she lives in. She caught I.'s ear for most of the mealtime. When the night was done, a friend came up to me and reported that our guests thought that Z. was I. and C.'s daughter. We both smiled at each other with a knowing grin.

Abbey Way is a church whose fabric of gathering is bound by the quality of relationships between each other. You can especially notice this in how we are with our kids. The children are with us as people. They are loved and included. Children companion "their adult" for the evening. I. was Z.'s adult on that Sunday night. I. talked and listened to Z. more than anyone else at the dinner table. Z. sat beside I. in worship. Z. was with I. from the time we entered the building to when we locked up, thus the confusion about who were her parents.

In a time when people hunger for connection and community, Abbey Way offers something of significance for those who desire to step in. We are different than other

experiences of church. Our children are with us from the beginning to the end. An outsider may not know whose child is whose just from experiencing the quality of the interactions between the adults and kids. They truly are our children.

For a newcomer who is either not used to children or wary of the involvement of others with their children, Abbey Way can seem to be a scary place. We hold a common way of life together. We eat at the table together. We move towards the children as individuals and a group for guidance and shepherding. We come to the communion table adult /child/adult / child. We believe children can work side by side with us in our life together as a community. We believe they have something to say to us. We love them and protect them fiercely. To commit to Abbey Way means a person brings their whole self as well as their children into the circle of opening and turning towards everyone. This is quite a demanding ask for those who been trained to be independent of others even in their experience of church.

The funny thing about this story is that the truth of the matter is that Z. "is" my granddaughter: not biologically but spiritually. She is mine in the best sense of that understanding. I am a part of her life and she is a part of mine. When I was on chemotherapy this last year, Z. prayed for me. She approached me and asked me how I was doing. She cared for me. Conversely, I cheer her accomplishments and admonish her missing the mark. I love seeing her grow and become who God is creating her to be. I love her and she loves me.

When I read books on the church and what God is doing today in reforming the Body of Christ, these sorts of stories seem absent. I do not hear about how God reforms hearts and heals wounds when a body of believers chooses to struggle rightly with the inclusion of children in their communities of faith. Change for us at Abbey Way happens

on so many levels, from the willingness to stop a conversation with another adult and notice a child in need in a food line to making room for children of others beside us in worship with all their wiggles and wonders. The community has chosen to make room for the children since the beginning. They are part of us. How we are together with them is a unique mark of who we are as a church. Everyone is included at the table of our life together.

Conclusion

Our life together at Abbey Way is formed as the members live into common set of principles and spiritual practices. We welcome struggle with our own limitations and failures to live more faithfully. It is our commitment to a shared expression of Gospel life that helps to create a safe haven to courageously live as Christ's body with mercy, grace and forgiveness extended toward each other, making place in our heart's for each person. Abbey Way is a good place to be, to grow and become. We are one community of faith where the corporate life of the church is finding life in today's world.

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From Neutrino Worship to Real Transformation

By Rory Noland

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Abstract
While worship should be formational and transformational, it is not always experienced as such. Worship is formation because we become what we worship; what we focus on tends to shape us. True worship will awaken in us a desire to be transformed and it will facilitate that transformation through the revelation of God to us, the revelation of ourselves to us, and the invitation to be more than we already are.

The Role of Worship in Our Spiritual Formation

The New Testament book of Matthew ends triumphantly. Jesus has conquered death and risen from the grave. Just before ascending into heaven, though, Jesus called his disciples together for one last meeting. “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him...” (Matt. 28:16-17 NIV unless otherwise indicated). As one would expect, the most natural response to the resurrected Christ was to bow down in worship before him. However, there’s an eerie twist to the story. After reporting that the disciples worshiped Christ, Matthew immediately adds three bone chilling words, “. . . but some doubted.”

I can’t tell you how much those three words bothered me when I first noticed them. Face to face with the glory of Christ—even worshiping him—some still doubted. Perhaps they doubted their ability to go on without him, as I’m sure I would have if I had been in their sandals. But the fact remains: this momentous worship experience was not sufficient to assuage their doubts and fears. My dismay quickly turned into conviction when I realized how often I, too, come away from the most meaningful times of worship completely unchanged. I call this dubious exercise in futility “neutrino worship.”

In physics, a neutrino is a subatomic particle, smaller than a neutron, which carries no electrical charge or measurable mass. Because it is electrically neutral, a neutrino is able to pass through solid matter without being affected. In the same way, I often engage in worship without allowing it to shape my behavior.

When the Lord appeared to Abraham, he proclaimed, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). Indeed, one does not truly encounter the character of God and stay the same. As Richard Foster writes, "To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change" (Foster 1998, 173).

In Romans, Paul writes: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers [and sisters], by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:1-2). Note that Paul connects worship with spiritual transformation. Thus, Paul is describing a worship experience that is much deeper than some "warm fuzzy" that wears off within seconds. Worship is inherently and ultimately transformational. Second Corinthians 3:18 teaches that when we behold or contemplate God's glory, we are "transformed into the same image." Thus, we are molded and shaped by the character of God. Every encounter with God comes with an invitation to be renewed into his image (Col. 3:10). For that reason, worship plays a significant role in our spiritual formation.

We Become What We Worship

Whether we realize it or not, we all worship something or someone. Whatever occupies the majority of our thoughts or controls our behavior is our god. The first commandment reads, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Today we may not bow down to graven images as did the ancients; yet our idols are just as

pervasive and perhaps more pernicious. Money, sex, and power are the most obvious forms of modern day idolatry, but some may idolize intellect, popularity, pleasure, image, or appearance. Others will worship material possessions, clothes, sports, or hobbies. Many artists put talent, beauty, and even our art above God. Whatever receives more of our devotion than God, whatever dominates our thoughts or controls our behavior more than does the Holy Spirit, is an idol. Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Matt. 4:10).

The hidden danger of idolatry lies in the fact that we become what we worship. In describing false gods, the psalmist says,

> They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:5-8, parenthesis mine)

If we worship money, we will become greedy. If we worship sex, we will become lustful. If we worship power, we will become corrupt. When we worship anything other than God, it makes us miserable: "The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods" (Ps. 16:4).

Fortunately, if we worship Christ, we will become more and more Christ-like (Rom. 8:29). A good friend of mine shared recently that his life has been continually marked by God's faithfulness. Near tears, my friend cited several examples of God's goodness throughout his life, and then said, "In spite of everything I've been through, God has been so faithful to me and my family." Coincidentally, faithfulness is also one of my friend's most admirable traits. Whenever I need prayer, wisdom or advice, I can always count on him; he has always been there for me. He is also particularly handy, and on many occasions I have seen him drop whatever he was doing to help someone with a

household emergency. I have also known him to give (not loan) money to a person in need. After many years of walking with Christ, God's faithfulness has rubbed off on this man and made him the faithful and loyal friend that he is. We really do become what we worship.

Worship Awakens a Desire for Transformation

Worship awakens a desire to change by challenging our spiritual status quo. Certain hymns and praise choruses, when taken seriously, should rock our boat. Who can sing the classic hymns *I Surrender All*, *Have Thine Own Way,* or *All for Jesus* without fully considering the implication of those words?

Worship challenges us to take an honest look within. Recently, during worship, I read lyrics that stopped me dead in my tracks. The first line read, ". . . the power of your love is changing me." While singing that line, I had to ask, "Is that true of me? Is God's love really changing me?" Another line stated, "Your grace is enough for me," which prompted me to ask, "Is God really all I need to be happy or am I seeking happiness and fulfillment in temporal things?" I didn't come to those questions on my own. Worship brought them to the forefront.

Worship also affirms our intentions to obey God. Spiritual formation is something God initiates and does in us through the Holy Spirit (Phil. 1:6; 2:13). However, it is our responsibility to co-operate with his work in our lives. Worship songs emphasizing faith and commitment give voice to our intentions to follow Christ.

Frequently the Holy Spirit uses worship to convict us of sin. Once, I was embroiled in a sticky relational conflict with a brother in Christ. However, I was absolutely convinced I was right and that he was completely wrong. Then I came to church. During the first song, we were invited to "humble [ourselves] before the Lord."

The next song proclaimed that God "graciously forgives sinners such as I." Needless to say, I was immediately convicted of my pride and arrogance, and realized that my stubbornness was preventing reconciliation. The next morning I apologized and made amends.

Worship Addresses the Three Most Important Questions in Life

Jesus posed questions that forced his listeners to wrestle with spiritual issues. To the multitude he asked, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Luke 9:25); to his disciples he asked, "Who do people say that I am?" (Matt. 16:13); to Peter he asked, "Do you love me?" (John 21:16). Jesus knew that we could not resolve life's biggest problems without the right questions. With that in mind, I submit to you what I believe are the three most important questions in life:

1. Who is God?
2. Who am I?
3. What is God inviting me to do?

Answers to these three questions inevitably inform our convictions, establish our values, and determine our behavior. Worship addresses, in various ways, all three of these vital questions and makes worship so powerfully transformational; God reveals himself to us, invites us to be more than we already are, and we respond accordingly.

Who Is God?

I have a friend who grew up with an overly strict father. As a result, she perceived God as perpetually angry and harsh. Growing up, she lived in constant fear that if she made one false move, she would miss out on "God's perfect plan" for her life. She became paralyzed by a fear of failure, and understandably so. In her mind, God was a quick-tempered taskmaster who threw down lightning bolts to keep her in line, and

turned his back on her whenever she failed. Through counseling, my friend began to realize that she had projected her father's personality onto God. Her image of God was more like that of her father. For the first time in her life, she asked, "Who is God?"

Most of us go through life with some concept of God. Jesus taught that we are to worship the Lord "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Worshiping in truth means that we worship God as we are coming to understand him from the Scriptures—not some god we concocted from distorted religious training and/or a dysfunctional family upbringing. A biblical concept of God is a prerequisite for true worship. According to N. T. Wright, "if your idea of God, if your idea of the salvation offered to you in Christ, is vague or remote, your idea of worship will be fuzzy and ill-formed" (Wright 1997, 10).

Our concept of God not only shapes our worship; it affects everything—how we think, act, and even feel. Therefore, it is crucial that our image of God be maturing. Richard Foster says, "To think rightly about God is, in an important sense, to have everything right. To think wrongly about God is, in an important sense, to have everything wrong" (Foster 1998, 159-160).

Intimate knowledge of God can completely change one's outlook on life. In the book of Lamentations, chapter three, we find Jeremiah greatly distressed and afflicted. He wrongly perceives that God is against him and blames all his problems on the Lord. Listen to the despair, resignation and hopelessness in Jeremiah's voice:

> I'm the man who has seen trouble, trouble coming from the lash of God's anger.
> He took me by the hand and walked me into pitch-black darkness.
> Yes, he's given me the back of his hand over and over and over again.
> He turned me into a scarecrow of skin and bones, then broke the bones.
> He hemmed me in, ganged up on me, and poured on the trouble and hard times.
> He locked me up in deep darkness, like a corpse nailed inside a coffin.
> He shuts me in so I'll never get out, manacles my hands, shackles my feet.
> Even when I cry out and plead for help, he locks up my prayers and throws away the key.

> He sets up blockades with quarried limestone.
> He's got me cornered.
> He's a prowling bear tracking me down, a lion in hiding ready to pounce.
> He knocked me from the path and ripped me to pieces.
> When he finished, there was nothing left of me.
> He took out his bow and arrows and used me for target practice.
> (Lam. 3:1-12 MSG)

We all have felt angry, in despair and abandoned by God, especially during adversity. After Jeremiah rants and raves at God, he realizes his need to change his concept of God. In verse twenty-one he says, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope." What is it that he recalls? He remembers who God truly is—that he is loving, compassionate, and faithful. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). Recalibrating his concept of God gave Jeremiah a fresh new outlook. Interestingly, C.S. Lewis referred to worship as "inner health made audible" (Lewis 1986, 94).

Who am I?

My friend—the one whose father was a strict authoritarian—suffered from a negative self-image. She felt worthless and unlovable, and viewed herself as a pitiful failure. When her inability to relate to others in a healthy way began to wreak havoc in her marriage and undermine her job performance, she came to a crossroad. She could either perpetuate her negative self-image or she could adopt a new identity. Since the former was ruining her life, she chose the latter. She knew it wasn't going to be easy to rebuild her self-esteem, but totally captivated by the love of God, she began to realize that the negative voices from her past were a pack of lies. Over time, she began to see herself in a much more positive light because she realized that God viewed her differently!

In order to discover our true identities, wisdom suggests that we turn to the one who created us and who knows us better than we know ourselves. According to 1 Corinthians 8:3, "whoever loves God is known by God" (TNIV). David wrote, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me" (Ps. 139:1, see also Jer. 1:5). Even Jesus derived his identity exclusively from God. When he proclaimed that he is the light of the world, the Pharisees objected. "Why should we believe that you're the light of the world?" they asked. "Just because you say so?" "No," Jesus replied, "because God said so" (John 8:12-18). Through worship, we discover not only who God is, but also who we are.

Some may reject the notion of drawing their identity from God because they assume that God has a very low opinion of them. But nothing could be further from the truth. God is for us, not against us (Rom. 8:31). His opinion of us is far more glorious than most of us dare to realize. Jesus said that he had given his disciples the glory that God had given him (John 17:22). Paul wrote that those God justified, he also glorified (Rom. 8:30). Indeed, Paul, in his letter to the Philippians proclaims that we are destined for greatness, to "shine like stars in the universe" (2:15). God knows our full potential for godly glory, and calls us to live up to that every day.

St. Irenaeus famously said, "The glory of God is the fully alive human being" (Irenaeus c180, 4:20:7). Sadly, many of us have no idea of how a fully alive version of ourselves would appear. But a person becoming fully alive is at peace with God, in harmony with others, content, free from dysfunction, unencumbered by brokenness, overcoming addictions, growing through adversity, and using gifts and talents in a meaningful way (Gal. 5:22-23). C. S. Lewis writes that God is intent on making each of us into "a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and

joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness" (Lewis 1980, 176).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, viewed herself in a whole new light after her personal encounter with God's miraculous power and might:

> And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name" (Luke 1:46-49).

Who is God? Mary says God is her Savior, the "Mighty One;" he is holy. In light of who God is, who is Mary? Mary concludes that she is God's humble servant, someone for whom God has done great things, someone history will regard as outrageously blessed.

While the Bible states clearly that we are destined to reflect God's image and glory, the problem is that we don't always allow ourselves to live up to that destiny. We live beneath our privilege. We not only forget who God is, we forget who we are. Instead of enjoying the freedom of being fully alive as new creations in Christ, we fall back into our old nature, with its addictions, bad habits, and dysfunctional behaviors. I am not suggesting that we live in denial about our fatal flaws, but that we stop allowing them to be the final word as to who we are.

What is God Inviting Me to Do?

As the prophet Isaiah witnessed God's holiness, he heard God say, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" God apparently had an assignment for some willing soul. Without even knowing what the job was, Isaiah shot up his hand and said, "Send me! I'll go!" (Is. 6:8). When Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus, his first question was, "Who are you, Lord?" His second questions was, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:8-

10). Apparently, enthusiastic obedience is a common and natural response to the presence of God.

Whenever God reveals himself to you, whether through his Word, through worship, or any other means, be prepared to act upon what you receive. Daniel claims "the people who know their God will display strength and take action" (Dan. 11:32, NASB). So worship that doesn't eventually motivate us to do something is sentimental gibberish. We are to be doers of the Word, not let it go in one ear and out the other (James 1:22).

The question, "What is God asking me to do?" may prompt us to look in the mirror, face the truth about our flaws, and invite the Holy Spirit to grow us up. Thus, inner-confrontation always demands courage. This willingness to be open to the truth about ourselves is illustrated in David's prayer from Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (23-24).

God never twists arms when he wants us to do something. He simply reveals himself and invites us to follow him. Zacchaeus was a despised tax collector, yet Jesus befriended him. He spent time with Zacchaeus and even stayed at his house. This made such a huge impression on Zacchaeus that he decided to completely change his lifestyle, and he started by giving half his possessions to charity and making amends to anyone he had cheated. No one coerced Zacchaeus into restitution and benevolence. He came face-to-face with the love of Christ and it changed his behavior.

Transformational Worship

I pray that your private and corporate worship continues to awaken a desire for deep transformation. As you worship, may you continue to behold God's glory and be

transformed into the image of Christ. And as you probe deeply into the character of God, may you continually ask, "Who is God? Who am I? And what is God inviting me to do?"

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Spiritual Formation in Community

By Jim Wilhoit

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Abstract
Christian spiritual formation must include as primary elements the context of community, the bracing truth and hope of the gospel, and an apprenticeship to Christ. These elements are at play in four aspects of formation essential for the growing believer and community: receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. These orientations are illustrated through the practices of brokenness, worship, inclusion, and hospitality.

Christian spiritual formation is the process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is intentional and communal, individual and corporate, for the glory of God and the service of others, and accomplished by the Holy Spirit. As Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, and God is causing the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6).

The Community and Spiritual Formation

About twenty years ago, I had the opportunity to teach at a small seminary in Estonia, when it was still part of the Soviet Union. By day I taught a Christian education course at the seminary, and by night I learned about the persecuted church from my hosts and members of the churches we visited. I was struck by the vitality of the congregation at St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn. The Baptist congregation had been assigned, by the Soviet authorities, to a remarkable 14th century church building, at one time the tallest building in the world. The building is a treasure, but certainly was not designed to support the age-segregated educational programs to which I was accustomed. In fact, the Soviet authorities had essentially banned children's Sunday school and youth programs.

Here was a church, free of typical programs, yet nurturing its members. What I was witnessing was spiritual formation through community.

Over the years, this image of a community forming its members without the fanfare of programs and dedicated staff stuck with me. I was aware of how the unique cultural and political setting contributed to what I had observed, but I also saw the powerful effects of a community committed to formation. Community formation is certainly not opposed to programs, but it can never be reduced to a program.

When I think of community formation, I like to conceive of it as the spiritual equivalent of the public health infrastructure in developed countries. A safe food supply, clean drinking and recreational waters, sanitation, and widespread vaccinations have improved the quality of life. Health interventions have eliminated diseases such as smallpox and polio. These advances, among many others, are part of the fruit of the public health movement that came to fruition in the twentieth century. We take many of these factors for granted, assuming they are just part of life; but in many parts of the world they are not widely present. A quarter-million 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. Cures may provoke media attention and buzz; however, it is the preventative and public health interventions that generally provide the real "bang for the buck." According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "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" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1999). 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.

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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "ten great public health achievements," they appear so reasonable that their implementation seems to be obvious to all. The list includes now widely accepted "best practices" such as vaccination, motor-vehicle safety, safer and healthier foods, and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1999). 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. What might be the spiritual formation equivalent of safe drinking water and vaccinations? What are the patterns in Christian community life that make a positive contribution to spiritual formation? What are the community practices that we so easily overlook or underutilize that could help create a climate of formation in a church?

While themes and patterns of formation do emerge with study, 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 that true formation comes from grace and by grace, channeled through our humble efforts. Spiritual formation is a multi-factorial process (Van Kaam 1983-1995) that requires us to constantly ask God what we should be doing. However, I would suggest that a healthy climate for spiritual formation will include at least three factors: gospel-centricity, imitation of Christ as the end and

means of formation, and a clear sense that "it's not about me" evidenced in the adoption of four basic orientations for spiritual growth.

The Gospel and Spiritual Formation

Much of our failure in conceptualizing spiritual formation comes from our failure to keep the gospel central. I was nurtured in churches that tended to see Christian education, discipleship, and spiritual formation as things that happened *after* the gospel was preached and believed. In this understanding, the gospel contains the indictment of our sin and the announcement of hope through the cross—this is "gospel as pre-discipleship." The danger is that we may come to think of the gospel as merely the door by which we enter Christianity and something we leave behind as we grow spiritually. This can lead to the mistaken notion that God saved me (gospel); now I need to make myself holy (discipleship). The gospel must permeate any program of Christian spiritual formation. The way a non-Christian becomes a Christian and the way we grow as Christians are actually the same—believing the gospel. The gospel is the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. *All our spiritual problems come from a failure to apply the gospel.* This is true for us both as a community and as individuals.

Imitation of Christ and Spiritual Formation

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gave a final charge to his disciples to engage in outreach, discipleship, and formation. He told his followers that one of the necessary elements in their formation is to "teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you" (23:20 NLT). The heart of spiritual formation is to teach and train people to follow the wisdom and instructions of Christ through the enabling power of his grace. In Bob Meye's words, "Imitation of Christ is both a fundamental

means and a glorious end of Christian formation" (Meye 1994, 199). Some writers put up resistance to the use of "imitation of Christ" language because they think that this has often led to a human-centered view of sanctification. True imitation respects the tension between the reality that the Holy Spirit ultimately brings about our imitation through conforming us to Christ's likeness and the reality that we must work hard and carefully at imitating Christ by adopting his lifestyle and patterns of life.

When we speak of imitation in formation, it is, as Dallas Willard has taught us, more akin to serving an apprenticeship with Jesus than merely mimicking selected actions of his (Willard 1998, 2002). I recently made a list of Jesus' commands but I chose to describe them as Jesus *inviting* us to do certain things (Wilhoit 2008, 46-49). I do not intend to soften the language of command, but rather to recognize that Jesus is inviting us to a certain way of living. He is not content to simply order us to do such and such; he wants "us" far more than our action. He wants all of us.

The focus on loving God and neighbor is the spiritual North Star we follow in seeking to understand Jesus' teaching. The sixteen invitations of Jesus that follow the two great commands come as applications of the call to the twofold love of God and neighbor. At the heart of the "love God" invitation, we must not simply hear "try harder and harder;" we need to hear, "Love the loveable Father," "Love the Lover of our soul," and "Receive his embrace." Out of that safe place, as secure spiritual children, we seek to live out these invitations—not to earn love and affection, but to grow in the likeness of one we admire and want to be like.

Basic Orientations and Spiritual Formation

There are four dimensions of community formation that can serve as the framework for cultivating the practice of Jesus' great invitations. This curriculum for

Christlikeness consists of four "R's": receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. These are not so much methods as stances or orientations of a church or faith community. While there are many practices or expressions of each of these orientations, we will illustrate receiving with brokenness, remembering with worship, responding with seeing those in need, and relating with hospitality.

Receiving and Brokenness

Christian spiritual formation requires that we actively and continually receive from God. We need to be extraordinary consumers of his grace; we need to receive his words of love and correction, his forgiveness, his affirmation, his life. Without receiving from God, there is no true formation. Receiving involves cultivating a spiritual openness and continual repentance. Some spiritual practices that correlate with receiving include prayer, discernment, submission, and brokenness.

The Bible most commonly employs brokenness as an image for people overwhelmed by troubles that change them. Old Testament writers commonly express this by saying that the "heart" or "spirit" is "broken." The image represents feelings of anguish and despair and a loss of hope or sense of well-being. Brokenness was the experience of many Bible heroes: Abraham, Moses, Hannah, David, and Paul. In the biblical narrative, as in life, brokenness may have two different outcomes. Some leave the experience wounded, despairing, and functionally impaired. Others leave it humbled and changed and far more effective. Paul captures the difference when he writes to the Corinthians:

> Now I rejoice, not that you were grieved, but that your grief led to repentance; for you were grieved in the way God intended, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For godly brokenness produces a

> repentance leading to salvation, without regret, but the sorrow of the world produces death. (2 Cor. 7:9–10, my trans.)

Broken people need to turn to God for help. Openness to God awakens his compassion and moves him to bind up the brokenhearted (Isa. 61:1); at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus quotes Isaiah to explain his own mission (Luke 4:18–19; Is. 61:1). Subsequently, he displays great concern for binding up the brokenhearted in his focus on the spiritually "sick" (Matt. 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31), his frequent calls for repentance (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3), his gentle dealings with sinful people (Luke 7:36–50; 19:1–10), and his parables of acceptance for the repentant (15:11–32; 18:9–14) (Ryken et al. 1998, 123-4 "Brokenness"). The grace of God—the grace we need for healing, for the freedom to be good, and for the deep joy we long for—only flows downhill. It is available to the humble: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5).

We need to live the Christian life as broken people. To be broken means we recognize we are personally powerless to manage our life in a way that will bring the kind of pleasure we most deeply long for. To be broken is to recognize that we face problems we cannot overcome by willpower alone. A community genuinely aware of the depth of their sin and the reality of their spiritual thirst is a fertile field for formation.

Remembering and Worship

Remembering involves us in bringing to consciousness who we are and whose we are: God's beloved children. It means being aware that I belong not to myself. It means discovering what God intends for our lives. It involves searching the Scriptures for wisdom for living. Where are people encouraged to remember who they are as children of God? Where does the congregation learn to remember the story of salvation? How

well are we teaching them to live out the great invitations of Jesus? Anointed teaching and preaching, telling the story of the faith, testimonies, catechesis, and worship are some of the community practices that help us remember these things.

Worship plays a crucial role in shaping a formative vision for Christians. Worship filled with prayer and praise and opportunities for confession, repentance, receiving the sacraments, giving testimonies of God's activity and learning and challenge is the most important context of community formation. This formation can only come when the worship is truly centered on God and not simply done as a means toward the end of formation. One of the great obstacles to growth that many people experience is their limited or distorted view of God. It is in truly creative and engaging worship that we not only confess what is true about God but also experience God and learn firsthand of his character.

One aspect of worship crucial to spiritual formation is that of confession and repentance. The Greek word for confession is *homologeō*, and it literally means "to say the same thing." When we speak of confessing our faith or confessing sins, we are acknowledging that, to the degree possible, we and God are saying the same thing. Confession is an extremely powerful spiritual action, and through it we avail ourselves and open ourselves to the process of growth and spiritual repair at deep levels. Lauren Winner shares candidly of her experiences with confession during her struggle with chastity:

> The rite of confession is, to my mind, the most mysterious and inexplicable of the Christian disciplines. In fact, many Christians do not observe a formal order of confession at all. I have never really understood intellectually what happens at confession; rather, I have taken on faith that in the confessional God's grace is uniquely present, regardless of my ability to articulate why or how. So it is fitting that in that moment full of grace I made a real beginning of chastity, because it is only God's grace—and not my intellectual apprehension of

> the whys and wherefores of Christian sexual ethics—that has tutored me in chastity. (Winner 2005, 14)

Repentance follows confession, for it speaks not only of our acknowledging our sin, but also of a commitment to respond to grace and act differently in the future. Part of the teaching on God's grace must be the reality of God's love. Revelation 12 tells us that Satan's full-time occupation is that of accusing Christians. Our adversary is not so much lurking to tempt us into new sins, but to defeat us through our doubting God's love and goodness.

Responding and Inclusion

Responding to God's gospel of love and forgiveness is critical. Appropriate responses to the gospel come in many forms. At times, a quiet prayer is the fullest and most appropriate response. At other times, the appropriate response may be costly and dramatic. What is crucial is that we see that following Christ requires us to cultivate a lifestyle of response, with love and service to God. In what ways do we foster a disposition to be a people of love and right living? Many of the spiritualities that we encounter in everyday life base their appeal on personal confidence and power. They focus on the individual and empowering the individual, with little regard, unless the individual so chooses, for the good of the community and society. In contrast, Christian spiritual formation ultimately is about enabling people to love others more and to help create a just and well-ordered community.

The message of the gospel is that when we were far from God, when we were seeking to manage our lives to bring the pleasure and peace we desired, when we were utterly lost in our plans and self-protection, God reached out to us and all humanity collectively through Jesus Christ. This in turn invites us to reach out to those who are on

the margins. The human instinct is to seek to find the inner circle in a group, to break in and be part of the group that is affirmed and is seen as the center of things. Life teaches us that the "inner circle" is illusory, and being there is seldom worth the price extracted to get there. Christians should cultivate a disposition of not seeking to break into the inner circle but of reaching out to those who are at the margin—those who are lonely or struggling with mental illness, whose education and poverty leave them vulnerable.

The early desert writers of Christianity were willing to say that the essence of spirituality was adopting a new way of seeing. A Philippine-American pastor said that our society views most of the members of his congregation as "machine people." Such people are invisible to the busy professionals, who view them as simply an extension of service machinery that performs the duties we want done. They are an extension of dish cleaning, dry cleaning, or hotel services. He challenged me to simply pay attention to these invisible "machine people" that I encounter every day and yet overlook. He urged me, as an act of following Jesus, to engage these people with eye contact, affirmations, and questions about their life and well-being. Part of the call here for compassion is simply developing a way of seeing.

Racial and ethnic prejudice is endemic to the fallen human race. It creates needless divisions, fuels hatred, and when present among Christians, destroys the kingdom community of Christ. The problem of our prejudice is illustrated by the godly prophet Samuel, whom God used to anoint the new king of Israel. He searched for a king and looked for what he thought would be a "kingly type." However, God had something different in mind; his choice was the youngest boy, whom his father had not even called to meet Samuel. Samuel was ready to choose for physical prowess, but God told him, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected

him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Christians need to be taught to walk free of prejudices, which distort our ability to see people's worth and discern their heart. Our dream should be that of Martin Luther King Jr.: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King 1986, 219).

Days of service and missions trips are an excellent way of introducing people to the joy of service and showing them agencies and strategies that work in the community. A friend who has lead several trips to rebuild houses in storm-damaged areas has remarked that the best spiritual formation takes place on a twenty-hour van ride. The power of community combined with tangible hands-on community-based care for the poor in the context of prayer and worship is potently formational.

Relating and Hospitality

This leads us to the fourth "R": relating. Psychologist and spiritual director, Larry Crabb, says, "The calling of community is to lure people off the island onto the mainland where connection is possible and to provide it" (Crabb 1997, 38). Where and how do we provide opportunities to grow in and through relationships? Ray Anderson observes, "Self-consciousness arises through authentic encounter and interchange with another person: the self is intrinsically social" (Anderson 1995, 52-3). Jesus invites us to make and keep relational commitments.

Certain relational activities have more spiritual leverage in the way they affect our souls; justice, sex, and hospitality are three. Although the Christian's response to the relational issues involved in justice and sexuality are worthy of our attention, we focus on hospitality here as an example of relating. In both word and deed, Jesus invites his

followers to show hospitality. In the Gospels, Jesus was the frequent recipient of hospitality (Matt. 13:1, 36; Mark 1:29–31; 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–39; 10:38–42; 14:1–6; John 2:1–10), and he seemed to assume that hospitality would be extended to him. He also clearly extends hospitality in his mass feedings (Matt. 14:15–21; 15:32; and especially for the Last Supper, John 13). Here he serves as the host who provides the space and food and breaks social convention by washing the feet of his guests.

Ana Maria Peneda observes that, "Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so it seems, is the human fear of the stranger" (Pineda 1997, 31). However, the early church took to heart Jesus' invitation and placed special emphasis on showing hospitality to strangers. Opening the fellowship of reading and interpreting Scripture and prayer to friends and strangers widens the circle of fellowship and breaks down the barriers that had previously left strangers on the outside. In three summary lists of virtuous actions, hospitality to the stranger is highlighted (Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 5:10; Heb. 13:2). Additionally, one of the qualifications of a church leader is a hospitable nature (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). The call for hospitality goes beyond simply entertaining guests and allows believers to work corporately with several disciplines simultaneously.

Hospitality is a practical outworking of the call to love and creates a space for formation. Creating a space for food, spiritual conversation, and the warmth of acceptance are so important to our formation. The New Testament writers first gave these commands in cultures where hospitality was already a social norm. How much more we need this urging today, when we treasure privacy and acknowledge that "we are short not only of tables that welcome strangers but even of tables that welcome friends" (Pineda 1997, 32).

If a church is interested in spiritual formation, it is critical that it has a particular culture. This essay has articulated some of the factors essential to that culture including a gospel-orientation, a commitment to the imitation of Christ, a community that nurtures the basic orientations for spiritual growth, and practices that inform and express the individual's and community's calling to follow Jesus.

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An Active Approach to Spiritual Formation: Encountering, Experiencing, and Extending God

By Michele F. Junkin

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Abstract

Spiritual development is a lifelong and differentiated process, with individuals growing spiritually at different rates, different times, and under differing circumstances. This article explores a number of active programs designed to engage those seeking to know and serve God under different conditions and at different stages of spiritual maturation. The programs are presented in a progressive format: encountering God through *Benedictine Cell* and *Alpha*, experiencing God in community through *Disciples of Christ in Community*, *Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts*, and *Stephen Ministry*, and extending God to the world through *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe* and *St. Michael's Mission*.

Spiritual Formation involves a transformative learning experience. When intellectual understanding of God and his kingdom is transferred from head to heart, changes take place in one's relationship with God and with others. Glen Scorgie in *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality* describes it as "an inward journey . . . from knowledge to experience; from merely cognitive awareness of truth to its deep actualization in our relationships, our souls, and the way we invest our lives" (Scorgie 2007, 155). Although a number of intentional disciplines aid in building spirituality on a solid foundation, such change is what Dallas Willard defines as a "Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (2002, 22). The Spirit guides and empowers us to seek God, to welcome God into our hearts, and to discover God in others. By listening for the Spirit's voice and being open to the Spirit's transforming power, we are permanently changed by this indwelling presence.

The Commission on Christian Formation for the Episcopal Church describes it as learning, transforming, and changing. These are action verbs depicting lofty ideals, but how in practice do we actually accomplish these goals? Deep learning is an experiential process, and thus we live into our faith through practices that engage and excite us. Formation begins first in the individual who must *encounter* God in a personal relationship. One must learn who God is and how he is calling us to serve him in our lives. Second, spiritual maturity is enhanced as the individual hones and refines understanding of God's call by *experiencing* the living God in the community of faith. And, finally, when a solid foundation has been established, believers validate, express, and augment their growth by *extending* Christ's love into the world.

There is no universal formula for encouraging spiritual development in individual church members. We are each at different points in our faith journey, and we come to know and love God through a variety of venues both intellectual and practical. In lieu of presenting hypothetical programs designed to stimulate spiritual development, this article will focus primarily on describing actual programs in which the author has been either the facilitator or a participant. The programs are divided into three phases during which the believer may grow spiritually.

Encountering God

Encountering God requires that we begin by building a relationship with him. We cannot enter into an intimate relationship with God unless we know God personally. Like our human relationships, our relationship with God grows in direct proportion to the time we spend with God and to the effort we willingly make to build that relationship. As John tells us, "we love because God first loved us" (1John 4:19). First, we experience God's grace and then we are enlivened by God's acceptance of us. Gordon Smith informs us,

"Nothing is so fundamental to the Christian journey as knowing and feeling that we are loved. Nothing" (2003, 74). While encouragement and support of the faith community is essential to spiritual formation, development begins in the singular with the individual intentionally seeking to know God. We come to know God through many spiritual practices: prayer, reading Scripture, meditation, participation in small groups and some of the many programs offered in our churches help to lead us to a fuller understanding of God, his nature, and what it means to be his child.

Listening is at the heart of all relationships including our relationship with God. Prayer is not merely a one-way form of communicating with God. If we go to God with our requests and our thanksgivings without listening for the still, small voice within us, we cannot know God. We hear God in the quiet moments when we are receptive to understanding his will and his direction for our lives. In our most intimate moments with God, in our times of private prayer, our spoken and unspoken words are transmitted by the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). The following programs present opportunities for the seeker to personally listen and learn about God's call.

Benedictine Cell

While the life and teachings of Benedict of Nursia offers one of the most inspirational models of spiritual Christian community, Benedict lived for three years as a hermit before determining that it is healthier for monks to live in (and that God is more readily found in) community than in isolation. However, it was during his time alone that Benedict developed a strong appreciation for both solitary (cell) and communal practices

and honed the contemplative practice of *lectio divina*, the meditative approach to Scripture that encourages us to listen for and to hear the quiet voice of God.

A few years ago, my parish church began offering a weekly time for reflection on the Benedictine way to spirituality which we called Benedictine Cell. Using the *Rule of Benedict: Insights for the ages* by Joan Chittister (1992) as a guide, the group slowly works its way through the three reading cycles Benedictines follow each year. Quiet reflection on the readings, prayerful time alone with God, and then sharing of insights all aid the participants into greater understanding of who God is and how he works in and through our lives. This process guides the participants to a deeper understanding of God's love for us and his will for the ordering of our lives. When we internalize the perfect, unconditional love of God, we are able to extend that love to others. The Benedictine balance of prayer and healthy labor sets a rhythm for life. Although prayer is central to our Christian life and necessary for knowing God, it must be integrated with our love of and efforts on behalf of others. This is an excellent discipline for those seriously seeking to truly encounter God and to enhance their spiritual life.

Alpha Program

The faith community also offers more structured opportunities to develop a relationship with God. One that has been growing in popularity in many denominations both nationally and internationally during the past decade is the Alpha Program (http://www.alphausa.org). Alpha offers the seeker the opportunity to come to God in a confidential, supportive environment. In his book, *Questions of life,* Nicky Gumbel (2004) addresses the important questions of who Jesus is, why he died, who the Holy Spirit is, why I should pray, how I should read the Bible, and so on.

Participants meet weekly, first for a talk on one of these life-changing topics, and then in small groups to discuss their understanding of the subject. A table leader guides the discussion where all questions and comments are respectfully accepted. One of the most spiritually influential segments of the twelve-week Alpha program is a weekend retreat aptly labeled "The Holy Spirit Weekend." During this time three significant lectures are presented covering the topics Who is the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do? and How can I be filled with Spirit?

Participants who attend the weekly programs and the retreat tend to form strong spiritual bonds. Many go on to become table leaders, and some have formed home Bible study groups to further their spiritual development. I have personally facilitated sessions where some of the participants are already growing in their relationship with God and others barely know who Jesus is, let alone why they should follow him. Each time I have been awed by the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing to Christ those whose hearts are open to accepting him into their lives.

Experiencing God in Community

We will never know God completely, but when we encounter him in our lives, and have a glimpse of his transforming power, we are drawn to experience Christ at work in the community of faith. Spiritual development does not flourish in a vacuum. It is through the encouragement and support of a caring Christian community that transformation takes place. Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher and mystic declared, "All real living is meeting" (Buber 1958, 11). When we meet with other Christians, we see God at work in others, and we begin to emulate the practices that further open us to internalizing his presence in our lives. Paul reminds us, "Christ gave himself for us . . . a people who are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:10).

Together we begin to understand the fullness of God in us, and the joys of the Christian life.

There are a myriad of programs offered in every Christian community that are designed to enhance spiritual growth. No program or even set of programs can be all things to all people: we learn differently, we are at different levels of spiritual maturity, and we connect positively with some groups and not with others. In this section, I will briefly outline three programs that have had an impact on large numbers of Christians in faith communities among whom I have worked.

Disciples of Christ in Community

Stepping forward from individual growth in programs such as Alpha, spiritual formation is enhanced by involvement in small groups. Disciples of Christ in Community (DOCC) is a well-organized, 21-week opportunity to experience God's presence in a small, caring community. The format is similar to Alpha with a presentation followed by group discussion, but the learning style is extremely experiential. Participants are not merely learning about discipleship or about the church, they are experiencing being the church, the community of God's people. DOCC covers a wide variety of topics including prayer, bible study, and theology in light of contemporary insights all directed to help the learner come to know Jesus in a personal way. Faith grows as the participants are affirmed and supported by their peer group.

Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts

As we venture forth to seek God in a Christian community, we begin to wonder where we fit into the community. What is our role to be, and what do we have to offer? A foundational place to start might be through seeking a clear understanding of one's

specific spiritual gifts. As with any human endeavor, individuals always do best and are happiest when they are doing things they are good at, things for which they have vocational abilities. All Christians are called to take their place in the body of Christ, to be an eye, hand, or foot. The body only functions effectively when every part is in working order. For this purpose, all Christians are endowed by the Holy Spirit with certain spiritual gifts. Scorgie states that, "What we *do* with our lives is an essential element of true spirituality," and then goes on to remind us that in order to lead a significant life two things are necessary: "Knowledge of our calling and the Spirit empowered courage to follow it" (2007, 135).

A program that has been quite effective in offering direction as well as development to those seeking to grow spiritually is *Discovering God's Vision For Your Life: You and Your Spiritual Gifts* developed by Kenneth Haugk (1998), founder and director of Stephen Ministry. During this eight-week course, participants complete a 200-question Spiritual Gifts Inventory addressing all of the gifts outlined by Paul in I Corinthians 12 and Romans12. Later, twenty gifts including areas such as leadership, evangelism, teaching, mercy, healing, and discernment are unpacked and discussed as to how they are used to minister in the body of Christ. The program carefully states that these are gifts given by the Holy Spirit for building up the body of Christ.

Completion of the Spiritual Gifts Inventory by new members of a congregation is a fruitful way to make certain that individuals are introduced to ministries they are called to and gifted by God. When we work in a field for which we have a calling, we do not suffer the burnout or discouragement that occurs when we labor in a ministry for which God has not gifted us. Completion of the Inventory by long-time church members is also very useful. Perhaps a member has a gift that has not been discerned and is sorely needed

in this particular congregation. Knowing that God is calling and responding to that call is another step in growing in faith.

Stephen Ministry

The Stephen Ministry program, also developed by Kenneth Haugk, is a further step forward into service in the faith community. For those with gifts of mercy, healing, encouragement, and helping, becoming a Stephen Minister presents an opportunity to truly become Christ to a fellow Christian suffering a life loss or transition. Although this is primarily a one-on-one listening ministry, the Stephen Minister helps preserve the health of the entire community by helping Christ carry the burden of a hurting member. We often question how we can be of help to others when we ourselves are hurting and incomplete. In response, Henry Nouwen (1972) affirms that a paradox is actually at work: our own pain and continuing woundedness lend unexpected power and effectiveness to our efforts. Stephen Ministers often tell me how much they have grown spiritually, and how they believe they have received so much more than they have given as a result of their service in this ministry. Here one truly has a first-hand opportunity to experience God at work in his church.

After training for 50 hours in a small group environment, Stephen Ministers continue to meet with their group one to two times monthly for as long as they remain active in the program. The groups I have trained and supervised have represented an ecumenical effort on the part of two quite different church denominations. The participants form strong bonds and healthy respect for the theology and practices of their fellow group members. They support each other in their work with their care receivers, hold each member of the group accountable, and provide vital input for positive results in each caring relationship. The success of the Stephen Ministry program is evidenced by

the fact that since its inception over thirty years ago almost a half-million Stephen Ministers have been trained representing virtually every denomination. God is eminently visible in the lives of those who give and those who receive care through this ministry.

Extending God to the World

We are all called by Christ to be salt and light to the world (Matt. 5), and to make disciples (Matt. 28). When we have personally *encountered* God and *experienced* his presence in the faith community, we begin to recognize the image of God in all humankind. Supported by our own faith community, growing comfortable in our relationship with God, we are ready to *extend* our spiritual journey into the world. Lee Hardy suggests, "We express the image of God within us, [and] we become most Godlike not when we turn away from action, but when we engage in it" (1990, 57). True Christian spirituality is grounded in the incarnation of Christ; it becomes flesh when we reach out with his love. "The mission of the church is to witness to the Incarnate Christ in all the conditions of human existence" (Griffiss 1997, 51). God hates injustice and oppression, and he calls us into action on behalf of those who cannot help themselves.

A multitude of work trips, soup kitchens, social and supportive outreach programs are offered by every Christian denomination and congregation. The needs of the world are endless and the opportunities to serve equally abundant. Where, then, do we best seek to serve God? In the beautifully simple words of Frederick Buechner, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and world's deep hunger meet" (1993, 119). Anywhere we serve God's people, we serve God. I only briefly highlight here two ongoing ministries that I believe are unique because of the time and depth of involvement. Over an extended period, both have provided reciprocal spiritual growth opportunities for Christians from vastly different backgrounds.

Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe

Nuestra Senora is a Spanish-speaking congregation that began meeting a little over ten years ago in a Chicago suburb. From a small band of approximately 30 faithful, it has grown to a congregation of over 500. Having outgrown its temporary meeting space, Nuestra Senora was assisted by my parish church in purchasing a church home of its own. Our involvement, however, did not end there, and we have adopted Nuestra as a sister parish in an intentional, ongoing relationship. This relationship is not merely one of economic assistance, but a supportive, reciprocal fellowship and friendship. Social, economic, and ethnic barriers are demolished as groups from each congregation regularly meet together, worship together, share meals and celebrations. Christ is with us when we recognize him in the faces and hearts of those who are radically different from us. As we reach out and give from our hearts to others, God embraces us and we grow in faith and grow more Christ-like.

St. Michael's Mission

St. Michael's is a small mission assisting Arapahoe tribe members on the Wind River Reservation in Ethete, Wyoming. On the surface, it may appear like many other mission and outreach projects, except for the fact that members of my church have faithfully visited St. Michael's for a week each summer for the past 25 years. Long-lasting friendships have been built and maintained over this extended period. Arapahoe natives have come to know Christ, and members of our own team have also come to know him in new and wonderful ways. This is a community effort in which entire families from our parish church visit St. Michael's, work side-by-side, and return renewed by God's grace. One not only sees God in the innocent faces of the native

children, but in the pristine, star-filled skies of the high desert. In giving, we receive, and in giving freely to others who have so little, our own faith grown exponentially.

Conclusion

Every church has its tried-and-true educational programs and favorite outreach opportunities. Those described here are but a sampling of the many opportunities we have to grow in faith, to serve God, and to reach out to others. Ultimately, it is up to each of us to create a space for God in our lives, a space to build a relationship with him, to interact in the faith community, and to serve others in Christ's name. Don Postema in *Space for God* (1996) suggests that if we strive to grow spiritually we must live with disciplined intent to resist the negative forces in our lives, and we begin by creating space for God. We position ourselves to welcome God by clearing away the cobwebs and clutter as well as the constant invasions and distractions of our lives. We open ourselves and wait for God knowing that he created us for relationship with him.

Glen Scorgie describes three kinds of space we can create for God:

1. *Chronological Space*: Setting aside the time to build our relationship with God, to get to know him as he knows us, and to be ready for his transformative power.

2. *Psychological Space:* Developing the self-discipline to rid ourselves of distractions and to consciously open our minds to hear God's Word.

3. *Physical Space*: Finding a quiet place to listen for the small, still voice—whether it be a church, somewhere in nature, or a private corner at home, we need a special place to be alone with God (Scorgie 2007, 161-162).

In prayerful contemplation, we first come to truly know God. When we understand the holiness of his nature and his unconditional love for us, we begin to strive to do his will. Spiritual formation is the inevitable result of this growing relationship. The only question remaining then is how open we are to God's abounding grace. Accepting

the gift of grace, how do we personally decide to go about expanding this all-encompassing relationship? The programs described above are only a few examples of the many ways we can come to know God. Nevertheless, what they do represent are intentional, active approaches designed to engage our heads and our hearts. In the end, what we do with our lives is the true measure of our spirituality.

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Telling the Old, Old Story: How the Contemporary Church Practices Reading the Old Testament for Faith and Life

By David Brisben

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Abstract

The importance of reading the Scriptures for the faith, formation, and life of the church is generally recognized; how we understand them—especially the Old Testament—is more contentious. Four ways that the Church has approached the Old Testament are reviewed: as a non-Christian book, as a sub-Christian book, as a pre-Christian book, and as a Christian book. For the purpose of this study, these are conflated into three: telling the Old Testament story as an independent story, a preparatory story, or an integrated story. Three surveys were conducted to see which approach Christians in the contemporary evangelical Church are taking. Results indicated that people read and understand the Old Testament in each of the three ways but that the latter two are much more popular. While nine of the twelve Old Testament professors claimed to teach from an integrated perspective, they thought that students primarily read it as a preparatory book. Based on the belief of the professors, it was unexpected that about half of the 23 students in the first student survey and about 40% of the 138 students completing the second questionnaire read the Old Testament as an integrated story. Based on the concern voiced by various theologians, it was unexpected that only 12% of the students claimed to read the Old Testament as an independent story with little or no value for Christian faith and life. For the large majority, failure to see how it relates to their lives is not an issue. Contact the author directly for copies of his survey instruments: DBrisben@jbu.edu

An arduous and ongoing task is that of understanding the relation between the practice of spiritual disciplines and Christian faith and life, or as it is more commonly called, spiritual formation. Recognizing this reality, this study serves to stimulate interest in the relation between practicing one particular discipline, that of reading the Old Testament, and Christian faith and life.

Interest in and concern about the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament for faith and life is not new. In the latter half of the 20th Century, a litany of biblical scholars and theologians began to raise the question of the proper understanding

of the Old Testament for the life and faith of the church. One of the early voices was Princeton scholar Bernard Anderson who declared that the answer to this question was so important that the very meaning of the Christian faith depended upon it (Anderson 1963, 1). Along that same line of thought, theologian Hans Frei lamented that the advent of the post-reformation period brought to the Christian church not only a loss of understanding of the Old Testament story, but the very meaning of that biblical narrative for its life and faith (Frei 1974, 76). A generation later, Evangelical scholar Marvin Wilson echoed both Frei and Anderson's concerns and lamented that the church's failure to understand the importance of the relation of the Old Testament story to its faith and life occurred much earlier than Frei' s contention. This early failure resulted in strange readings and understandings of the New Testament, understandings that continue to haunt the contemporary church (Wilson 1989, 177). And finally, almost half a century after Anderson initially raised the question, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen reiterated his concern with their own declaration that the failure to adequately understand the vital relationship of the Old Testament story for Christian faith and life may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers (Bartholemew and Goheen 2004, 12). These scholars, while calling attention to this question, have not been the first to raise it. Rather, they represent the continuing voice of the church's long struggle throughout its history to understand how it should read, interpret, and tell the Old Testament story for Christian faith and life.

By raising the level of concern about the importance of properly understanding the relation of the Old Testament story to Christian faith and life, these contemporary scholars have served the church well. However, they still leave an important, and in one sense, prior question unanswered: how does the contemporary church currently read,

interpret, and understand the Old Testament story for its faith and life? Since its beginning, the Christian church has accepted the Old Testament as its Scripture and to assume that it no longer does would be erroneous. However, understanding how Christians in the contemporary church currently practice the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament for faith and life needs to be a part of the ongoing discussion. A lack of understanding how Christians are currently practicing this discipline will prevent us from adequately understanding how the practice of this discipline relates to Christian formation.

Methodology

In this paper, descriptive research was conducted to answer the question of how Christians in the contemporary church are currently practicing the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament for faith and life. The first part of this research consisted of a historical survey of how Christians practiced this discipline in the past. After this brief historical survey was completed, a three-part survey was conducted to gather feedback on how Christians are currently reading and understanding the Old Testament for faith and life.

Historical Survey

Sidney Greidanus helps us get at the question of how the church previously practiced and continues to practice this discipline. He suggests there are four different ways that the church historically approached the Old Testament that continue to surface in the present context. The first two ways are as a non-Christian book and as a sub-Christian book. These two ways focus on reading the Old Testament as an independent story, a story that stands by itself. The third way that Greidanus suggests that the Old

Testament is approached is as a pre-Christian book. This approach focuses on its preparatory nature. It is a story that prefaces or prepares the listener for another story. The fourth and final way to read it is as a Christian book. The focus in this approach is to read it as an integrated story, that is, the first part of a longer story (Greidanus 1999, 39).

Two things should be noted about these approaches. First, they need to be understood as general tendencies and not as fixed hermeneutical approaches. This tendentious nature of the four approaches recognizes that the boundaries between them are somewhat fluid and permeable. Second, not all of the approaches are positive. This is not surprising and is the very reason concern for a proper approach has surfaced. Reading the Old Testament either as a pre-Christian story or as a Christian story has tended to be viewed as healthy for the life and faith of the church. On the other hand, reading it as a non-Christian story or as a sub-Christian story tend to be viewed in a negative light.

One final observation will be made about Greidanus' suggestion. Since the non-Christian and sub-Christian approaches to the Old Testament share much in common, that is, since both focus on reading the Old Testament as an independent story, they can and will be treated as one approach. For that reason, these four approaches can be condensed to three. These three approaches can thus be more broadly summarized as the independent approach, the preparatory approach, and the integrated approach.

These three approaches are not new. They are rooted in the history of the church. Understanding this rootedness and their historic practice will be helpful for understanding their contemporary use. For that reason, the historic rootedness and practice of each will be briefly described. After describing each of these ways of reading the Old Testament, results of a survey of the church's current practice will be presented. The results of this survey will indicate whether the Old Testament is in fact being read and understood in

one of the three tendentious ways suggested above or whether it is being read and understood in some other fashion.

Telling the Old Testament Story as an Independent Story

One of the oldest ways the church practiced reading the Old Testament was as an independent story. In this approach, its Jewish or Hebrew origin was emphasized and its discontinuity with the New Testament was stressed. This emphasis, whether intended or not, often resulted in the church treating the Old Testament as inferior to the New Testament.

This approach first arose after the New Testament period. After all, since the Old Testament was the only Scripture Christians had during the 1st century, this approach was not an option for them. Nevertheless, as the church grew beyond its Jewish-Christian base, it became more Hellenized. This resulted in dualistic or Gnostic thinking infiltrating its ranks and influencing some early Christians to reject reading the Old Testament as valuable for Christian faith and life. One of these was Marcion, a Christian leader who taught that the Old Testament was not canonical for the Christian community. His Gnostic thinking influenced him to view the Old Testament god as different from and inferior to Jesus Christ. Because of his extreme views, he was expelled from the Church at Rome in 144 CE (Andersen, 1963, 4).

Since Marcion's view of the Old Testament was considered heretical, few Christian leaders have openly declared the Old Testament story to be inferior to the New Testament. Nevertheless, the Gnostic or dualistic thinking which led to Marcion's extreme view continued to influence the church to promote readings and interpretations that fostered viewing the Old Testament as inferior to the New Testament writings (Higgins, 1949, 21). Greidanus cites the medieval church's view of associating law as the

means of salvation in the Old Testament and grace as the means of salvation in the New Testament as an example (Greidanus 1999, 117).

Along these same lines, theologian Hans Frei, notes that during the post - reformation period, the Church under the influence of modernistic thought rather than dualistic thought, began to abandon an historical reading of the Old Testament story. This resulted in the Old Testament story being severed from the New Testament story and left it to be read as a confusing mosaic of religious history, poetry, and lessons in morality and doctrine (Frei 1974, 43). Not only did the sacrifice of this historic perspective destroy the unity of the biblical narrative but also its power to identify people in relation to God, shape them into Christian community, and incorporate them into God's world (Bartholomew and Goheen, 2004, 12).

While modernistic thought influenced some churches to read the Old Testament independently of the New Testament, the classical dispensational movement popularized in the first half of the 20th century influenced others to do the same. This movement seemingly echoed the medieval church's earlier stress on the discontinuity of the story line between the Old and the New Testaments. According to this approach, the major dispensation in the Old Testament is the dispensation of law and the major dispensation in the New Testament is that of grace. This approach, which leaves the reader with the impression that the Old Testament is primarily about law or legalism whereas the New Testament represents grace, relegates the Old Testament to an inferior position (Schultz, 1983, 10).

Telling the Old Testament Story as a Preparatory Story

A second, and in some circles, more common way the Old Testament story has been read and understood is as a preparatory story. This way of reading the story does not

invite the listener to enter or find her place in the story. Rather, it focuses on reading the Old Testament story as preparation for the Christian story. This does not mean that it has no value for the Christian community. Reading it as a preface or an introduction which points to the Christ event is a valuable exercise for the church.

One of the primary ways of reading the Old Testament as a preparatory story is by focusing on typological, allegorical, and prophetic interpretations that point to and predict the coming of Christ. This is done by surveying the Old Testament as a series of persons, institutions, offices, events, and actions that point to and thus prepare people for the Christ event (Schultz, 1983, 10). The New Testament writers provide ample examples of this way of reading and understanding the Old Testament story. For instance, the gospel writer of Matthew focused on many Old Testament passages such as Isaiah's sign to King Ahaz about a maiden bearing a son named Immanuel (Isaiah 7) and Hosea's rendition of God calling Israel out of Egypt (Hosea 11) as pointing to the coming of Jesus as the Christ

What is striking about many of these examples is not that the New Testament writers read, interpreted, and told the Old Testament story as pointing to the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but that they did so with the propensity to seemingly ignore the historical context and authorial intention of the Old Testament text. While this way seems a bit strange to those of us schooled in the modern rules of interpretation, it was certainly not strange in the Jewish community of the 1st century. Rather, in seeking to uncover deeper, hidden meanings in the Old Testament story that would better serve to point to Jesus as the Christ, they were following the hermeneutical practices of the 1st century Jewish community, (Enns 2005, 131). Moreover, this Jewish use of allegory and typology not only allowed these first Christians to read, interpret, and

tell the Old Testament story as a preparatory story, but it also allowed them a way to claim that this book was their Scripture even though they read it so differently than did the Jewish community (Farrar 1886, 167).

In the beginning of the 2nd and well into the 3rd century, many of the early church fathers continued to follow the example of the Apostles and other New Testament writers by employing the Jewish allegorical and typological interpretations of Old Testament events as a way to point to Christ (Greidanus, 1999, 81). However, as the church spread beyond the dominant Jewish roots of its 1st century existence, its leaders began to abandon the conservative, Jewish-type allegorical method for a more Hellenistic, anti-historical kind of allegory. Origin provides an example of this more Hellenistic use of allegory in his sermon about the battle of Jericho. He tells his listeners that Joshua pointed to Jesus, that Jericho stood for the world, that Rahab represented the church, and that the scarlet cord hung from her window pointed to the blood of Christ (Wainwright, 1982, 87). This Hellenistic use of allegory and typology thus became a significant and influential way of reading, interpreting, and telling the Old Testament story for Christian faith and life.

Telling the Old Testament Story as an Integrated Story

The third and final way the church has tended to read and understand the Old Testament story is as an integrated story. The emphasis in this approach is on the Old Testament's continuity with the New Testament. The Old Testament is read together with the New Testament as one book and tells one seamless story about the Triune God and his creative and redemptive action in history for the salvation of the whole world.

A New Testament example of reading and telling the Old Testament story as an integrated story is the Apostle Paul's presentation of the story of Abraham's justification

by faith. In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Church at Rome, he stressed the continuity of God's means of justifying his people during the Old Testament period to the means by which a person is justified through Jesus Christ in the New Testament period.

John Calvin provides an example from church history that illustrates reading and understanding the Old Testament as an integrated story. Unlike the medieval church, which stressed the discontinuity of the Old Testament and the New Testament with its sharp contrast between law and grace, Calvin emphasized the unity of the Old and New Testaments. He emphasized that there was but one covenant, the Covenant of Grace, underlying the Old and New Testaments. He declared that the covenant made with Abraham was so much like the New Testament covenant in substance and reality that the two were actually the same (1960, 2.10.1).

A contemporary example of reading and understanding the Old Testament for Christian faith and life is that of Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen. For them, the Old and New Testament tells the one seamless story of God's creation of a world he loves, of the rebellion of humanity against him and the fall of the whole world from him, and of his mission to restore the entirety of creation to him. Two things must be understood by the Christian community for Christian faith and life to be shaped by this one seamless story. First, Christians must understand that "the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend”. . . and second, that "each of us has a place in that story" (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004, 12).

Telling the Old Testament Story Today

Understanding the three tendentious ways the church has read and understood the Old Testament story for its life and faith is important for considering how the church

today continues to do so. However, which if any of these tendentious ways is most commonly practiced in the contemporary church still needs to be answered.

To answer this question, a three-part survey was conducted to gather feedback on how church members currently are reading and understanding the Old Testament. The first part of the survey consisted of a survey instrument composed of a series of open-ended questions. This instrument was administered to twelve different professors of Bible and theology who teach undergraduate survey or introductory courses on the Old Testament at four different Christian universities. The average teaching tenure of the professors was 10.9 years, with a range of 2 to 22 years. All of the professors identified themselves as Christians in the evangelical tradition representing five different denominations: Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Independent Bible, and Assembly of God.

On the survey instrument, the three tendentious ways of reading and understanding the Old Testament were briefly described and the professors were asked to identify which of the three most closely resembled their approach for teaching the Old Testament. They were also given the option of describing a different approach if none of the three ways represented their approach. Next, the professors were asked to identify which of the three approaches their students would use to read and understand the Old Testament. Finally, they were invited to give comments about their selections.

The second part of the survey was a similar instrument administered to twenty-three students currently studying Old Testament courses at a Christian university in the evangelical tradition. These students were asked a similar series of open-ended questions about how they currently read and understand the Old Testament and how people in their

home churches read and understand the Old Testament. The entire group of students identified themselves as Christians in the evangelical tradition.

The third part of the survey was a Likert-style questionnaire comprised of six questions designed to indicate a person's preferred approach to reading and understanding the Old Testament. The questionnaire was administered to one hundred and thirty-eight undergraduate students at two different Christian universities. A set of demographic questions was included with the questionnaire. Most of the students (93%) identified themselves as Christians in the evangelical tradition. Almost 37% of the students attended Baptist Churches. This number was closely followed by Interdenominational Churches at 29%, Methodist/Wesleyan Churches at 11%, Charismatic/Pentecostal Churches at 8%, Presbyterian/Reformed Churches at 8%, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Catholic Churches at close to 1% each, and other at 4%.

Findings

Input from the three-part survey indicated that people in churches in the Evangelical tradition continue to read and understand the Old Testament as independent story, as a preparatory story, or as an integrated story.

The first part of the three-part survey, that of the professors teaching Old Testament courses, clearly supports this assertion. Of the twelve professors surveyed, nine stated that they taught their students to read and understand the Old Testament as an integrated story. Two stated that they preferred to teach students to read and understand the Old Testament as an independent story. They emphasized that the Old Testament was the Hebrew Scripture and had little value for the faith and life of the church. Those with this view made comments like, "I want my students to understand that books like Leviticus were written to a Jewish audience that lived over 3000 years ago. American

Christians should find it confusing and hard to apply." One professor did not select any of the three tendentious ways but rather opted for a combination of all three. In explaining this option, he stated that "each of the three ways has merit and is appropriate in certain circumstances."

Interestingly enough, most of the professors believed that their students understood the Old Testament differently than did they. The majority (9) thought that their students, even though representative of their churches, primarily read and understood the Old Testament as a preparatory book and secondarily as an independent book. Only three of the professors thought their students read and understood the Old Testament as an integrated story. Of the majority, one commented that, "theologically, my students would claim to understand the Old Testament as a preparatory story that pointed to the coming of Christ. However, from a practical perspective, they would understand it as an independent story that had little value for Christian faith and life." Several other professors shared this last sentiment. Another professor in the majority group reinforced this sentiment stating, "My students tend to claim to accept the Old Testament as God's Word. That just goes with part of claiming to be a Christian. However, most of them do not see how it relates to their lives." When asked if they thought the students were representative of their churches, the overwhelming response was affirmative. One professor gave a telling comment, "In six years at my church, I have never heard the minister preach through an Old Testament book and can only think of five or six sermons from the Old Testament. The minister does not have to tell his flock that the Old Testament is irrelevant for their lives, ignoring it already communicates that point."

The second part of the survey, the series of open-ended questions administered to the twenty-three college students studying Old Testament courses at a Christian university revealed findings markedly different from the professor's responses. Of this group, nine stated that they read and understood the Old Testament as a preparatory book. Several noted that the Old Testament passages that point to the Christ event, such as the story of the Passover, the celebration of the burnt offerings, and the "Suffering Servant" prophecy were the most valuable aspect of the Old Testament. Only one student claimed to read it as an independent story with little or no value for the Christian life. This student cited the harshness of God's judgments, the confusing nature of books such as Leviticus, and the brutality of the people against each other as reasons for reading it as an independent story. Surprisingly, almost 60%, thirteen of the twenty-three students claimed to read it as an integrated story. For these students, the Old Testament teachings about God as Creator, the fall of humanity, and his judgment and discipline of his people were cited as examples of its value for Christian faith and life.

The third part of the survey, the six Likert-style questions administered to the one hundred and thirty-eight undergraduate students at two different Christian universities, yielded results that more closely paralleled the responses of the twenty-three students participating in the second part of the survey than the responses of the twelve professors participating in the first part of the survey. Of the one hundred and thirty-eight students completing the questionnaire, reading it as a preparatory story was chosen by almost half (47%). Reading the Old Testament as an integrated story was preferred by almost 40% of the respondents. The least preferred way of reading the Old Testament was as an independent story. Only 12% of the respondents chose this approach.

Discussion

While the results of this research suffer from the obvious limitations of its sample and, therefore, cannot be generalized to the broader Christian community, they do reveal some interesting and somewhat encouraging patterns for the sample group. Possibly the most surprising and encouraging result is the small percentage of respondents who seem to reflect the concern raised by Hans Frei, Bernard Anderson, and other theologians, that contemporary Christians had lost the very meaning of the Old Testament narrative for faith and life. Only 11% of the students participating in the third part of the survey seemed to reflect their concern; that is, only this small group claimed to read the Old Testament as an independent story with little or no value for Christian faith and life. On the other hand, almost 88% of the undergraduate students participating in this part of the survey claimed to read the Old Testament as a preparatory or as an integrated story. For these students, failure to see how it relates to their lives is not an issue.

One can only speculate as to why the results of this survey seem to suggest that the concern raised by Frei and company seems to be an exaggerated fear. As previously mentioned, the limited sample size is not representative of the broader Christian community. Perhaps Evangelical college students do practice the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament story quite differently from other Christians.

At the same time, it might be that Frei and other theologians have simply been mistaken. Perhaps like the college professors participating in the first part of this survey, their own assessment of how contemporary Christians practice reading and understanding the Old Testament has been too subjective.

Finally, while this study did explore different ways some contemporary church members practice the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament for their

faith and life, further research is needed. Similar studies need to be replicated across a broader spectrum of the church. Moreover, this study only explored how the discipline of reading and understanding the Old Testament is being practiced. It does not address how the particular ways it is practiced relate to faith and life, Research on the relation between Christian faith and life and reading the Old Testament as an independent story, as a preparatory story, and as an integrated story still needs to be conducted.

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Influencing the Laity's Theologizing for Spiritual Empowerment: An African Perspective

By Agnes Makau-Olwendo

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Abstract
Recently, African Christian theologians have shown interest in how the laity theologize through prayer, conversations, singing, testimonies, and storytelling. This article argues that the laity's theologizing can be positively influenced if the laity are empowered to study and apply the Scriptures appropriately. The article acknowledges that African Christian theologians have made efforts to contextualize biblical teaching but if knowledge is confined to a few, it will minimally help the masses. Spiritual empowerment through the study of Scriptures influences a believer's spirituality.

Cultivating a Biblical Base

Spiritual formation has to do with the intentional focus on developing the inner being, forming edifying relationships, and engaging in spiritual experiences with the intention to deepen one's faith in God. Spiritual formation is, therefore, focused and holistic. This means all believers have to be actively involved in their own spiritual formation for growth to be realized.

Studying the Bible is important for spiritual growth. The great commission is emphatic on teaching believers (Matt.28:20). Teaching is an integral part of the discipling and the formation process. The early church "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching" (Acts 2:42 NIV unless otherwise noted). Paul and the writer of Hebrews warned against believers being spiritual babies and being tossed here and there by every wind of teaching (1 Cor. 3:1-4; Eph. 4:14; Heb. 5:11-14). Some of the Apostle Paul's prayers are for spiritual empowerment. He describes what spiritual rootedness should look like among believers:

> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:16-21)

It is one thing to make converts; it is another to foster rootedness. Spiritual rootedness like physical growth has indicators. In Ephesians 4:12 Paul writes that the whole purpose of ministerial gifts is "for equipping the saints for work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ". "Equipping" requires tools and suggests enabling and it assumes a sense of responsibility as an end result on the one being equipped. "Building" suggests intentionality, planning and progress towards a specified goal. Building takes time; it is a process not an event. Just as a strong foundation supports a building, so does a biblical foundation support spiritual growth. Since God has especially revealed himself to humankind through his Son and the Scriptures, it is important that all who believe in Christ ground their beliefs and practices on the Scriptures. The Word of God is powerful, active, and relevant (Heb.4:12; 2 Tim. 3:16), thus rendering the Word indispensable. Therefore, it is necessary for believers to study, understand, and apply the Word of God appropriately. For believers to influence the world around them, they need to be spiritually empowered and liberated to exercise their rights as children of God.

However, interpreting the Word of God is influenced by numerous factors. In 2004 The Presbyterian Church of East Africa experienced an unprecedented conflict between the church leaders and the laity on the question of the meaning of symbols used in the church. Some argued that the origin and meaning of the symbols were in conflict with biblical teaching. Others wondered why people who had been in the same church for

such a long time would suddenly begin to question symbols they had so far accepted or tolerated. It appeared that the tradition of the church was not well understood by some of its adherents. In the midst of such confusion some might consider Robert Chambers' words to be appropriate when he points out "much has been done that is good. But so much has been done so badly that to dispel and correct myth and error remains hugely important" (1997, 100). As Hosea prophesied, "My people perish for lack knowledge" (4:6). Spirituality requires that believers understand what and why they believe in order to confidently and effectively live out their Christianity.

John Parratt defines contextualization as "the reception and rooting of the gospel in a particular cultural, political, economic or social context or situation; hence the relation of the Church's teaching and practice to its local and historical circumstances" (1987, 153). This does not mean that the gospel changes; it means that the bearer of the good news does it in a way that makes sense to the recipients so that they can act upon what they have received or heard. The gospel is the same but contexts affect its delivery, effectiveness and practice. There are two key words in the above definition "reception" and "rooting". If people hear the gospel and it is not rooted in their lives there will be no transformation. The change is usually superficial and as a result people tend to be syncretistic.

In the church in Africa, the awareness of contextualization continues to grow among the clergy. In the early stages, African theologians addressed the need for contextualized Christian theology and attempted to differentiate Christianity from westernization. As Tite Tienou explains "European presence in Africa has initiated what A Ali Mazrui calls a clash of cultures. This resulted in a paradoxical situation" (Tienou 1990, 25). Mazrui explains, "clearly Africa is not the nearest in culture to the western

world, yet the continent has indeed been experiencing perhaps the fastest pace of westernization this century of anywhere in the non- western world" (Mazrui 1980, 47). While westernization has had its advantages, African Christians still have distinct theological questions that need to be answered. As Thomas Spear writes,

> Christian missionaries brought, and enforced specifically European cultural norms of religious, social, moral and economic behavior and sought to mould African individuals and societies to them. Similarly, African conversion to Christianity has been seen as largely materialistic and instrumental terms as individuals sought to gain political allies, land, education, medicine and jobs in the new colonial order through the missions. (Spear 1999, 3)

Spiritual formation can be sidelined while believers pursue what they perceived as the real (social, political, material) advantages of being a Christian. The need for contextualization was not immediately felt; instead, there was a lot of transfer of beliefs and practices.

Both the indigenous and western education system influenced church education positively and negatively. The purpose of indigenous education was to preserve tradition and enhance communalism, while western education was mostly to train assistants for the colonialists and missionaries. Therefore, the input of an African was deemed inconsequential because the westerners were convinced the Africans were incompetent. According to Eshiwani,

> Missionary education was linked to Christianity, and at first its major aim was to produce African 'priests' to spread the word of God. Therefore, Africans were to be enlightened so that they could read the Bible and assist in spreading Christianity and western civilization to fellow Africans. Africans were also taught to read and write so that they could communicate easily with the missionaries and colonial administrators as well as serve as interpreters whenever necessary. Missionaries controlled education in Kenya up to about 1911, when the colonial government stepped in. (Eshiwani 1993, 15)

African culture clearly influenced church ministry both positively and negatively. For example, the attempt of learners to show respect for their teachers and leaders is often

misinterpreted as passivity. This alleged passivity is often mistaken as invitation for more or a sign of satisfaction such that churches may overlook the need to intentionally plan for interactive learning experiences. Leaders are often left with a lot of control over the learning process. However, this control can be turned around for the learners' good. The leader can persistently invite the learners to respond, in a way 'permitting' them to ask questions, challenge assumptions and provide solutions. Without reflection and feedback, it is hard to tell the impact of the teaching or practice on the laity.

Under both perceptions and systems of education, the school and the church curriculum failed to actively engage the learner or listener. The teaching in schools and church ministry process lacked input from the learner and dialogue. Schools and churches were similarly affected because the westerners who served as missionaries in the church served as teachers in the schools. According to Anderson, the missionaries established schools and churches. Schools paved the way for Sunday schools and were used for evangelism purposes (Anderson 1994, 17-23, 81). To de-school minds from such a cultural and educational background requires intentionality. Educating for spiritual development is a lifelong process, unlike schooling that may focus mainly on achievement goals. The laity should be fully involved in spiritual practices in order to own both the process and the outcome. Involving the laity and implementing their input will empower them with the right knowledge and experiences.

Influencing the Laity's Theologizing

Poor understanding of Scriptures influences the believers' theology and practice negatively. Many African church leaders are trained and able to preach and teach appropriately. However, most believers are not equipped to study and apply Scriptures appropriately. According to members of a youth group in an African Church, the bible

studies lacked depth, more than half of the time there was no trained mentor present to guide the youth in their study, and half the time the bible study was sporadic (Makau-Olwendo 2007, 143-145). Improper practice hinders spiritual growth.

The art of theologizing cannot be reserved for those who have been to theological colleges. Believers will reflect theologically about their experiences if only informally. Theologizing is a window to the believer's spirituality. The believers' oral theology, as found in their prayers, testimonies, conversations, and stories, is an indicator of how much they understand and how they apply scriptures. However, proper theologizing requires a sound understanding of scriptures and context. The laity's ability to theologize needs to be cultivated for a number of reasons. (1) They need to live out their Christianity and impact their sphere of influence. (2) Many churches in Africa do not have pastors to provide leadership for every group in church and therefore they depend on the laity to volunteer, lead and teach. (3) Not all Christians go to the pastors for counsel. Many will seek counsel from fellow Christian friends or family members. It is a cultural practice to seek counsel from friends and relatives rather than professional counselors; professional counseling is a concept which has not taken root in many collectivistic communities. In this case, it is important that Christians be taught certain principles on which they can operate. (4) Believers should be equipped to study the scriptures to enrich their individual devotions, feed their souls, and encourage their spirits. (5) The laity's theologizing can help the clergy to know the extent to which the congregants understand the Bible rather than merely memorizing it.

The idea of Christians theologizing may sound farfetched but if we take the basic meaning of theology as the study about God and his relationship to his creation, then

every Christian needs to understand how God relates to humankind and how humankind should relate to God. Kwesi Dickson suggests,

> Such a reflection may be done in song, or in prayer, in action or in meditation: the song one has often sung in Church may suddenly come alive out of a conscious or unconscious relating of its thought to oneself and one's circumstances; one's prayer may reflect one's understanding of the meaning of faith in one's life; one's actions may be founded upon a particular view of life which flows from certain religious convictions. (Dickson 1984, 14)

In other words African Christians should be able to express their understanding of the Bible in relation to how they live. It is important that the teachings of the Bible are translated into life. Ezra is a biblical example of believing and doing. The Bible says, "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Christians need to express their Christianity in life through different forms. They need to make a connection between the doctrine taught in the church and life.

Factors that affect theologizing in Africa include studying the Scriptures, experience, church tradition, and culture. The Scripture is the primary source because it is the Word of God and reveals God's grace to humankind through the work of Jesus Christ. Trained church leaders need to help believers to understand the teachings of Scripture because they do possess some knowledge that the laity may not possess. The leaders can create forums for discussions. They should also enable believers to use tools that can help in interpreting the scriptures making biblical teachings applicable to the average Christian. These forums may be in form of Bible studies, Sunday school or even discussions—any forum that is appropriate for the particular local church should be employed; this will also likely lead to better relationships between the clergy and the laity.

Experience also influences theologizing. These experiences range from personal to communal, happy to sad, and difficult to easy. Christians should be allowed to reflect on both their past and present experiences and how they affect their faith. But there should be a balance and the present experiences should carry the day because people should look into their past as long as they can positively learn from it but not to retrogress.

A third factor influencing theologizing is church tradition. Church traditions must have been established with good intentions to help the church run its affairs in an effective way. As these traditions have been passed on from generation to generation they might have lost meaning, like the use of church symbols aforementioned. These church traditions can sometimes hinder positive spiritual experiences amongst Christians. Church leaders should not be afraid to ask and answer questions about existing church or denominational traditions. The church leaders may also consider looking into their church constitution and review what has been written in light of the spiritual development of its believers. The bottom line is that church traditions should not be more authoritative than scripture and the laity should know this.

Culture also influences theologizing. Parratt defines culture as "all the formally and informally accepted institutions, customs and tradition, and the common ideas, values and taste, which find expression in social behavior of a regional, national, or tribal group or society (Parratt 1987,154). This means and appreciation of culture is indispensable when it comes to theologizing because it forms the total lifestyle of a person. For Africans, life is interwoven. There is no dichotomy between secular and sacred; religion is part of the warp and woof of culture. The Africans look at a person holistically and therefore Christianity needs to retain this integrality in its teachings. Dickson asserts,

"People function most efficiently when they employ language and thought forms in which they have been nurtured; and theology, involving communication, as it does, obliges us to come to terms with our cultural particularities" (Dickson 1984, 28). It is not uncommon for believers to use a local saying or proverb to make a theological point. While in many cases this does help in understanding the concept, sometimes the meaning of the proverb in the cultural setting is in direct conflict with the biblical teaching the believer is discussing. When believers theologize, cultural references are inevitable; however, culture should not be raised above the scriptures. After all there is no culture in the whole world that is wholly Christian or biblical. Every culture should be evaluated on the basis of biblical principles when Christianity enters.

The church may need to help believers understand some principles of interpretation and application. One approach suggested by Marc Ntetem is that the church should look at the positive religious values of the tribal religion as "points of contact" or "starting points." Ntetem believes, contrary to what others before him held, that the conversion of *muntu* (man) should not be regarded as a break at whatever cost with his past and with his tribal religion, as if to make a kind of dichotomy between light and shadow, between what is holy and what is perverted (Ntetem 1987, 100). If a cultural practice is in conflict with the Bible then that practice should be discouraged. If the practice has some elements that can enhance the understanding of Christians but does contain some aspects that conflict with the Bible, then the practice can be redeemed by incorporating the principle behind the practice in some church programs. For example, some churches in Africa have father-son retreats where fathers and sons spend the time bonding and learning from one another. In the African tradition, young men went through initiation rites such as circumcision when they were secluded for a time to live with the

tribal leaders in order to be taught the ways of the tribe and how to act as men. These churches acknowledge that the interaction between sons and fathers is important, that learning from one another is crucial for growth, and that there needs to be a transition from childhood to adulthood. The churches are being intentional in borrowing from this African practice. The scriptures, experience, tradition, and culture play a crucial role in theologizing. Osadolor Imasogie cautions that "any failure to recognize these "givens" in Christian theologizing in Africa will only result in the production of African anthropology rather than African Christian theology" (Imasogie1983, 73-74).

In order to effectively cultivate theologizing by the laity, church leaders should take the opportunity provided by events that affect their members and encourage reflection. Whether it is sickness, death, birth, planting, harvesting, politics, schooling, travel, or disaster—all these situations can be learning situations. Unfortunately these are the situations that form fertile ground for syncretism because some African Christians do not know how and why they should or should not be involved in some practices. Pastors can ask questions about the people's perceptions and their feelings and find out what the people think is God's role in their experiences. It is in interpreting their experiences that African Christians fall into syncretism. The more they reflect on their experiences in light of scripture, the more they will learn to theologize appropriately.

The process of equipping believers is not a light responsibility. While church leaders should read about the issues, this by itself is not sufficient: there is lack of relevant books and new issues often arise. However, in addition to reading the little there is, pastors need to consult with their parishioners and colleagues in the ministry. At the continental or national front, African church leaders will benefit from cohorts in addressing issues that face the church and in sharing new ideas. The cohorts may be

formed within denominations and regions or across denominations and regions. They may need to consult a lot in order to prioritize issues and form a strategy that will help the church in Africa in the long run. Freire advocates for dialogue between teachers and learners which is equivalent to the clergy and laity. He asserts that dialogue brings out generative themes, which play an important role in lifelong learning since they originate from learners (Freire 1973, 49). In order to equip the laity the church leaders may have to adopt an observation and listening posture so that they can effectively assess the needs. Studying in small groups allows for full participation; during discussions participants should be allowed enough time to contribute. The church will benefit from consultations, interviews, and documentation to come up with principles that can act as a guide for current Christians and even create a reference for future generation of Christians. In this age of upgraded technology, all of these initiatives will be easier than it was a decade or so ago.

Theological colleges can have a great influence on equipping the laity to regularly study the word of God thus influencing their theologizing by how they train their students. Theological colleges in Africa need to not only train African theologians on how to minister and influence the world around them, but also learn to enable the laity to do the same. This can be done through an appropriate philosophy of education, channeled through the courses offered and the teaching styles used. People need to be equipped to pass on what they know to others. Paul admonished Timothy, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2 TNIV), so should African theological schools and churches do with their adherents.

Gaining Ground

Theologizing cannot be prevented nor can it be treated as privilege for the chosen few—all Christians will theologize to some extent. The church in African owes Christian believers answers to questions such as "what should I do with the information they teach me in church? How can I have a meaningful relationship with God and others? How does religion relate to spirituality? How can I gain a better understanding of the Bible? How can I share the gospel cross culturally? What should I emphasize when having a discussion about Christianity? What is the purpose of church tradition and how does it relate to what the Bible says? Why or why should I not practice some cultural practices practiced by my tribe? How should I respond to some cultural practices if my family is involved and I feel it is unchristian? What makes some cultural practices unchristian and are their principles that can help me make a choice? What is an African Christian's contribution to the community? How can an African Christian respond to the current situation in the church, society or nation? Are there any principles I can use to help me know what I should or should not be involved in as an African Christian? Why don't we practice some practices found in the Old Testament in the church today and yet many of them are so similar to those practiced by the people of my tribe?

Influencing the laity's theologizing will not only help to answer the above questions but it will also help the church to grow not just in numbers but in depth under the Lordship of Christ. The biblical influence over theologizing will hopefully result in relevant church forms, speak to the needs of the people, and be an antidote to syncretism. With the wars, diseases, birth, death, seasonal ceremonies, intertribal relationships and poverty in Africa, Christians will continue to encounter issues that need a biblical

response. They need to be equipped so that they understand the bible, reflect theologically, and respond in a Christian manner, that is, they need spiritual formation.

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Spiritual Formation: Movements to New Life in the Gospels

By Fred Guyette

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Abstract
Baptism is the sacrament of new life in Christ (Mark 1:9-11). Four Greek words help shed further light on Marcan spirituality: *metanoia*, *diakonia*, *koinonia,* and *kenosis.* In Matthew's gospel, there is a special connection between new life in God's Kingdom, The Sermon on the Mount, and the merciful actions of Matthew 25. The Year of Jubilee and Recovering the Lost are vital themes in Luke's spirituality. Luke also places special emphasis on the role of prayer in God's Kingdom. John's testimony is that many people have been transformed by their encounters with Christ: The Woman at the Well, Peter, Mary Magdalene. We might think of spiritual formation as a pilgrimage, then. In Mark, there is a movement from fear to trust in God. In Matthew, narcissism gives way to compassion. Luke's desire is to help us move from despair to hope. For John, spiritual formation is a matter of turning from death to life.

Seeing, listening, remembering, following: simple words; we learn what they mean when we are children. We find these simple words in the New Testament, too, but packed with new significance. Seeing what Jesus does: listening attentively to his words; remembering to obey him; following him.

The aim of the gospels is to form us as Christians, to help us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord (2 Peter 3:17-18). Yet, each of the four gospels tells the story of Jesus with its own special emphasis. Mark's teaching about Jesus begins with his baptism, and is shaped decisively by his journey to the cross. Four Greek words can help shed further light on Marcan spirituality: *metanoia*, *diakonia*, *koinonia,* and *kenosis.* In Matthew's gospel, there is a special connection between new life in God's kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, and the merciful actions of Matthew 25. The Year of Jubilee and recovering the lost are vital themes in Luke's spirituality. Luke also places special

emphasis on the role of prayer in God's Kingdom. John's testimony is that many people have been transformed by their encounters with Christ: the woman at the well, Peter, Mary Magdalene. We might think of spiritual formation as a pilgrimage, then. In Mark, there is a movement from fear to trust in God. In Matthew, narcissism gives way to compassion. Luke's desire is to help us move from despair to hope. For John, spiritual formation is a matter of turning from death to life.

Mark: From Fear to Trust in God

Discipleship in the gospel of Mark is a call to a cruciform spirituality involving repentance, service, communion, and self-emptying in a movement from fear to trust in God. Christian conversion is a lifelong process of transformation involving a person's "complete abandonment to Christ."[1]

To be sure, God calls us and shapes us well before we "wade in the water." Yet, it is right and proper for us to think of baptism as the sacrament that marks the beginning of our pilgrimage with Christ. Mark 1:9-11 tells of Jesus' own baptism by John in the Jordan River, in which there are three remarkable events: The Opening of the Heavens, The Descent of the Spirit, and The Voice from Heaven.[2] It is possible to discern in Jesus' baptism another threefold pattern: offertory, consecration, and communion.[3] Psalm 40 is useful for describing the attitude of *self-offering* that brought Jesus to the banks of the Jordan: "Behold I have come to do your will, O God." When he comes to John for

[1] Francois Amiot, "Baptism" in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* ed. Xavier Leon-Dufour (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1988), 42-43. John E. Phelan, "Baptism in the New Testament" *Covenant Quarterly* 1996, 54 (1): 17-38.

[2] James R. Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 1991, 34 (1): 43-57.

[3] For this threefold pattern, see Peter E. Fink, "The Challenge of God's *Koinonia*" *Worship* 1985, 59 (5): 386-404, and Mark Searle, "The Journey of Conversion" *Worship* 1980, 54 (1): 35-55.

baptism, Jesus is saying "yes" in an unqualified way to the mission God has given him. The Father responds by *consecrating* Jesus' action with these words: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Following the words of consecration, there is a special period of closeness and *communion* between The Father and The Son. Even though Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days, the angels are there with him, ministering to him (Mark 1:12-13).[4]

Four Greek words in the New Testament help shed more light on following Christ in Mark's gospel: *metanoia*, *diakonia*, *koinonia,* and *kenosis*.[5] Soon after the forty days in the wilderness, Jesus begins his Galilean ministry with a call to *metanoia* (Mark 1:15). "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel! [6] *Metanoia* means "conversion," or more literally, it is a command to "change one's way of thinking and acting." Consequently, those fishermen who first begin to follow him—Peter, Andrew, James and John—must leave behind on the shore their nets and their old way of living. Their futures will more and more be shaped by following Christ.

Seeing that Jesus has power to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and cast out demons (Mark 2-5), the disciples begin to follow him with enthusiasm.[7] After their initial excitement, however, they are increasingly bewildered by his teaching that they must

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[4] For further discussion of Mark's "theocentric spirituality," see Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (Hendrickson, 1992): 40-46.

[5] John Navone, "Four Complementary Dimensions of Conversion" *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 1989, 10 (1): 27-35.

[6] An excellent account of our life-long need for repentance can be found in John Wesley, "The Repentance of Believers" (Sermon 14) [Available Online]: http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/14/

[7] Donald E. Cook, "The Call of the Disciples in Mark" Faith and Mission 1993, 11 (1): 3-15. John Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing: A Medical and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 90-104.

become the servants of all. This is a natural response on their part. According to Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, the role of servant does not appeal to Callicles, either. He says to Socrates, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone else (*Gorgias*, 491e)?" In Callicles' view, only a foolish person would choose to accept the status of a servant. In Mark 10:42-45, a similar argument breaks out among Jesus' own followers. Jesus, knowing the nature of their heated discussion, tells them explicitly that, although he is a king, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." This is *diakonia*, or servanthood, and it is in this spirit that Christ continues as he goes to face death for our sake on Good Friday.[8]

Koinonia is the Greek word for fellowship, partnership, and communion as experienced by those who enter into God's kingdom. Mark's gospel encourages Christians to become agents of solidarity with the sick, the friendless, and the needy.[9] In some important respects, however, their *koinonia* is in serious danger of breaking down. In Mark 6, "hardness of heart" prevents them from understanding the deeper meaning of sharing the loaves with others.[10] On account of their "blindness," they fail to see that

[8] Douglas J. W. Milne, "Mark: The Gospel of Servant Discipleship" *Reformed Theological Review* 1990, 49 (1): 20-29.

[9] William Reiser, *Jesus in Solidarity with His People* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000). Mitzi Minor, *The Spirituality of Mark: Responding to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 34-52.

[10] Suzanne Watts Henderson, "Concerning the Loaves: Comprehending Incomprehension in Mark 6: 45-52" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2001, 83: 3-26.

Jesus is a Messiah who must suffer and die.[11] And as Jesus has predicted, as soon as he is arrested, they all forsake him and flee, out of fear (Mark 14:50).[12]

Even so, at the Last Supper Jesus remains faithful to them, making a pledge concerning their fellowship: "I will not drink of this cup again until the kingdom has come (Mark 14:25)." Philippians 2:6-11 is an early Christian hymn that tells how Christ set aside every privilege he had as Son of God, in order to walk among human beings. He became poor for our sake. He brought no weapon that would help him establish his kingdom, but came empty-handed. He did not try to defend himself against the soldiers who were sent to arrest him, nor did he try to escape (Mark 14:43-53). Instead, Jesus emptied himself (*kenosis*), and died on a godforsaken cross (Mark 15:34). Mark makes it clear that following Jesus is a risky matter of (1) bearing the cross just as he did, and (2) trusting the outcome to God, the One who raised Jesus from the dead.[13]

Matthew: From Narcissism to Compassion

A major contribution from the gospel of Matthew to spiritual formation is learning to rank goods God's way; it involves us in a movement from narcissism to compassion. The Slaughter of the Innocents (Matt. 2:16-18) shows that this is a world dominated by powerful kings who do not hesitate to crush little children when it suits

[11] Marie Noel Keller, "Opening Blind Eyes: A Revisioning of Mark 8:22-10:52" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2001, 31 (4): 151-157.

[12] Robert E. Tannehill "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role" *Journal of Religion* 1977, 57 (4): 386-405.

[13] Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "'Spiritual Formation' and the Gospel According to Mark" *Ex Auditu* 2002, 18: 80-92. C. Clifton Black, "Does Suffering Possess Educational Value in Mark's Gospel?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2001, 28: 85-98. Mark Wegener, "Reading Mark's Gospel Today: A Cruciforming Experience" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 1993, 20 (6): 462-470.

their interests. But who is Jesus, if not the one who can be counted on to embrace children and welcome them in every circumstance?[14] Matthew also brings to our attention many other vulnerable people who are suffering from disease, hunger, and demons. When John the Baptist sends a message asking whether Jesus is the long-expected Messiah, Jesus answers: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Matt. 11:5). [15]

In such a world, then, it is certain that the disciples will encounter darkness and many shadows, but affirmation and light are what we find in Christ's actions and in his teaching. God himself is our highest good, says Jesus, the ultimate goal of every desire in the human heart.[16] The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) stir up a longing for God in our hearts by subverting our natural expectations and showing us what the kingdom of heaven looks like. The Beatitudes declare as blessed the poor rather than the rich, those who mourn rather than those who laugh, the meek rather than the strong, the merciful and the peacemakers rather than victorious warriors, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness rather than those who are already rewarded by the world.[17]

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[14] A.G. Van Aarde, "Jesus' Affection towards Children and Matthew's Tale of Two Kings" *Acta Theologica* 2004, 24 (2): 127-146. Judith Gundry-Volf, "'To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God': Jesus and Children" *Theology Today* 2000, 56 (4): 469-480.

[15] Mary Jane Haemig "Advent Preaching on "Doubting John" *Lutheran Quarterly* 2006, 20 (3): 348-361.

[16] Augustine, *City of God* 10. 3.2. Jean Porter, "Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas" *Theological Studies*, 1986, 47 (1): 48-68.

[17] Alfredo Albreu, "Justice, Earth and Heaven: According to the Beatitudes" *Crux* 2006, 42 (2): 34-42. Larry Chouinard,. "The Kingdom of God and the Pursuit of Justice in Matthew" *Restoration Quarterly* 2003, 45 (4): 229-242.

Jesus calls us to "take on his yoke" and learn from him (Matt. 11:28-30). Always the initiative is his: "Follow me" (Matt. 8:22, 9:9, 16:24). His followers are required to practice a form of righteousness higher than that of the Pharisees, so we find that a common pattern in his teaching is: "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you..." (Matt. 5:20-45).[18] This is not a rejection of the Law of Moses, but Christ's firm insistence that the Mosaic Law must be interpreted by a prophetic emphasis on mercy and compassion.

The double command to love God and neighbor shows us how to respond properly to God's goodness (Matt. 22:34-40). To have enough bread to eat truly is a good—we need it to exist—but life's deepest meaning is grounded in loving God and obeying His word (Matt. 4:4). Love for God must be without limit and without hypocrisy. Already the world has enough people who see no contradiction between praying long prayers in public and devouring the houses of widows in secret (Matt. 23:14). The story of The Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19 is likewise an instructive counter-example, one aimed at challenging a culture that places too much emphasis on the acquisition of material goods.[19] Christ calls this young man to a new way of life, but when he is told to sell all that he owns and give the money to the poor, he decides *not* to follow. Instead,

[18] Frank J. Matera, "The Ethics of the Kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew" *Listening* 24, 3 (1989): 241-250. S. P. Saunders, "'Learning Christ': Eschatology and Spiritual Formation in New Testament Christianity" *Interpretation* 2002, 56 (2): 155-167.

[19] John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981). Marva J. Dawn, "Until Christ Is Formed in You": Nurturing the Spirituality of Children" *Theology Today* 1999, 56 (1): 73-85.

The rich young ruler grasps these things ever more tightly in his fists, vivid evidence that his possessions and security mean more to him than loving God and following Christ.[20]

"Loving the neighbor" finds further expression in The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25. This is a story meant to sharpen the vision of disciples, so that we see Christ's face in the faces of those who are outcast, hungry, or imprisoned. During a time of severe famine in the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus exhorted his flock to embrace the deeds of mercy described in Matthew 25:

> While we may, let us visit Christ, let us heal Christ, let us feed Christ, let us clothe Christ, let us welcome Christ, let us honor Christ, not with food alone, like some, nor with ointments like Mary, nor with tomb alone like Joseph of Arimathea, nor with obsequies like Nicodemus who loved Christ in half measure, nor with gold and frankincense and myrrh like the Magi did before these others. Rather, since the Lord of all will have mercy and not sacrifice, and since a kind heart is worth more than myriads of fat sheep, this let us offer to him through the poor, who are today downtrodden, so that when we depart this world they may receive us into the eternal habitations.[21]

Gregory knows very well what it means to cross the threshold from narcissism to compassion for others, and this he has learned by following Christ.

Luke: From Despair to Hope

The Gospel of Luke, too, is very rich in what it teaches about the Kingdom of God and conversion, with themes of jubilee, recovering the lost, and prayer; this kingdom spirituality illustrates the movement from despair to hope.

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[20] Birger Gerhardsson, *The Ethos of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981): 45-54. G. D. Kisner, "Jesus' Encounter with the Rich Young Ruler and Its Implications for Theology and Development" *Journal of Religious Thought* 1992, 49 (2): 81-86.

[21] St. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 14: On Love of the Poor" in *Select Orations* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 70-71. Similar themes are explored in Susan R. Holman, "The Hungry Body: Famine, Poverty, and Identity in Basil's Homily 8" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1999, 7 (3): 337-363.

In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus announces that The Year of Jubilee has come. This is the time when the poor will have their dignity restored, the blind will recover their sight, and the captives will be freed from their chains.[22] In Luke 14, conversion is dramatized as answering an invitation to join God's Great Banquet. Woe to those who are too busy with other things or make excuses about why they cannot attend! "Gone to check on a new piece of land," says one. "Permit me to inspect the new oxen in my field," says another. "Sorry—just got married," says a third.[23] In both the Jubilee and The Great Banquet, there is an emphasis on the overflowing goodness of God, and also on seizing this very moment—loving, forgiving, healing, serving in God's kingdom *now*.[24]

The Prodigal Son, however, only comes to his senses after a prolonged period of sin and missed opportunities. Luke 15 offers an especially meaningful description of his long-awaited conversion. The parable begins with the son's fascination with an illusory freedom which leads him to abandon his father's house. After he squanders his fortune, he is humiliated, reduced to feeding pigs. He even finds himself hungering for the husks thrown to the animals. When he realizes all that he has lost, he repents and decides to return to his father. The father welcomes him generously, with joy, quite beyond anything the son had expected. The robe, the signet ring, the banquet—these are all symbols of new life in God's Kingdom.

Even so, many who heard Jesus' teaching were not ready to receive his message. Instead of repenting and being converted themselves, they looked for ways to silence

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[22] Johan Verstraeten, "Debt Forgiveness, Social Justice, and Solidarity: A Theological and Ethical Reflection" *Ethical Perspectives* 2001, 8 (1): 18-28.

[23] Humphrey Palmer, "Just Married, Cannot Come" *Novum Testamentum* 1976, 18 (4): 241-257.

[24] Mark Allan Powell, "Salvation in Luke-Acts" *Word & World* 1992, 12(1): 5-10.

him. In Luke 5, the religious leaders complain that "he eats with sinners." And how does Jesus answer them? "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners." Luke has a special collection of conversion stories, all the more memorable because they are so unlikely: The Woman Known to Be a Sinner (Luke 7:36-50), Zacchaeus, The Tax-Collector of Jericho (Luke 19:1-10), The "Good Thief" on the Cross (Luke 23:39-43). These are among the "lost sheep" spoken of in Luke 15, and of them Jesus says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance."

Luke's kingdom spirituality is also deeply rooted in prayer.[25] For many years, Simeon has been praying for the deliverance of Israel. When the baby Jesus is brought to the Temple by Mary and Joseph to be dedicated, Simeon is finally able to pray: "Now may your servant depart in peace. My eyes have beheld the salvation which you have prepared… (Luke 2:29-32)." More typically, though, it is Jesus himself who provides the model for prayer. Jesus is seen praying at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22). He often withdraws to lonely places in order to pray (Luke 5:16), and he spends the entire night in prayer before He chooses the Twelve (Luke 6:12). Shortly before The Transfiguration, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28). After the seventy have been commissioned, they return to Jesus and report that they have been successful, even against the demons. Then, "Jesus, full of joy, through the Holy Spirit said, 'I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth' (Luke 10:21)."

[25] Stephen S Smalley, "Spirit, Kingdom, and Prayer in Luke-Acts" *Novum Testamentum* 1973, 15 (1): 59-71. P. T. O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts" *Tyndale Bulletin* 1973, 24: 111-127. Kyu Sam Han, "Theology of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 2000, 43 (4): 675-693.

When one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them how to pray, he teaches them to focus on God's goodness, the coming of his Kingdom, our dependence on him for daily bread, our deep need for forgiveness, and the help we need to protect us from temptation (Luke 11:1-4).[26] In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus is about to be arrested and brought before Pilate, he prays, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done (Luke 22:42)." On the cross, when death is near, Jesus continues to show trust in God by praying, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

The last time we see Jesus praying in Luke's gospel is in the resurrection appearance found in Luke 24. The disciples are in despair after Jesus' death on the cross. They have still not recognized their companion as the Lord, even after their walk along the road to Emmaus. Then when Jesus is breaking the bread and praying, their eyes are suddenly opened and they understand that, indeed, he has been with them throughout their journey. It is a story in which gathering the people, reading the scripture, proclaiming the word, praying and celebrating the Eucharist all lead to witness and to mission. [27]

John: From Death to Life

John's gospel is eager to show us how Christ calls people to new life through personal encounter and in that encounter, turning from death to life.[28] Jesus uses the imagery of new birth to indicate to Nicodemus the radical nature of conversion.

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[26] Henry French, "The Lord's Prayer: A Primer on Mission in the Way of Jesus" *Word & World* 2002, 22 (1): 18-26.

[27] Stanley Saunders, "Discernment on the Way to Emmaus: Resurrection Imagination and Practices in Luke 24:13-35" *Journal for Preachers* 1997, 20 (3): 44-49.

[28] Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel" *Downside Review* 1976, 94 (1): 26-46.

Nicodemus, one of The Teachers of Israel, is haunted by this image and the possibility of beginning a new life in God's kingdom. Can it be true, he wonders, or am I in danger of being bewitched by this man's words? Still, even if Nicodemus does not seem ready to become a follower of Jesus in John 3, we would not be justified in writing him off completely. There is still reason to hope that Nicodemus will develop an openly courageous form of faith.[29]

In John 4, Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in conversation as she comes to a well to draw water at midday. At first, he seems to be talking to her about physical thirst and how refreshing it would be, in the heat of the day, to enjoy a bucket of water. Their conversation is shifting, however, to "Living Water." Jesus is straightforward in his assessment of her long history of broken relationships. Surprisingly, she is willing to confess her sins. She is able to confess, too, that she doesn't need another "husband." Her deepest need now, as it has always been, is to know God's love and to worship Him truly.[30] That very day, she takes it upon herself to go and find others, inviting them to "come and see" this man who knows the truth about everyone's life.[31]

Later in John, after Jesus has been arrested, he appears before Pilate. Pilate, representing the military power and the bureaucratic machinery of Rome, must either condemn Jesus to death or set him free in Jerusalem, which is a powder-keg of a city during the celebration of the Passover. Before he passes judgment, however, Pilate wants

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[29] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 130-138.

[30] Paul Wadell, Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

[31] Dorothy Lee, "In the Spirit of Truth: Worship and Prayer in the Gospel of John and the Early Fathers" *Vigiliae Christianae* 2004, 58 (3): 277-297. Mary Margaret Pazden, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 1987, 17 (4): 145-148.

to know whether Jesus is a king, as has been rumored. Jesus acknowledges that he is a king, but then he adds, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here" (John 18:36). To confuse matters even more for Pilate, Jesus then says that he "came into the world to testify to the truth." For Pilate, a man whose life is based on pragmatic action and political compromise, these are only the words of a dreamer, and he asks with a mixture of resignation and scorn, "What is truth?"

After Jesus' death on the cross, the disciples are deeply discouraged. They return to their old livelihood—hauling nets again on the fishing boats of Galilee. Peter is especially disappointed that he himself had not been more faithful to Christ. This is why Peter is more than amazed when the resurrected Lord appears to him. Christ asks Peter three times whether he loves him, recalling Peter's threefold denial.[32] This is done, not so much to sting Peter's conscience, however, but rather with a view to restoring Peter, both as a follower of Christ and as a pastoral leader. Not many days after that, we find Peter preaching a powerful sermon before a crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2). We have to wonder: Can this possibly be the same man who so recently denied that he even knew Jesus? [33] Peter seems to have new resolve, new purpose. In a very profound sense, Peter has been transformed by Christ.

Conversions in John come about thanks to an encounter with Christ who is truth. Pilate did not go further than his cynical question, "What is truth?" He refused to see that

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[32] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* Vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 1110-1117.

[33] Leon-Joseph Suenens, "Peter's Vocation, Conversion, and Mission" *Lumen Vitae* 1980, 35 (3): 319-332.

Christ is "full of grace and truth," (John 1:18). Peter and The Woman at the Well, however, have come to know Christ in a more intimate way. They are among those who know that Christ's words are trustworthy and that he has shown us the Father (John 14:7-9). The bread and wine of the Eucharist have a special efficacy in the communication of truth.[34] "I am the true bread," says Christ in John 6:33, and he promises that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth (John 16:13).

The imagery of "turning" is an important key to understanding the story of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18). Mary has come to the tomb, expecting to find Jesus' body, in order to care for it. Already deep in grief, she is further alarmed when it appears that the tomb has been vandalized by two strangers. It does not yet occur to her that Jesus' body is missing because he has been raised from the dead. Mary believes she is turning to the gardener for "information" about where the body has been taken. Her eyes are filled with tears, and she does not realize that she is on the verge of a life-changing moment. Jesus then calls her by name, and after a brief reunion, he commissions her to return to the other disciples with the startling news: "I have seen the Lord!" she says in John 20:18. And that is part of the story of how Mary and many others began to turn from death to life.[35]

Not So Much a Conclusion as a Calling

We come back to those simple words in the New Testament, important words for spiritual formation: seeing, listening, remembering, following. In Luke's account of the Annunciation, Mary is understandably afraid, but the angel says, "Do not be afraid. The

[34] Dean G. Blevins, "The Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 1997, 32 (1): 69-84.

[35] Dorothy Lee, "Turning from Death to Life" *Ecumenical Review* 1998, 50 (2): 112-120.

Lord is with you!" Mary *listens* to the angel, and allows her whole life to be shaped by these words. In Matthew 27, the centurion *sees* the glory of God shining most visibly through Jesus' death on the cross, and he begins to look at his own life in a new way. In John 2:22, the disciples are bewildered by what Jesus has said about his impending death, but after he is raised, they *remember* his words, and their faith begins to grow stronger. In Mark 10, Blind Bartimaeus is sitting beside the road, neglected, almost forgotten. Then the disciples say: "Take heart! He is calling you!" And immediately Bartimaeus begins to *follow* Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. May we be formed into the likeness of Jesus as we listen, see, remember, and follow.

About the Author

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