



Research article

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CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION: A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DELIBERATION

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ABSTRACT



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Although it is generally agreed that Christian spiritual formation is a very significant aspect of a believer's growth unto maturity, today, the aspect of growing up unto maturity has been described, understood and expressed in varied ways and with various terminologies and nuances such as 'Christian Spirituality,' 'Spirituality,' 'Spiritual Theology' and the like. However, What is the nature of Christian spiritual formation? What does it entail and imply? This study divulges that spiritual formation is synonymous to the evangelical doctrine of sanctification and its subsequent constituents. It also divulges that spiritual formation has a definitive goal, namely as an individual, faith-community and to the world at large.

Keywords:

Spiritual, Christian, Sanctification, Formation, Regeneration



Introduction

The last few decades, have witnessed a widely recognized evangelical approach to spiritual formation and the movement that have gained momentum. The major thinkers and influencers of this movement include, Richard Foster¹ and pioneering writers such as Dallas Willard, James Houston, and Eugene Peterson.² The work of these four writers have influenced the shift in mainstream evangelicalism's discourse from the traditional (narrower) category of discipleship to the newer and broader category of spiritual formation. Subsequently, many prominent evangelical writers have, attempted to discuss and explain Christian Spirituality by providing newer and deeper insights. This paper attempts to add value to the ongoing discourse by examining the dynamics and nature of Christian spiritual formation from the reformed biblical and theological perspective.

1. Biblical Foundation of Spiritual Formation

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul, wrote; "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Corinthians 3:18)³ from this verse, some foundational principles of a spiritual formation can be gleaned; 1) spiritual formation is about being transformed into the image of Christ, 2) spiritual transformation is an ongoing process, 3) the Holy Spirit is involved in the transformation process, and 4) the transformation restores the glory of God. Commenting on this verse, Bock claimed that 2 Corinthians 3:18 was the verse in the New Testament that best described the concept of spiritual formation.⁴

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 25th Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003).

² For instance, see Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998); Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance : Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Venrura, CA: Regal Publishing House, 1984); Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, Co: NavPress, 2002); Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) and other of their works that have set the pace for evangelical interests in Spiritual Formation today.

³ Henceforth, all Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, "New Testament Community and Spiritual Formation.," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, ed. P. Petit (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kruger, 2008), 105.



Christ is the embodiment of God's revelation and glory, through whom is offered a new order of salvation, reconciliation, and righteousness. Christians are transformed gradually (from glory to glory) as they conform to the image of Christ, who is the image of God's glory. The agent of this transformation is the Holy Spirit. Apostle Paul, in effect, described in this verse, the biblical and theological nature of Christian spiritual formation. These foundations and the nature of Christian spiritual formation can be examined in the following categories: 1) Sanctification and spiritual formation 2) The goals of Christian spiritual formation and its formative strands.

2. Sanctification and Spiritual Formation

In the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, which, in part, is derived from Calvin's *The Institutes*, question seventy-seven asks, "Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?" And the answer is as follows:

Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputes the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification his Spirit infuses grace, and enables to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued: the one does equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.⁵

This shows that Calvin was able to accept and appreciate the interplay and of balancing the distinction between justification and sanctification. Whereas justification occurs when sin is pardoned because of Christ's righteousness, which is a one-time event, sanctification occurs when the Holy Spirit imbues grace to control sin, which is an ongoing process that leads to a righteous life. Reformed theologian Hoekema, in an attempt to explicate this, argued that sanctification is that, "gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our

⁵ J. G. Vos, "The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary," ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 173.



entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.”⁶

The sanctification process begins immediately after justification. This is also known as regeneration in a new believer’s spiritual life.⁷ Comparing justification or regeneration with sanctification, Lightner stated that whereas Justification is purely a work by God, sanctification needs the new believer’s cooperation; whereas Justification is instantaneous, sanctification is a process, and whereas Justification is God’s gift, sanctification results, in part, from obedience to God.⁸ Sanctification therefore, is a process that rests on a person’s willingness and cooperation with God.

Subsequently, over the years, although, there have always been a tendency to emphasize one over the other, Calvin belabored to keep this tension in balance and harmony. However, after Calvin, sanctification began to be given precedence over justification by the Reformed churches. The scope of sanctification or ‘growing up to perfection’ was narrowed down namely to the teaching of Scripture and living a disciplined life.⁹ Emphasis on the cognitive knowledge of Scripture and appropriate behavior became the ethos of the Reformed church tradition. These developments, unfortunately, led to a “sanctification gap,” which, in turn, led to legalism, self-righteousness, dogmatism, and conservatism.¹⁰

With the narrowed down view, one might need to consider the scope of sanctification. Is it limited to individuals, or is it related to the wider world in which they live? There are two aspects to sanctification according to Mullen; 1) sanctification according to God’s creative design and 2) sanctification according to God’s redemptive purposes. Regarding sanctification according to God’s creative design, Mullen claimed that, “God created the universe and human beings perfect (i.e., sanctified).”¹¹ This ‘perfect’ state of God’s creation

⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 192.

⁷ J. I. Packer, “Regeneration,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1985), 925.

⁸ Robert P. Lightner, “Salvation and Spiritual Formation,” in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. K. O. Gangel and C. Wilhoit (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 42–43.

⁹ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, Revised Edition (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 78.

¹⁰ Leith, 80.

¹¹ Bradford A. Mullen, “Sanctification,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 709.



was distorted upon the fall of Adam and Eve. The biblical narrative climaxes with God making holy or perfect His fallen creation.¹² In this view of sanctification, it applies to God's entire creation. In his commentary on Romans 8, Moo comes to similar conclusions. He argued that, "both creation and Christians, suffer at present from a sense of incompleteness and even frustration and eagerly yearn for a culminating transformation."¹³ In other words, God's creation is no longer perfect because of the fall and that sanctification, according to God's redemptive purpose, relates to God's actions in redeeming a fallen creation. This redemptive purpose necessitated the sending of His Son and his work on the cross which enable humans to receive forgiveness of sin. It involved God's calling out a specific group of people to be his instruments in redeeming the created order. God's redemptive purpose includes using his people to establish the kingdom of God on earth. In the perspective, sanctification does have wider scope than that of justification as it is interconnected with God's redemption plan to redeem and make His creation holy. Sanctification, then, must include not only God's redemption of his people but also a missional outreach to non-believers and the care of creation.

However, not all theologians agree with this perspective. Erickson, for instance, chose to narrow his scope of sanctification to apply to individual believers only. He argued that, "sanctification is the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy. By 'holy' here is meant, 'bearing the likeness of God (Rom. 8:29).'"¹⁴ Jesus is the perfect image of God (2 Cor. 4:4), so it may be inferred that sanctification is a process of becoming like Christ. However, by narrowing the scope of sanctification without a connection to the wider faith-community and to the created order; culture, community, society and so forth, Erickson seems to suggest viewing sanctification as becoming purely an inward-looking, individualistic spirituality.

It is to be noted that the concept of spiritual formation, we are grappling with today, no matter in what variety of terms it may be put; 'Christian Spirituality,' 'Spiritual Theology'

¹² Mullen, 709.

¹³ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 513.

¹⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 980.



and the like,¹⁵ are synonymous with the evangelical doctrine of sanctification. Porter puts it aptly:

While these terms and the plethora of viewpoints which accompany them often sound much different than typical evangelical presentations of sanctification, this should not detract us from the realization that what is being discussed under the heading of “spiritual formation” (at least within evangelical Protestantism) is none other than views regarding the nature and dynamics of growth in Christian holiness.¹⁶

Although there are variety of definitions of what spiritual formation is, fundamentally, any definition of spiritual formation, I believe, must include the following aspects: 1) inner life transformation by the Holy Spirit, 2) it is an ongoing process, 3) It must be intentional, 4) the goal is to become like Jesus, 5) along with others within the faith community and 6) becoming active agent for God’s redemptive purposes in His creation for His glory.

However, there are also others who consider Christian spiritual formation as a *means* of sanctification (italics is mine). For instance, Willard¹⁷ described the relationship between sanctification and spiritual formation as follows:

Sanctification is not an experience, though experiences of various kinds may be involved in it. It is not a status, though a status is maintained by means of it. It is not an outward form and has no essential connection with outward forms. It does, on the other hand, become a “track record” and a system of habits. It (sanctification) comes about through the process of spiritual formation, through which the heart (spirit, will) of the individual and the whole inner life take on the character of Jesus’ inner life.¹⁸

¹⁵ For more of such terminologies, see, M. Chung, “What’s in a Name: Is the Term ‘Spiritual Formation’ Adequate?” 29, no. 2 (2011): 60–67.

¹⁶ Steve L. Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key: Relieving Evangelical Anxieties Over Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Social Care* 1, no. 2 (2008): 130.

¹⁷ His examination of the spiritual disciplines led him to a deeper understanding of human nature. for instance, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (1988) led him to look at character formation in God. In *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (2002), Willard did wholly formalize his thinking on spiritual formation. His articles available online at <http://www.dwillard.org/default.asp>.

¹⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 226.



Willard seems to suggest that sanctification is achieved through Christian spiritual formation, whereby people are transformed into the character of Christ. Considering it as a process, both sanctification and Christian spiritual formation are essentially the same. Both of them have similar formative elements and goals. It is therefore quite hard to concur with Willard. I consider Sanctification, not as a “system of habits” as stated by Willard, but rather an inner transformation of a person to holiness, gradually & progressively. Willard’s statement seems to suggest that sanctification is achieved through behavioral modification. I consider sanctification and Christian spiritual formation to be two nuanced terms describing the same reality. However, the difference might be that, whereas sanctification seems to be a theological description, Christian spiritual formation seems to be a laity description. Christian spiritual formation is not a *means* to sanctification but *is* sanctification.

In sum, sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit with the willing cooperation and participation of believers to restore the fallen image of God within them and, to that end, to develop habits of living that are pleasing to God through the continual ministration of the Holy Spirit. The scope of sanctification includes not only personal salvation but also God’s redemptive purposes for his creation. Sanctification and Christian spiritual formation are one and the same.

3. The Goals of Christian Spiritual Formation and its Formative Strands

Since the very nature of Christian spiritual formation seek to fulfill God’s creative design and redemptive purposes, three fundamental goals would be; 1) individual believers conforming to the image of Christ, 2) Establishment of the faith-community of God and 3) participating in the establishment of the kingdom of God. These three goals can be viewed in term of three interconnected strands that express and explain the goals of Christian formation wholistically as it corresponds to these goals. They do not exist separately; 1) individual (personal) regeneration (inner life formation), 2) the church community (faith community) and 3) participation in world mission as agents

3.1 Individual Regeneration

This strand represents the individual believer’s process of personal spiritual formation in being conformed to the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19; Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18), and in the process, restoring the *Imago Dei* (image of God) for God’s glory. Becoming



‘Christlike’ does not mean becoming Christ or God. It does, however, mean that one achieves the maturity to exercise, the characters and qualities in one’s life, intentionally, as imparted by Christ. As the Christian grows in maturity, he progresses towards ‘holiness’ and ‘perfection.’ Jesus urged his disciples; “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Similarly, Paul declared that the desired outcome of his ministry was, “that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Colossians 1:28).

An apt metaphor employed by Paul describe this process well; “put off the old man with his deeds” and “and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.” (Colossians 3:9–10). This metaphor is apt because the ‘individual regeneration’ is the process of developing a new Christlike character by removing the old self. Both these metaphors are helpful because they emphasize change, movement, and spiritual advancement. This process is like a journey because it recognizes that an individual develops and progresses at his or her own pace with a definitive outcome of the destination in sight, helped along by signposts every now and then. This process is not about doing (ritualism) but about becoming the right person (Christlike) through the guidance and enablement of the Holy Spirit.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition regards ‘*theosis*’ or union with God as the goal of sanctification.¹⁹ The Orthodox theologian, Wesche argued, “God became human (without ceasing to be God) that humanity might become God (without ceasing to be human).”²⁰ Elaborating on the second half of the statement, Wesche commented that in human beings, there exists latently, the image of God and therefore, humanity is still in communion with the divine nature.²¹ Catholics describe the intentional living out the Christian life, simply as ‘spirituality.’²² Quite similar to the Orthodox position, Catholics also hold that that believer begins to share in the divine nature after Baptism. Aumann stated, “...God's love for us

¹⁹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*. (Collegenille, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 21 see also, Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p.23; J. Patout Burns, “Against Heresies,” in *Irenaeus of Lyon*, Theological Anthropology, book 4 Chapter 38 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 22–26.

²⁰ Kenneth Wesche, “Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: Union with God in Theosis,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 1 (1999): 30.

²¹ Wesche, 30.

²² Joseph O’donnell, “Spirituality: A Roman Catholic Perspective.,” *Review & Expositor* 79, no. 2 (1982): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463738207900210>.



elevates us to his level and deifies us, so to speak, by means of a formal participation in the divine nature.²³ However, this lifelong journey of being spiritually formed, consists of two major avenues; 1) external phenomena (prayer forms, disciplines, methods, devotions, and so forth) and 2) interior phenomena (states of consciousness, emotion, and mysticism which is variously defined.²⁴ According to Bowe, Catholic spirituality is very significantly conjoined with, 1) the authority of the church and its sacraments and 2) Credibility of the (vast and varied) Catholic tradition.²⁵ However, in the Reformed tradition, restoration of the image of God by becoming like Christ is the central thesis of ‘individual regeneration.’

3.2 The Church Community

The second developmental strand represent the individual believer in community, the church. The purposes of Christian spiritual formation is to establish the faith-community; a communal people of God. The bible records God’s continual plan of bringing together and establishing His people. For instance, the building and rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem receive considerable attention in the Old Testament narratives, however, in the New Testament, there is a drastic shift of emphasis to the temple as a holy community of God’s people. Kang concurs with this observation. He stated that the center of biblical theology and spiritual formation is a people of God. He suggested that the people of God may be in communion with those of the past and with those in other continents. The people of God constitute a worldwide faith-community called by God for His purpose as revealed by this covenant: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7).²⁶ The people of God, therefore, constitute the foundational community of God; those who have responded to God in both the Old and New Testament eras.

The people of God is one of the three major images Paul uses to describe the Church. The other two are the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church, or ‘*ekklesia*’ meaning, “called out ones,” may be defined as; 1) a local community of those who profess

²³ Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (University of Santo Tomas, Manila: UST Faculty of Theology, 1989), 62 and 64, <https://in1lib.vip/book/16644477/0427a2>.

²⁴ Scott Hahn, “‘Come to the Father’: The Fact at the Foundation of Catholic Spirituality,” in *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, ePub (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 79.

²⁵ Barbara E. Bowe, *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching a Finger to the Flame*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2003), 5.

²⁶ Steve S. Kang, “The Church, Spiritual Formation, and the Kingdom of God: A Case for Canonical- Communion Reading of the Bible,” *Ex Auditu* 18, no. 1 (2002): 138–46.



faith and allegiance to Christ, 2) the universal Church, and 3) God's congregation.²⁷ The implication here seems to be that, while all the people of God comprise the universal Church, not all local congregations are made up of the people of God. Only God will know who His people are. The universal Church refers to the people of God whom God has elected, before creation, to be His own. While it is likely that most of these elected persons are in the local churches, it is also possible that many are also in the Christian faith-communities that are (possibly) not part of these institutional churches. Such faith-community could comprise of 'insider' converts choosing to remain anonymous in order to be more effective within that given context. It also could comprise of those who deliberately choose not to identify themselves with the formalized institution of the church due to various theological and/or cultural dynamic.²⁸

Such issues aside, the concept of the Church as the people of God divulge the special relationship of God with the community. For instance, instead of adopting an existing nation as his people, God created an alternate group of people for Himself. This group includes not only Jews but also Gentiles. Thus, writing to the Thessalonians, Paul stated; "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14). Therefore, within the Church community, the people of God, both individually and collectively, dwells the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19). In this regard, Richard Averbeck's insight is apt. He stated that, "as an individual '*temple of the Holy Spirit,*' the Christian is part of the community '*temple of God,*' the church."²⁹ He argued that a biblical theology for spiritual formation has its roots in the work of the Holy Spirit in individual Christians, the Church, and the Church's mission.³⁰

²⁷ C. M. Pate, "Church," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 95.

²⁸ For an insight to this aspect in the Indian context, see Dasan Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church in Chennai, India: A Socio-Historical Study of a Non-Church Movement* (Hyderabad: Keans, 2010).

²⁹ Richard E. Averbeck, "Spirit, Community, and Mission: A Biblical Theology for Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Social Care* 1, no. 1 (2008): 43 (italics are min).

³⁰ Averbeck, 43.



A community will develop its distinctive identity as it interacts with surrounding communities in their cultural and social diversity. The ultimate purpose of this ‘Individual regeneration’ is to establish a ‘church community,’ the people of God in the world today so that in and through them, the centrifugal movement of holiness and righteousness based on Christ, begins to permeate the entire creation.

3.3 Participation in World Mission as Agents

The individual Christians and their communities becoming and participating as agents of transformation for His kingdom, represent the third developmental strand of spiritual formation. They become the agents for God’s purposes of reconciling the whole of creation for his kingdom and glory. In a narrow sense, it is an individual Christian’s engagement in reconciliation. In a broader sense, it involves the reconciliation of the church community, God’s people, to God. Still, in an even broader sense, it entails the reconciliation of the whole of creation to her Creator.

The biblical concept of *shalom* encompasses a view of the creation’s being in perfect harmony with God. Although this *shalom* has been achieved by Christ’s atoning death on the cross, spiritual formation brings what Christ achieved into being in an individual, a community, and the created order. In his letter to the Ephesians, apostle Paul wrote that, “in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.” (Ephesians 1:10). Commenting on this verse, Calvin, wrote, “the mode of expression is supposed to resemble one frequently used, when we speak of a whole building as repaired, many parts of which were ruinous or decayed, though some parts remained entire.”³¹ Reflecting on the same verse, Bruce expressed that what Paul meant by reconciliation, “is the reconciliation of human beings to one another, as a stage in the unification of a divided universe.”³²

In His own divine timing, one day, a complete reconciliation will dawn. In this sovereign plan of God, Christian spiritual formation must be viewed as the process God employs to bring His plans for the redemption of both heaven and earth. When Jesus said to religious

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. W. Pingle (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 205.

³² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 261.



leaders, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20), He was talking about life on earth in the kingdom of God. On similar lines, Willard argued that the kingdom of God means, “God in action” in our world today.³³ This action includes spiritual formation as believers try to become Christlike and as such, agents of transformation to the whole creation.

Conclusion

The goals of spiritual formation are; 1) to conform to the image of Christ, 2) to establish the faith community, and 3) to participate in the establishment of the kingdom of God. Although there are many ways in which protestant evangelicals shape, conceive and map spiritual formation, in the end, these are but maps and signposts in the journey to holiness and ultimately, to God and in being like Him. Amongst many who have penned deep insights of lived experiences on Christian spirituality, this deliberation is, but just an attempt to be an additional ‘signpost’ on the roadside in which we are traveling as co-sojourners. Christian spiritual formation is a process grounded in God’s covenant and divine-human interactions through the mediating work of the Holy Spirit.

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³³ Dallas Willard, “The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation.,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 41.



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