
Adolescent Spiritual Formation: Creating Space for God to Speak

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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 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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