

Becoming Like Christ

by Richard Foster, Founder & Chair of RENOVARÉ

For the Christian, heaven is not a goal; it is a destination. The goal is that “Christ be formed in you,” to use the words of the apostle Paul (Gal. 4:19; all passages quoted are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.) To the Romans, he declares, “Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son” (8:29). And to the Corinthians, he says, “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image” (2 Cor. 3:18; emphasis added in all three). Thus the daring goal of the Christian life could be summarized as our being formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. And the wonder in all this is that Jesus Christ has come among his people as our everliving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend.



Richard Foster

He who is the Way shows us the way to live so that we increasingly come to share his love, hope, feelings, and habits. He agrees to be yoked to us, as we are yoked to him, and to train us in how to live our lives as he would live them if he were in our place.

Now, we must insist that this way of life is reliably sustained in the context of a like-minded fellowship. Essential to our growth in grace is a community life where there is loving, nurturing accountability. Christlikeness is not merely the work of the individual; rather, it grows out of the matrix of a loving fellowship. We are the body of Christ together, called to watch over one another in love. Unfortunately, in our day there is an abysmal ignorance of how we as individuals and as a community of faith actually move forward into Christlikeness.

We today lack a theology of growth. And so we need to learn how we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). In particular, we need to learn how we cooperate with “the means of grace” that God has ordained for the transformation of the human personality. Our partici-

pation in these God-ordained “means” will enable us increasingly to take into ourselves Christ’s character and manner of life.

What are these “means of grace”? And how can disciples of Jesus Christ cooperate with them so they are changed into Christlikeness?

Formed by Experiential Means

God works first through the ordinary experiences of daily life to form the character of Christ in us. Through these experiences we come to know on the deepest levels that Jesus is with us always, that he never leaves us nor forsakes us, and that we can cast all our care upon him. In addition, we learn that ordinary life is sacramental, and that divine guidance is given primarily in these common junctures of life.

Work as sacrament. The most foundational of these character-formation experiences is found in our work. Work places us into the stream of divine action. We are “subcreators,” as J.R.R. Tolkien reminds us. In saying this, I am not referring to sharing our faith at work or praying throughout our work. Both of these are good, to be sure; but I am referring to the sacredness of the work itself. As you and I care for our daily tasks, we are glorifying God in the work itself. When Martin Luther gave us his revolutionary teaching about the priesthood of all believers, he was referring not just to the fact that the plowboy and the milkmaid could do priestly or liturgical work, but that the plowing and the milking themselves were priestly work.

If we are working to “the audience of One,” we will find Jesus to be our constant companion and friend—though our work be so mundane as picking up sticks. We will grow in intimacy with God and patience with others. And we will experience divine care and supernatural guidance in the most ordinary circumstances—like discovering the problem with the washing machine or finding the right words for a difficult conversation.

Jesus, we must remember, spent most of his earthly life in what we today call a blue-collar job. He did not wait until his baptism in the Jordan to discover God.

Far from it! Jesus validated the reality of God in the carpentry shop over and over before speaking of the reality of God in his ministry as a rabbi. “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,” says Paul, “do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Trials that produce endurance. Another experiential means of grace for the formation of the human personality is found in the various trials, tribulations, and difficulties through which we go. The apostle James reminds us, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2-3). This “endurance” is what the old moral philosophers called “fortitude,” and they viewed it as one of the foundational virtues that was essential for a good life. James adds, “And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4).

At times, these adversities are tragic in the extreme. The company you worked for your entire life goes belly-up and you are left without a job. Your only daughter dies suddenly and needlessly in a car accident. A tiny error at the hospital renders you permanently blind. These are the sorrows that are written across the face of humanity.

But most often, the trials we face are of the garden variety rather than heroic. Your superior at the office makes a mistake that places you in an awkward position. Your son puts a nice round hole in the neighbor’s window with his new BB gun. You are embroiled in ongoing tension with someone who used to be your best friend.

But through the operations of grace, even these work endurance in us, and we learn something of the cosmic patience of God. We come to see God’s timing and God’s ways as altogether good. We become what George Fox called “established” men and women.

Trials, tribulations, persecutions—these we should expect. They are part of life. Even more important, they are part of our discipleship to Christ—“Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The key is how we are shaped and formed ever more fully into the way of Christ through the process of these experiences.

Movings of the Spirit. Still another form of the experiential means of God’s grace comes through our interaction with the movings of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts. Have you ever felt the drawing and encouraging of the Spirit? You probably did not hear an audible voice—though we must never rule out that possibility. But more likely you sensed the weight and authority that comes with divine communication. The clarity of

the Word of Truth was unmistakable. And it coincided with God’s revealed truth in Scripture, for the same Spirit who inspired Scripture is at work within you.

Often the Spirit comes to us as Teacher. Perhaps we receive a simple word of assurance and care: “You are loved in ways you never dared hope.” Maybe there are blind spots that need his tender scrutiny. Perhaps there is instruction in truth. The key lies in our reaction to and interaction with God’s grace-filled teaching.

We may harden our hearts and turn away from the light. But God’s patience and love overcomes us, and we repent and turn into the light. We may argue, debate, question. Back and forth we go until we come to see the goodness of rightness. Throughout, God is molding, shaping, forming us into creatures that can bear the beams of his overcoming love; creatures that can contain God’s goodness without being completely done in by it.

At other times, the Spirit comes as counselor and guide. Perhaps we are given prophetic words to share, and so with fear and trembling we speak out in the gathered meeting for worship. The experience is so exhilarating, however, that we forget ourselves and speak beyond our leading. Soon sensible of our error, we grieve over our disobedience, knowing that words once spoken cannot be retrieved. All the time we are learning to distinguish the life-giving words of the Spirit from the death-giving words of the flesh. We see that our humanly initiated words vanish into thin air, and that only the *d’bar Yhwh*, the word of the Lord, endures, and we come to treasure these wonderful words of life.

All these experiences, as varied and diverse as life itself, are meant to draw us deeper in and higher up into Christlikeness. And so they do when we are docile of heart. God takes the dynamic give and take of our interaction with himself and plants within us deep-rooted habits of the heart—habits of joyful allegiance and glad surrender, habits of faithful obedience and patient endurance.

Conformed by Formal Means

The formal means of grace refers to well-recognized disciplines of the spiritual life: disciplines like prayer, study, fasting, solitude, simplicity, confession, celebration, and the like. I call these “formal” means because they involve formal ways of arranging our lives for training in the spiritual life. We simply must understand that we will never grow in Christlike habits and disposition without intense, well-informed action on our part.

Now it must be said with vigor that these acts do not make us acceptable to God. Our acceptance is by grace alone, and our justification is by grace alone. The

disciplines make up the ground of this action. They are spiritual exercises through which we bring our little individualized “power pack”—we call it the human body—and present it to God as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

Athletes of God. But these spiritual disciplines do train the body, mind, and spirit for the things of God. “Train yourself in godliness,” says Paul (1 Tim. 4:7). The background to Paul’s call is the Greek gymnasium where athletes trained to participate in the games. And Christians from the earliest centuries spoke of themselves as the *athletae Dei*, the athletes of God.

We have embedded in our bodies and our minds habits of evil that permeate all human life. And our bodies and minds need proper discipline to be freed from these destructive habits so that they can be brought into a working harmony with our spirit.

Now, it is important to distinguish “training” from “trying.” I might try very hard to win a marathon race, but if I have not trained, I will not even finish, not to mention win. Without training, the resources simply are not in my muscles, they are not in the ingrained habit structures of my body. On the day of the race, no amount of trying will make up for the failure to train. It is the training that will enable me to participate effectively in the race. The same is true in the spiritual life. Training builds interior habits within us, “holy habits.”

Conquering pride. Suppose I am longing to win the battle over pride. (I know that today people are not much concerned about pride, but the devotional masters always saw it as among the most destructive sins.) I can never defeat pride by “trying.” Direct assault against pride will only make me proud of my humility! No, I must train. But what do I do?

Well, as I read the great writers on the soul—Saint Benedict’s “Twelve Steps of Humility,” for example—I discover that they call me to deal with pride by training in *service*. Why? Because service takes us through the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves. A father, for example, dies to his desire to watch Monday-night football in order to play with his children. Or a husband dies to a promotion that would mean relocating in order for his wife to advance in her chosen vocation.

These are *little deaths*, to be sure. But each one takes us beyond ourselves, and God uses these simple acts of service to work a miracle in us. Through serving others we learn how precious people are. We come to value them as persons, delighting even in their idiosyncrasies. All of this places us in a right relationship to others. “Me” and “mine” give way to “we” and “ours.” We come to see ourselves as part of a whole.

If, in addition, I read William Law’s *Serious Call* or Saint Bernard’s *Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride*, I become aware of the importance of worship as a discipline for nurturing humility. As I begin to see God as high and lifted up, to overhear cherubim and seraphim praising God and all the heavenly host casting their crowns before the throne, singing, “You are worthy,” I am brought into appropriate perspective with relation to God (Rev. 4:9-11). I realize that all I am, all I have, all I do is derived. I am not the captain of my salvation nor the master of my fate. Far from it. I am utterly, completely, radically dependent upon a loving Father who brings me rain and sun as I need them, and in whom I live and move and have my being. You are, too.

Do you see what these basic spiritual exercises have done for us? They have nurtured us into proper perspective toward others—right horizontal relationships—and into proper perspective toward God—right vertical relationship. When these things come into place, we can understand what William Law meant when he spoke of “the reasonableness of humility.”

Now, these little exercises of service and worship do not make us righteous. Righteousness is first, foremost, and always a work of God “by grace through faith.” No, these exercises merely place us before God—the simple offering of a living sacrifice. But from this small offering God is able to bring forth far greater good: such as creating in us an interior disposition of preferring others; such as understanding God as the creator and sustainer of all things; such as seeing our efforts as reflex responses to divine urgings; and much more.

This, in God’s time and in God’s way, produces a pleasing balance in our lives so that humility flows from us as naturally and as effortlessly as breathing.

A menu of disciplines. I have mentioned the disciplines of service and worship. There are many others. *Inward disciplines*, like meditation, prayer, fasting, and study, cultivate our heart and mind toward the way of Christ. Meditation is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. Prayer is ongoing dialogue with the Father about what God and we are doing together. Fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. Study is the process through which we bring the mind to conform to the order of whatever we are concentrating upon.

Outward disciplines, like simplicity, solitude, and submission, cultivate our appetites toward the way of Christ. Simplicity is an inward reality of single-eyed focus on God that results in an outward lifestyle free from “cumber,” as William Penn put it. Solitude involves creating an open, empty space for God that

undercuts all the false support systems we use to shore up our lives. Submission is the ability to lay down the everlasting burden of needing to get our own way.

Corporate disciplines, like confession, guidance, and celebration, cultivate our affections toward the way of Christ. Confession is the grace through which the sins and sorrows of the past are forgiven. Guidance is the experience of knowing the theocratic rule of God over our lives. Celebration is being, as Augustine said, “an alleluia from head to foot!”

Now, I have no exhaustive list of the spiritual disciplines, and as far as I know, none exists. We are simply finding ways to place who we are—body, mind, and spirit—before God. All of this, I must add, flows out of a proper disposition of the heart: seeking first the kingdom of God, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, longing to be like Christ.

Doing these things to be seen by others is a failure to understand that the disciplines have absolutely no merit in and of themselves. They do not make us right with God or improve our standing with God. All the disciplines of the spiritual life do is place us before God. At this point, they come to the end of their tether. But it is enough. God takes this simple offering, imperfect and misguided as it may be, and uses it to build within us virtues and graces we can hardly imagine—conforming us, always, to the way of Christ.

Transformed by Instrumental Means

The instrumental means of grace refers to the various physical and human instruments God uses to transform us. God in his great wisdom has freely chosen to mediate his life to us through visible realities. This is a great mystery. God, who is pure Spirit, utterly free of all created limitations, stoops to our weakness and changes us by physical and visible means.

Many and varied are the instrumental means of grace. Baptism is a means of grace whereby we are buried into Christ’s death and raised unto his life. Preaching is a means of grace in which “the sacrament of the Word” is given to us, and the ministers of Christ are themselves the living elements in Christ’s hands, broken and poured out in soul. The laying on of hands is a means of grace through which God imparts to us what we desire or need, or what God, in his wisdom, knows is best for us. The anointing with oil is a means of grace for the healing of the sick. Intercessory prayer is a means of grace through which God freely uses human instrumentality to speak forth his will on earth as it is in heaven.

Transformed by Scripture. There is probably no more transforming instrumental means of grace than

reading, studying, and meditating upon Scripture. Habitual reading of the Bible touches the affections; systematic study of the Bible touches the mind; and sustained meditation upon the Bible touches the soul.

When we read Scripture, we gain a world-view. We become immersed into “holy history.” In reading about God’s interaction with Abraham and Ruth, Mary and Paul, we understand something of God’s dealing with us. Reading whole sections in a single setting—Jeremiah, for example, or John or Romans—gives us the larger sense of the unseen world. With Abraham we begin seeking for a “city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). With Mary we confess, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). With Paul we can “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14; RSV).

Through this process the Bible becomes “all over autobiographic of you,” to use the phrase of Alexander Whyte. As we study Scripture, we are seeking the intent of the Author, searching for the meaning of the text. Grammar, history, geography, and critical research all play a vital part in our inquiry into the Word of God written. We submit to the results of our study, for we want what the Bible says more than what we want it to say.

When studying the Ten Commandments, for example, we discover through historical research that it parallels closely the form of the treaties of the ancient Near East in which the suzerain tells of his great grace and mercy to the vassal, and in gratitude, the vassal agrees to the stipulations of the covenant in obedience to the suzerain. Grace comes before obligation! All of a sudden, the words of God to the people of Israel take on an enlarged meaning: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). Study, you see, brings the mind into conformity to the ways and nature of God.

In meditating upon Scripture, the heart and the soul are molded ever more closely to the love of God. “How can young people keep their way pure?” cries the psalmist, and then he answers his own question: “By guarding it according to your word” (Ps. 119:9). Sustained rumination upon Scripture—in this case, Torah—will keep our way pure, particularly by purifying the aspirations of the soul.

We are also given new power. As we meditate, for instance, upon Jesus’ staggering words, “My peace I give to you” (John 14:27), we are baptized into the reality of which the passage speaks. We brood on the truth that he is now filling us with his peace. The soul and spirit are awakened to his inflowing peace. We feel all motions of fear and anger stilled by “a spirit of power

and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). And the grace-filled result: a heart enlarged to receive the love of God; "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:97, 103).

The Lord's Supper. An obvious instrumental means of grace is the bread and the wine of Holy Communion. Regardless of our particular theological position on the Eucharist, we all agree that, in ways we cannot fully comprehend, the life of God is mediated to us through the bread and the wine. We bow under the wonder of this incarnational reality.

But how does our participation in the Eucharistic feast work to transform us into Christlikeness? Well, first of all, nearly every aspect of heart devotion is found at the Lord's Table—examination, repentance, petition, forgiveness, contemplation, thanksgiving, celebration, and more. And genuine heart devotion always produces character transformation. The Eucharist is the most important moral action of the church, because its celebration incorporates us into the ongoing story of God's redemptive work.

Then, too, the Lord's Supper brings forth inward transformation in the way in which it forces us to keep coming back to the Great Sacrifice: Jesus' broken body,

his blood poured out. This is how we live. This is how we are strengthened. This is how we are empowered. We all come to the Communion service praying the prayer of the child—the prayer of receiving. We come with open hands. We also come with empty hands. We have nothing to give. All we can do is receive. Each and every one of us approaches the Table declaring, "Just as I am, without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me." What happens then is all of grace and nothing of us. Heart transformation. Faith. Hope. Love. An amazing simplicity that is free of manipulating and managing and maneuvering.

And "empty hands" brings us full circle, back to grace where we started. And what a transforming grace it is! It is a grace that not only gets us into heaven when we die but gets heaven into us here and now. It is a grace that is continuously forming and conforming and transforming us into the likeness of Christ. The only adequate response to such "amazing grace" is doxology.

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