
Spiritual Formation in Community

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Wilhoit, Jim. 2009. Spiritual Formation in Community. *Common Ground Journal* v7 n1 (Fall): 71-84. ISSN: 15479129. URL: www.commongroundjournal.org.

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” (Meyer 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 *homolegeō*, 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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