



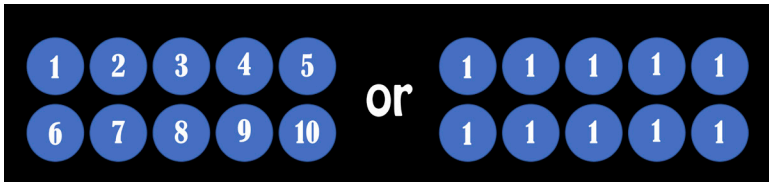
Spiritual Formation

— Spiritual Formation —

Several years ago, I heard a question that so impacted me that I wrote it down and carefully thought through its implications:

What is the difference between a Christian with ten years of experience and a Christian with one year of experience ten times?

Ponder that for a moment. Both Christians travel through the same amount of time — ten years — but one moves through the decade intentionally while the other haphazardly stumbles along through the time.



The first Christian finds depth and growth with each passing year while the second, having no vision and following no plan, simply repeats that first aimless year over and over.

Every part of life contributes to our spiritual formation. Every action taken, every thought pondered, every emotion allowed, every response given, every relationship experienced, moves us one way or the other. Moment by moment, we are being formed into some kind of person. We are being shaped either into the image God has in mind or into a terribly destructive distortion. C. S. Lewis puts it this way:

*Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature.*¹

Spiritual Formation is not an option. We are all on some kind of spiritual journey. The question is what are we becoming?

THE DEFINITION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Since Richard Foster published **Celebration of Discipline**, in 1978, Spiritual Formation has become one of the most written about and talked about topics among Christians of all ages. In fact, to some it might even seem to be a “new” concept. But, as the late Dallas Willard explained in an interview for *Leadership Journal*, “*Spiritual formation isn’t new; it’s only been lost for a while.*”²

The door of Spiritual Formation is an ancient door. So, what is Spiritual Formation? Perhaps these definitions will help.

Christian spiritual formation ... is the life change or transformation that occurs after conversion and before death. ³

God gradually and slowly “captures” the inner faculties: first the heart and the will, then the mind, the imagination, and the passions. The result is the transformation of the entire personality into the likeness of Christ. More and more we take on his habits, feelings, hopes, faith, and love. ⁴

But, of course, the best place to find a definition is in scripture. And if we simply take the phrase “Spiritual Formation” and break it into parts, its true meaning becomes very clear.

“**SPIRIT**” is translated from *pneuma* meaning breath, wind, spirit, the human soul. It is the part of us that animates the body and gives it the power to know, to decide and to act. It is one of God’s greatest gifts.

*“The dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the **Spirit** returns to God who gave it.”
— Ecclesiastes 12:7 —*

*“Who among men knows the thoughts of a man
except the man’s **Spirit** within him?”
— 1 Corinthians 2:11 —*

*“The body without the **Spirit** is dead.”
— James 2:26 —*

“**FORM**” is translated from *morphoo* meaning to shape, to mold, to sculpt, to build. Here God is at work as the eternal artist, following a spiritual pattern and taking our entire lifetime to shape our inner lives.

*“My dear children,
for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth
until Christ is **Formed** in you.”
— Galatians 4:19 —*

*“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory,
are being **Transformed** into his likeness.”
— 2 Corinthians 3:18 —*

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,
but be **Transformed** by the renewing of your mind.”
— Romans 12:2 —*

And so, Spiritual Formation takes place when we offer to God the deepest part of who we are — heart, soul, mind and strength — that part of us that will survive our death. And we allow him ...

... to form our spirit.	... to teach our mind.
... to shape our heart.	... to direct our inner being.
... to change our life.	... to determine our purpose.
... to grow our soul.	... to set our course.

Spiritual Formation is not an event, a weekend retreat, an online course, a book, or a class. It is a long-term process that moves through our entire lifetime.

This lifetime process of internal change takes place in solitude, community, and service. It does not happen quickly, neatly, or predictably. It is clearly God's work, but it requires my participation.

And all we have to do is look in scripture at the lives of people God has formed: Moses, David, Noah, Jonah, Joshua, Abraham, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, Timothy. How did the Spiritual Formation process occur in their lives? Slowly, painfully, individually over their entire lifetime.

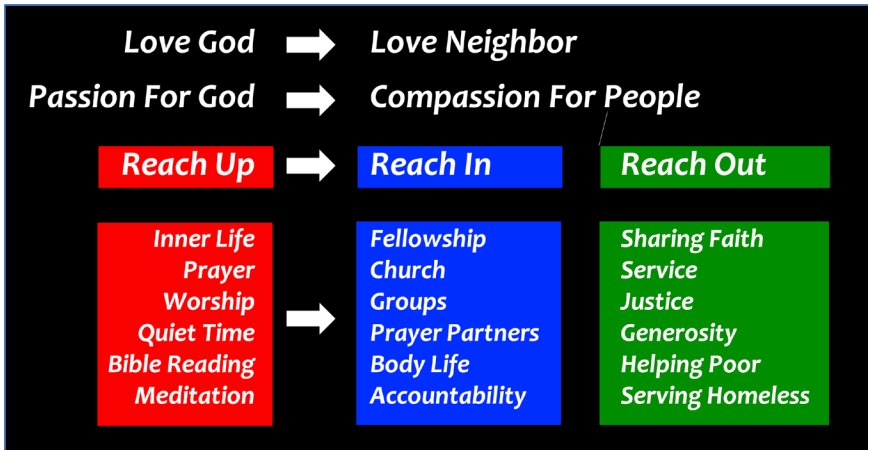
We can give our hearts to God in a moment, but our habits take much longer.

THE FLOW OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

There is a powerful process at work as our inner lives, shaped and sculpted by God, overflows into all our other relationships. In fact, we make a serious mistake when we understand spiritual formation as simply time alone with God. When Jesus was asked to identify the single greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36) he did not give a "single" answer! In essence his answer was:

You have asked me one question, but I cannot give you one answer ... I have to give you two answers, because I can't talk about God without talking about people. They always go together.

And so, there is **movement** in spiritual formation. There is **flow** from our inner life to our outer life, from our time "alone" to our time in "community" and into "ministry." Jesus knew that loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength would unavoidably impact every other relationship. Passion for God will overflow into Compassion for People. Walking with God will flow towards Caring for People. Reaching Up is the power, the energy, and the very fuel for Reaching In and Reaching Out.



Scripture is filled with examples of this “flow” —

WE ARE FORGIVEN ➔ SO WE FORGIVE

“Forgive as the Lord forgave you”

— Colossians 3:13 —

WE RECEIVE COMFORT ➔ SO WE GIVE COMFORT

*“Praise be to ... the God of all comfort,
 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort”*

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 —

WE ARE TAUGHT ➔ SO WE TEACH

*“You welcomed the message ...
 The Lord’s message rang out from you”*

— 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8 —

WE ARE RECONCILED ➔ SO WE RECONCILE

*“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ
 and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”*

— 2 Corinthians 5:18 —

WE RECEIVE GRACE ➔ SO WE EXTEND GRACE

“Faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms”

— 1 Peter 4:10 —

WE ARE SERVED ➔ SO WE SERVE

*“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
 you also should wash one another’s feet.”*

— John 13:14 —

And so, to ask about the lifestyle value of spiritual formation is like asking if our bodies need food or if our cars need fuel. Relationships, family, fellowship, service, generosity, justice, ministry, evangelism, sacrifice — they all need fuel. And the purest, most powerful fuel is generated through the presence of God inside, at our core, in our very spirit. God heals and cares for our souls, filling us to overflowing, so that we can extend his love and compassion to those around us.

THE LONGEVITY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

As our spirits are shaped by God, much of the change and growth will be internal. And while those around us may not immediately notice the transformation, God is nevertheless at work in our lives. Our spiritual life moves from stage to stage — From ...

- ...Selfish Independence To Selfless Reliance (Jer 17:5-8)*
- ...Following Culture To Following God (Rom 12:1-2)*
- ...Personal Agenda To The Kingdom Of God (Matt 6:33)*
- ...Defiance To Obedience (1 Sam 15:19-22)*
- ...Indifference To Growth (2 Pet 1:3-8)*
- ...Serving Self To Serving Others (Phil 2:3-4)*
- ...Image To Character (1 Sam 16:7)*
- ...Wasting To Investing (Matt 25:14-18)*
- ...Entitlement To Gratitude (Lk 17:11-19)*
- ...Isolation To Community (Ecc 4:9-12)*
- ...Conflict To Love (1 Cor 13:4-8)*
- ...Bitterness To Forgiveness (Eph 4:29-32)*
- ...Disruption To Cooperation (1 Thess 5:13-15)*
- ...Positional Leadership To Relational Leadership (Mk 10:42-45)*

Make the decision to seek God for the long term. Be the Christian with ten years of experience. Find and follow a plan. As Albert Day wrote:

Instead of throwing away your hunger for God ... seek it. Seek it for ten years, for twenty years, for thirty. Then come back and tell me what you think.⁵

Understand that you will have to go through shallow to find deep and that Spiritual Formation will take place throughout your entire lifetime as God slowly molds and shapes your inner life. It is a life-long journey, which will require all that you have, all that you are, your entire life. But what an exciting journey it will be!

1 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 87.

2 Dallas Willard, Leadership Journal (Summer, 2005).

3 Keith Meyer, Whole Life Transformation, p. 23.

4 Richard J. Foster, Streams of Living Water, p. 51.

5 Albert Day, Discipline and Discovery, p. 108.

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