

Introduction

Spiritual formation can be one of the most overlooked aspects of a believer's life, yet, if neglected in a Christian's life it can have a cumulative effect of stunting our spiritual growth into ineffectiveness for Christ and His church. Because spiritual formation can often be overlooked in lieu of study, or simply due to the fast-paced lives we deal with in the 21st century, many of us do not know what is meant by spiritual formation. In the familiar passage, the Apostle Paul, talks about the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23) as a mark of our spiritual growth, and "our spiritual life is improving [only] when all of these dimensions are present."¹ Having an understanding of what is meant by spiritual formation is important if we intend to grow in our spiritual walk, desire a closer relationship to God, and strive to become people who are able to lead others in their own development. In order to achieve these intentions we must live a life that includes spiritual disciplines, be open to correction when needed, and maintain our focus on God.

What is Spiritual Formation

Often in our protestant, evangelical, culture today we study, or absorb, the formation of our faith on Sunday mornings, but we then leave out the spiritual part. Spiritual refers to matters of "the spirit or non-material", something distinctly separate from our possessions (Rom. 15:27, NASB), and many times something we cannot

¹ John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life, The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 9.

physically touch or understand with our senses.² To a seeker or new believer, describing something that exists but can't be touched or seen is not always the easiest concept to understand. If we cannot ascertain a meaning that we can readily comprehend (and an understanding might very well be different for each of us) how can we grow in the discipline of spiritual formation, which Westerhoff describes? John, in speaking about the Holy Spirit, puts breath into understanding what we mean by "spirit" when he says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

The wind provides a concrete solution that has universal understanding. We can see its nourishing or damaging effects, we can readily understand if the wind is getting stronger or weaker, but we do not control the wind, completely understand its origin, nor can we reach out our hand and touch its face. We can however be prepared for it, knowing that it indeed does exist on a plane beyond our sight. That is the key to the definition of spiritual formation, in this writer's opinion, discipline. The spiritual disciplines are tied to our spiritual formation and something that is not at any one point complete but "something we practice, an exercise".³

A Life of Discipline

In *Spiritual Life, the Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*, Westerhoff examines six spiritual disciplines that are key to spiritual formation that exemplify the need for the follower of Christ to live a disciplined life. The first example of exercising a life of discipline, *time and place*, explains the daily need for us to consciously "find a

² Herbert Lockyer, F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison, , *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Herbert Lockyer, F.F. Bruce and R.K. Harrison (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 1008.

³ Westerhoff, 65.

place in which we can experience silence and solitude”.⁴ Perhaps one of the common misunderstandings about effective communication with God is that, as with most relationships, our conversations need to be bidirectional to be healthy. Communicating both ways requires us to do something our modern culture does not practice very often, the art of listening. In order to listen, we need a time and place of silence and solitude.

Next we need a time of *preparation* where we can examine our heart and clear our mind of the routines and problems of life. Without preparation we will not be ready, or willing to understand what God has to tell us, nor will we be available to receive the spiritual blessing that comes along with a two-way relationship with God. When we enter into this two-way relationship with God we then enter into His *presence*. This intimate relationship with God, that of presence, is something we can only fully realize and appreciate through preparation, time and place.

Once these disciplines are established it becomes important to make some kind of daily, personal, record of our experiences with God in some form of a *journal*. With family or friends we often take photographs, write letters, or in the information age, write a weblog of our experiences with those closest to us. If we have established this practice among family and friends as a means to record memories, places, and events, how much more special would it be for believers to extend that practice to our relationship with God. Writing down our conversations with God is not only a means for spiritual growth but over time can provide us with a tangible reminder of how God had worked in our lives, where we were spiritually and the growth that has occurred through our relationship over an extended period of time.

⁴ Westerhoff, 67.

Out of the last two examples of living a life of discipline, which Westerhoff examines, *spiritual friends* is probably the most relevant in the post-modern, 21st century, Internet age. Jesus did not intend for the Christian life to be lived in isolation from fellow believers. “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:42,44), but even those outside the Church body who are not necessarily seeking to grow their spiritual life obviously understand this concept.

The explosion in recent years of social networking has started to gain the attention of the Church body, yet fellowship has been a key part of the basic fabric of Christianity since the ministry of Jesus. As pastor Tim Stevens writes in an article for Collide Magazine called *The Evils of Twitter and Facebook*, “I’ve reconnected with people that I haven’t seen in decades, and I am now “closer” to them than I would have been otherwise” and Facebook alone has more than 225 million visitors each month, seeking to connect with each other.⁵ The Barna Group has completed research that concluded social networking, as a whole of society is still emerging into the mainstream, over 78% of Americans use some form of electronic communication each week.⁶ God intended for us to share our lives together and having a spiritual friend whom we can trust is very important in the continuing growth of our spiritual life.

⁵ Tim Stevens, *The Evils of Twitter and Facebook*, July 20, 2009, <http://www.collidemagazine.com/article/238/the-evils-of-twitter-and-facebook> (accessed August 25, 2009).

⁶ Ltd The Barna Group, *Social Networking, Online Entertainment and Church Podcasts*, May 26, 2008, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/14-media/36-barna-technology-study-social-networking-online-entertainment-and-church-podcasts> (accessed August 25, 2009).

The final means of living a life of discipline, that Westerhoff describes, is the *Lectio Divina* (or divine reading), “engaging in activities with God, which will enhance our relationship”.⁷ We can do this by pouring over the scriptures in prayer, meditating on what God has revealed to us through his divine Word and letting our imagination draw us closer to God.

If spiritual formation is tied to our practice of the spiritual discipline, the glue that holds all this together is prayer. Most are taught at an early stage in the Christian walk (or spiritual formation) that as followers of the Risen One we are to pray continually, or without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17), but rarely is this principle spelled out for new believers in a practical way so as to aid in their spiritual growth. Just as with worship, there are many different ways to pray and we shouldn’t confine ourselves to one traditional means, but be open to how God can work in our lives. “Prayer is any means that aids us in our relationship with God” and is most likely different for everyone.⁸ Without a disciplined prayer life, however, our spiritual formation will be slow at best.

Conclusion

Spiritual formation in a believer’s life can be practiced and experienced through living a disciplined spiritual life. There will not be a point at which we can say we have arrived and our spiritual formation is complete. God is continually at work in the lives of His followers but we cannot sit on the sidelines and then wonder why we have not grown spiritually. The disciplined spiritual life requires us to be diligent in finding a place of solitude, preparing our hearts for God, writing about our experiences with God, and sharing those experiences with other spiritual friends. It takes time and effort but maintained spiritual growth will become the blessing of a closer relationship with God.

⁷ Westerhoff, 70.

⁸ Ibid, 63.

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