



## The Quest for Spirituality in the Light of Biblical Discipleship

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The cover of *Newsweek* magazine displayed in bold letters:

THE SEARCH FOR  
THE SACRED:  
AMERICA'S QUEST  
FOR SPIRITUAL MEANING



Michael Wilkins

With the increasing secularistic materialism of our modern culture, people both within the church and in society at large are looking for spiritual answers. This quest has taken many different forms.

The “new age” movement has attracted large numbers of followers as highly visible entertainment figures try to give spiritual answers for complex modern life. But the new age movement has developed its practices apart from Jesus Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is a counterfeit of Biblical spirituality.

The recent popularity of “spiritual formation” authors in some quarters of the church speaks to a desire by Christians to find deeper practices of the spiritual life. There is a hunger for a real spiritual life, something different than simply playing church. But even within the Christian realm we find remarkable differences in what proponents mean by “spirituality” or “spiritual formation.”

### Approaches to Spirituality

The history of the Christian church is marked by a variety of approaches to spiritual formation.<sup>1</sup>

*The contemplative life.* Church history has witnessed men and women who fled the life of the city to found cloisters and monasteries, emphasizing the importance of solitude, meditation, and

prayer. A notable example is Augustine of Hippo. Here many emphasize that the road to spirituality is through contemplative intimacy with God.

*The life of holiness.* In a world of sin and moral laxity, some have emphasized the removal of sinful habits in the life of the Christian. John Wesley and his friends were nicknamed the “Holy Club” because they took sin seriously and developed specific methods to achieve a life of holiness. For many spirituality is achieved through holiness before God.

*Life in the Spirit.* Still others emphasize the shaping of the individual Christian by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the means or agency of spiritual formation. Some groups, as widely divergent as Quakers and the Assemblies of God, emphasize that spiritual formation is achieved as the Christian is open to the experience of the Holy Spirit.

*Social justice.* From Francis of Assisi to the modern organization World Vision, many in church history have devoted their lives to care for the sick, the poor, and the lame. Some have abandoned their former lives altogether, while others make this a conscious pattern of life within regular activities. For many the path to spiritual formation is pursued in a life characterized by following Jesus’ example and admonition to care for the needy.

*The Word of God.* The Reformation, led especially by Martin Luther and John Calvin, focused on the centrality of the Bible as God’s Word of truth, instruction, and guidance. Reformers advocated the accessibility of the Bible to laypersons and clergy alike, which spawned a movement to study and apply Scripture as a primary means to spiritual formation.

*The disciplined life.* In the “spirituality” traditions, the focus is upon the practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, meditation, etc. “Formation” is regarded as whatever “disciplines” it takes to bring us where we are able to engage rightly in a life of spiritual growth.

*Community life.* Benedict of Nursia initially sought spirituality through being a contemplative hermit. Later he recognized the need to live in relationship with other believers, and so he developed the monastic community of faith, the Benedictines. Since Jesus gathered disciples around him, many emphasize that spirituality must be pursued within a community of believers.

*Leadership training.* Some understand spiritual formation to mean formal training in special spiritual activities. In the Roman Catholic tradition this points to “priestly formation” or the “spiritual formation” of the priest. The future priest is involved in external training for ministry, although this is implied to go deeper, to the inner self. The counterpart in the Protestant tradition is seminary training, where the emphasis is upon developing a successful minister, pastor, leader, or full-time Christian worker. From this perspective, spiritual formation is the training that turns the individual Christian into a successful Christian worker.

### *Going To Extremes*

Each of us has been exposed to some aspects of these approaches to spirituality. There is some overlap, and much can be learned from each. However, within each there are adherents who overemphasize their particular area of strength.<sup>2</sup> For example:

- the contemplative who forgets the needs of the world
- the moralist who focuses on sin and neglects compassion
- the charismatic who seeks the gifts and neglects the Giver
- the social activist who forgets to listen to God
- the Bible-study enthusiast who feels no need for the Holy Spirit
- the ascetic who disallows the joy of life in Christ
- the community participant who loses his/her individual identity

- the Christian leader who forgets that she/he is still simply one of the flock.

It is important to learn from each, but not to over-emphasize one or another, or allow one to dominate the others. The spiritual life is obtained by following the kind of life that Jesus exemplified, which is a balance of each of these approaches.

Would you consider yourself to be “spiritual”? Is a “spiritual” Christian different from an ordinary Christian? What in your life today indicates that you are involved in your own personal spiritual formation? How does spiritual formation relate to discipleship?

### *“Yes to God”*

Robert Meye defines spirituality as

...the grateful and heartfelt “Yes to God,” the response of the child of God to the call of God in the Spirit. Expressed both in act and attitude, the believer lives in obedience to and imitation of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, and walks in the disciplined and maturing pattern of love’s obedience to God.<sup>3</sup>

“Yes to God.” Yes to God in his call for us to be holy. Yes to God when he calls us to his Word. Yes to God as he directs us to serve our neighbor and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. The various approaches to spirituality we mentioned above are powerful attempts to say yes to God in one particular area of the Christian life. Therefore, we can learn from each one. While we each will have one or more areas of natural strength, or areas to which our personality naturally draws us, combining them helps us to move further along the way toward whole spiritual growth.

“Spirituality,” then, is the overall *goal* of becoming like Jesus. “Spiritual formation” points to the *process* of training, shaping, and being shaped in every area of our lives by the Spirit into the image of Christ.

Note that I emphasize *every area of our lives*. The use of “spirituality” and “spiritual formation” can be misunderstood to imply only the immaterial aspect of our lives. The terms may seem to separate “spiritual” formation from other aspects of personal growth, focusing only on the “inner life.” That is why some prefer to speak of “Christian formation,” emphasizing the development of the whole person. Dallas Willard clarifies,

Spirituality in human beings is not an extra or “superior” mode of existence. It’s not a hidden stream of separate reality, a separate life running parallel to our bodily existence. It does not consist of special “inward” acts even though it has an inner aspect. It is, rather, a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world.<sup>4</sup>

### *Fragmentation*

As Christians, you and I can become tragically fragmented. We become fragmented when we develop only one dimension of our lives. The expressions “discipleship” and “spirituality/spiritual formation” are often misapplied to emphasize only the “spiritual” element of human existence. This may separate “spiritual” formation from other aspects of personal growth and create fragmentation in the Christian life.

I see this regularly in young people who are preparing for ministry. Some emphasize serious study. They excel in their coursework, able to do Greek exegesis on any passage of the New Testament. But then when they get out into ministry, they often don’t know how to relate to people. They have given massive amounts of time to understanding the biblical text, but they have not given equal amounts of time to developing other areas of their lives. They often really don’t know themselves, and they don’t understand others, so they cannot clearly communicate the meaning of the Bible to the lives and circumstances of their people. I often suggest that they take a year off from school and get a job, so they can learn about the stresses of a secular job and also relate to the joys and sorrows of people in the everyday details of life.

I have also seen this fragmentation in many who have become so focused on their business careers that they have sacrificed their families. Or the mothers who have become so absorbed in the lives of their children that they almost lose their own identities. It is all too easy for us to focus so exclusively on one aspect of our lives that we become one-dimensional, fragmented persons.

Spiritual formation points to the normal process of growth for all Christians. The normal life is the spiritual life. Since we have been created

with both immaterial and material dimensions, the process of becoming like Jesus is a call to each of us to develop in every area of our lives. We are healthy persons when we develop as whole persons. Like Jesus in His earthly life (Luke 2:52), we are to grow mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially/emotionally.

### **Discipleship Is Spiritual Formation**

How then does spiritual formation relate to discipleship? Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”<sup>5</sup> That definition is virtually synonymous with discipleship. Discipleship and spiritual formation/ spirituality have striking similarities. While both terms have unique emphases, they are quite similar in their intended result: to be transformed into the image of Jesus. Jesus said that a disciple when fully trained will be like his master (Luke 6:40), and Paul said that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into the image of Christ (see Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). As with discipleship, spiritual formation is the process that is the natural outgrowth of new life in Christ.

Discipleship is the emphasis of the four gospels, where Jesus in his earthly ministry gathered disciples and they followed him about. Once he ascended to his Father in heaven, Jesus sent his Spirit as the Comforter who would carry out his ministry in the lives of his followers. Spirituality became the focus of those in the early church, such as Paul, who stressed a life lived “in Christ” in the power of the Spirit.

Therefore, discipleship is the flip side of the same coin as spiritual formation. Discipleship emphasizes the immediacy of Jesus’ example, while spirituality emphasizes the dynamic of the Spirit’s work in our lives as we follow Jesus’ example. We really cannot separate what they mean or how they are carried out. Discipleship is spiritual formation, and spiritual formation is discipleship, and together they speak to the full concept of sanctification.<sup>6</sup>

### **Jesus, the Mark of Real Spirituality**

The life that we now live as Christians is to be marked by one characteristic: *Jesus*. No matter what other characteristics our particular form of discipleship and spirituality may take, Jesus is the

boundary marker of real Christian life. We enter through Jesus, we are nurtured by Jesus, we follow Jesus' example, we become like Jesus, and Jesus is formed in us.

John Calvin stretches our understanding of this truth when he comments on Paul's statement, "Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). "Christ being formed in us is the same as our being formed in Christ. For we are born that we may be new creatures in him. And he, on the other hand, is born in us so that we may live his life."<sup>7</sup>

Christ is formed in us, and we are transformed into the image of Christ. This is the wonderful truth of the life offered to us. Each person who has come to Jesus as Savior for eternal life has been introduced to a life of discipleship and spiritual formation through the new birth. What does the process of growth look like?

In my book, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life*, I have tried to develop in some detail what I call the "non-negotiables of biblical discipleship." None of these characteristics or axioms can be excluded. Each is rooted in clear, biblical teaching. Each must be employed in conjunction with the others, simultaneously. And although we can examine them individually, they contribute to the whole person, the disciple of Jesus who is in the process of becoming like Him.

Non-negotiable biblical discipleship—

- is grounded in a personal, costly relationship with Jesus
- results in a new identity in Jesus
- is guided by God's Word
- is empowered by the Holy Spirit
- is developed through a whole-life process
- is practiced in communities of faith
- is carried out in our everyday world.

We need a biblically based understanding of spiritual formation and discipleship. While various programs and formulas of growth can help, they are only means to the end. The true mark and goal of spiritual formation and discipleship is full transformation into the image of Jesus.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The first five are discussed by James Bryan Smith, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 13-19. The latter three I suggest.

<sup>2</sup> James Bryan Smith, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook*, p. 17,

suggests the first five. I suggest the latter three extremes.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Meye, "Spirituality," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. by G. F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and D.G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 907-8.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> For a more complete discussion, see Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 11 (rpt.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 82-83.

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