

“*A Heart Aflame for God* is one of the most edifying and spiritually insightful books I have ever read. While confessional Protestants often look to other traditions for guidance in spiritual formation, Matthew Bingham is like a miner uncovering the rich, life-giving treasures of the Reformed tradition. I wish I could travel back in time and hand this book to my younger self. Highly recommended!”

Hans Madueme, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“In our current historical moment, rife as it is with digital noise, doctrinal shallowness, and irreverent worship, some professing Christians have moved away from the biblical faith in search of ostensibly soul-satisfying alternatives. Turning to denominations like Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, many crave the stillness, theological intricacy, and spiritual gravitas that are promised by those traditions but that, when weighed in the balances, are found wanting. Matthew Bingham returns to the old paths by examining the sound doctrine and experiential piety of the Reformed tradition, a faith whose theologians of previous centuries—whether the English Puritans, the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* divines, or the Old Princeton theologians—were masters of the craft of vibrant spiritual formation. Bingham examines how the Reformed tradition promotes spiritual growth through the disciplines of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer, as well as through self-examination, worship, and Christian fellowship. This is a very helpful exposition and affirmation of Reformed experiential piety.”

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“In a time when many evangelicals are experiencing great spiritual anxiety and discontentment, Matthew Bingham retrieves a distinctively Reformed account of spiritual formation. This book is like food in a time of hunger. Many are leaving evangelicalism in search of a greater depth of spiritual practice. Bingham helps us see how this need can be met within the resources of our own tradition. Drawing especially from the Puritans, he builds a robust theology of prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, self-examination, relationship, and even nature and the human body. Rich in both theology and spiritual insight, *A Heart Aflame for God* will serve and edify readers at multiple levels. Highly recommended!”

Gavin Ortlund, President, Truth Unites; Theologian in Residence, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Matthew Bingham calls us to leave the experiential shallows of modern evangelicalism and to plunge into the deeper understanding of Christian formation that was developed by the Reformers and Puritans from their sustained reflection on the word and works of God. This is an incredibly important new book—a word in season to those who are weary.”

Crawford Gribben, Professor of History, Queen’s University Belfast; author,
An Introduction to John Owen

“This book on spiritual formation by Matthew Bingham is just the tonic for this age, in part because it relies on many ‘ages’ throughout church history. To address contemporary concerns, while also offering a positive approach to how to live as a Christian, Bingham has marshaled some of the best in this delightful treatise. A Reformed approach to living a spiritual life is not an oxymoron but rather part and parcel of how Reformed theologians, including many of the illustrious Puritan divines, did theology. This is a modern ‘Puritan’ work addressing a present need in the hopes that evangelicals will embrace the tools readily available to them to make them mature, deep-thinking Christians.”

Mark Jones, Senior Minister, Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church,
Vancouver, British Columbia

“This work stands as a guiding light, showing us that a heart aflame for God can thrive within a Reformed understanding of spiritual formation. I highly recommend Matthew Bingham’s insightful and accessible book to anyone yearning for a stronger connection to the Reformed faith and a deeper walk with God. Protestant readers will discover that the resources for profound spiritual growth can be found within their tradition.”

Karin Spiecker Stetina, Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological
Studies, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“One of the major effects for evangelical Christians living in the modern West with its ahistorical ethos and *mentalité* is an ignorance of the spiritual riches of their tradition. Matthew Bingham’s work on spiritual formation and what have traditionally been called the means of grace is a fabulous remedy for this dire situation. Drawing especially on the Puritan writings of our evangelical heritage (he even includes quotes from that relatively unknown star of the Puritan firmament Brilliana Harley!), Bingham charts a way for modern Christians to benefit from that notable era of spiritual wisdom and so walk worthy of their calling. It is a book, I trust, that will bring much good to God’s people and glory to the God of the Puritans!”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Matthew Bingham helps the sons and daughters of the Reformation feel no shame for the origin story of their piety. He displays the rich fare of spiritual formation passed down to us by the Reformers, even as he strongly resists the modern trend of adopting spiritual and mystical practices from other traditions. This book outlines the contours of a truly healthy spirituality that is inseparably connected to healthy doctrine—with the ‘Reformation triangle’ at its foundation and with Christ at its center.”

A. Craig Troxel, Robert G. den Dulk Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California; author, *With All Your Heart*

“Oh to have ‘great souls’ like the early modern saints. Our inner persons today have shriveled so small. We are fragile and weak of heart. We are in desperate need of enlarged, deepened, conditioned souls that glory in real glories, fear real threats, and keep Godward balance in the tides of unbelief, decadence, and trivial distraction. Bingham has collected many Puritan treasures in one chest, arranged them in order, and made them accessible for use today. The health of your soul in the late modern world—and perhaps, through you, the healing of others—may await a slow, attentive engagement with this book. The more I read, the better it got. I’ve already made plans to reread this book.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, Desiring God; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“In Galatians 4:19, the apostle Paul expressed his longing to see that ‘Christ is formed’ in believers. From this verse, the term *spiritual formation* has arisen to describe the biblical process of molding the mind, heart, and life of a Christian into conformity to Christ. Books related to this theme have appeared for as long as Christian books have been written, but I cannot recommend many of them because they rely heavily on writers who hold to a different gospel than the one taught in Scripture. They may say wonderful things about how a Christian should pray, for example, but behind those commendations is false teaching about how a person becomes a Christian in the first place. I cannot encourage the reading of some books on the subject because they advocate spiritual formation by means of practices not found in Scripture at all. But *A Heart Aflame for God* rightly contends for a *sola Scriptura* spirituality. Those unfamiliar with the Reformed tradition on spiritual formation (which seems to be true of some of the bestselling contemporary authors on spiritual formation) will be surprised by the depth and breadth of the riches uncovered by Bingham. He carefully considers the views of other traditions, but he maintains that all true spirituality must be founded on the Bible and the gospel it proclaims. As Jesus prayed, ‘Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth’ (John 17:17).”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and John H. Powell Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; *Praying the Bible*; and *Family Worship*

A Heart Aflame for God

A Heart Aflame for God

A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation

Matthew Bingham

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation

© 2025 by Matthew C. Bingham

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Chapter 9 is a revised version of Matthew C. Bingham, “Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-aligning Anthropology and Ministry,” *Themelios* 46, no. 1 (2021): 37–54. Used by permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked GNV are from the Geneva Bible. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible. Public domain.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-9262-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9264-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9263-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bingham, Matthew C., 1983– author.

Title: A heart aflame for God : a reformed approach to spiritual formation / Matthew Bingham.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024022134 (print) | LCCN 2024022135 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433592621 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781433592638 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433592645 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Reformed Church. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BX9422.3 .B544 2025 (print) | LCC BX9422.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.088/2842—dc23 /eng/20241207

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024022134>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024022135>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*For Amelia, John, James, and David—
olive shoots around the table,
who I pray will grow up well (Ps. 128:3).*

Contents

Acknowledgments *xiii*

Introduction *i*

PART 1: FOUNDATIONS

1 Spiritual Formation *21*
A Simple Concept with a Complicated History

2 Spiritual Formation in a Reformation Key *51*
Five Solas for Head and Heart

PART 2: THE REFORMATION TRIANGLE

3 Scripture *89*
Hearing from God

4 Meditation *129*
Reflecting on God

5 Prayer *163*
Responding to God

PART 3: WIDENING OUR SCOPE

6 Self-Examination *197*
Looking Inward

7 The Natural World 227

Looking Outward

8 Christian Relationships 255

Looking to One Another

PART 4: CHALLENGES

9 What about the Body? 279

Connecting the Spiritual and the Physical

10 When Things Go Wrong 305

Wrestling with Spiritual Weakness

Epilogue 333

Appendix: A Brief Note on Spiritual Formation, Individualism,
and the Church 337

General Index 342

Scripture Index 352

Acknowledgments

IT IS A PRIVILEGE to thank those who helped shape this book and bring it to fruition. First and foremost, I am grateful to all my students at Oak Hill College, especially those who took my elective courses on spiritual formation and Puritanism. Much of the material developed in this book began in those class sessions, and both the content and form of what follows has been sharpened and strengthened by the many thoughtful comments and questions shared in the classroom. Likewise, I owe a huge debt to my colleagues at Oak Hill and Phoenix Seminary, whose support and interest has been a wonderful source of encouragement. In particular, I am grateful to Matthew Sleeman, a mentor, prayer partner, and friend who championed this project from the beginning and always had time for a chat along the way.

In addition, I am indebted to the entire team at Crossway, all of whom have been a joy to work with. In this connection, I must extend a special word of appreciation to David Barshinger, whose keen editorial sensibility has considerably strengthened this book.

I am grateful to Crawford Gribben for continuing to be a constant source of wisdom and good advice. I owe many thanks to my good friends in ministry Reagan Marsh and Joshua DeLong, who read portions of the manuscript and offered tremendously helpful feedback. And I am so thankful to Gareth Burke, who models godliness and faithfulness in all that he does and whom I will always consider a

mentor and friend. I am also blessed to have Christian parents and parents-in-law—Gordon, Lisa, Gary, and Nancy—all four of whom model faithfulness, generosity, and love.

This book could never have happened without the support of my beautiful wife, Shelley. Walking alongside me at every stage of the writing process, she has provided encouragement and enthusiasm, reading the manuscript from start to finish and improving it at every turn. She is the love of my life *and* my best critic!

Finally, I am thankful for my children—Amelia, John, James, and David—who bring me joy each day and to whom this book is dedicated.

Introduction

YOU CAN LEARN A LOT about the state of twenty-first-century evangelicalism by talking to those who leave it. This isn't always true, of course—some ex-evangelicals leave with such a bitter taste that their subsequent commentary feels more vindictive than insightful—but many offer useful lessons to those of us who remain within the fold.

Consider, for example, the case of Joel and Stephanie Dunn, a married couple who left their Southern Baptist roots to convert to Eastern Orthodoxy. As described in an article in the *Christian Post*, the Dunns were drawn to Orthodoxy because they believed it offered spiritual resources that were absent from the evangelical churches they were familiar with. After Joel came “face-to-face” with a sense of his own “depravity,” he arrived at the conclusion that in his Baptist tradition, “there was nothing . . . to help [him] through it other than” advice to “pray harder and have faith.” Convinced that “there’s got to be more than that,” the Dunns went looking for a church that would provide “more tools” to help them on their Christian journey. The article’s author writes, “The Orthodox Church had the tools, they soon discovered, and not only were they helpful resources but they helped create saints.”¹ In converting from evangelicalism to Eastern Orthodoxy, the Dunns were not alone. A May 2023 piece in the *Wall Street Journal* reported

¹ Brandon Showalter, “Why This Evangelical Couple Became Eastern Orthodox (Part 1),” *Christian Post*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.christianpost.com/>.

on a surge of new converts swelling the ranks of Orthodox parishes, many coming from evangelical backgrounds.² What is it exactly that draws them? At least in the case of Joel and Stephanie Dunn, it seems that what they were really after was spiritual formation.

To be perfectly honest, I can relate to their feelings. I grew up in a vibrant evangelical church. The people in the pews were almost all friendly, well meaning, and generous. My pastors were passionate about ministry and genuinely concerned for their congregations. We had no shortage of events on the church calendar; from weekly youth group and vacation Bible school to short-term summer missions trips, my days and nights were full of well-run, thoughtfully constructed activities. If there was any scandal or impropriety in our church, I didn't know about it. In other words, I enjoyed a happy evangelical upbringing for which I am genuinely thankful to God.

And yet for all this exposure to a seemingly healthy contemporary evangelical culture, something was missing from my Christian life, or at least underdeveloped. For a long time, I felt confused by what should be, from one angle, the most basic aspect of my faith: my own spiritual formation. Though I remember a desire to deepen my spiritual life in theory, I often felt confused about how exactly to pursue such an aim in practice. Beyond a simple commitment to some sort of daily "quiet time," I would have struggled to articulate what it actually might look like to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18) and to "work out [my] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

I suspect that I was not alone in this feeling. I have spoken to many Christians with a background like mine who would express a similar sense that the evangelical busyness in which they participated left gaps in their understanding of Christian growth. Some of these people, like Joel and Stephanie Dunn, have left evangelicalism altogether and now

² Francis X. Rocca, "Eastern Orthodoxy Gains New Followers in America," *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

claim to have found a more satisfying faith within Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism. Others have left not just evangelical Christianity but Christianity full stop. And among those who have remained within the evangelical fold, a lack of clarity about how they ought to pursue the spiritual life is often paired with a troubling openness to spiritual techniques and methods that owe more to nonevangelical, non-Protestant, and even non-Christian traditions than to the Reformation heritage that ostensibly ought to be theirs. This is deeply unfortunate because evangelicalism actually has a rich biblical tradition of spiritual formation, and yet, somehow, it often gets ignored.

To a large extent, the particularities described here reflect a long-standing impulse within evangelical Christianity, namely, a preference for outward expansion and growth at the expense of inward development and depth. Considered on its own terms, of course, this outward impulse points toward something very good: extending and fulfilling Christ's charge to his first disciples "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Whether it's George Whitefield (1714–1770) barnstorming up and down the American colonies, Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) charging into the interior of China, or Billy Graham (1918–2018) filling up Madison Square Garden for an evangelistic rally, the picture of evangelicals at their best has typically involved men and women relentlessly pressing onward, seeking the lost wherever they might be found, and advancing the kingdom of God in all directions.

And yet even as we celebrate the positive side, keen observers of evangelical culture, both from within and without, have long sensed that the drive for outward expansion has sometimes seemed to come without any accompanying pursuit of greater depth. The vine has spread with marvelous speed, but the roots below have not always gone very deep. "To put it most simply," writes historian Mark Noll, "the evangelical ethos is activist, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian." The result of this restless energy, argues Noll, is that evangelical culture "allows little

space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”³

And though Noll’s concern is largely with “the weaknesses of evangelical intellectual life,” these trends raise larger questions about our more basic theological commitments and spiritual health.⁴ Richard Lovelace (1931–2020) drew attention to the problem in his 1979 book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, in which he coined the term “sanctification gap” to describe evangelicalism’s “peculiar conspiracy . . . to mislay the Protestant tradition of spiritual growth” in favor of “frantic witnessing activity.” In particular, Lovelace lamented his discovery during seminary that “most Protestants were ignorant of the body of tradition which seemed . . . to be the living heart of the Reformation heritage.”⁵ Among twenty-first century evangelicals, real progress has been made on this score, thanks in part to Lovelace’s own work. But his criticism struck a chord that still resonates with many today. Commenting on Lovelace’s “sanctification gap,” John Coe and Kyle Strobel note that the “critique remains as accurate now as it did nearly four decades ago.” Moreover, they go on to helpfully observe that despite a growing evangelical interest in spiritual growth, “there has not always been a recovery of a distinctively evangelical understanding of formation.”⁶ This latter point is a crucial one. As we explore further in chapter 1, the decades since the publication of Lovelace’s book have seen a flood of titles dedicated to spiritual formation, but many of these works do not consistently align their vision of Christian growth with the Reformation heritage evangelicalism arose out of.

The need, then, is not simply to address spiritual growth per se but to do so in a way that takes seriously the foundational Protestant theo-

3 Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 13, 12.

4 Noll, *Scandal*, 13.

5 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, expanded ed. (1979; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 232, 231.

6 John H. Coe and Kyle C. Strobel, “Introduction: Retrieving the Heart of the Christian Faith,” in *Embracing Contemplation: Reclaiming a Christian Spiritual Practice*, ed. John H. Coe and Kyle C. Strobel (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 2–3.

logical commitments that motivated the Reformation in the first place. The purpose of this book is to do just that: to explore and commend a distinctively Reformed Protestant vision of Christian growth for twenty-first-century evangelicals. In so doing, I hope to address not only committed evangelicals desiring deeper roots but also those within evangelical circles who are feeling the pull of nonevangelical traditions. Often, as in the case of Joel and Stephanie Dunn, that pull is predicated less on intellectual agreement and more on the perceived allure of the opportunities for spiritual formation that these other communions offer. Alongside such stories of ordinary people questioning evangelicalism, high-profile converts to Roman Catholicism (e.g., Christian Smith) and Eastern Orthodoxy (e.g., Hank Hanegraaff) serve to highlight and further a growing sense of religious discontent among many. Increasing numbers of Christians reared in evangelical churches are disillusioned and frustrated by a religious culture that, at its worst, can seem superficial, shallow, and almost wholly disconnected from the ancient faith that once inspired men and women to bravely go to the lions. They are seeking a deeper, more serious Christian expression, a quest that often leads to methods and techniques beyond the boundaries of Reformation Protestantism.

A chief goal of the present volume is to speak to what Kenneth Stewart has described as an “evangelical identity crisis” by pointing readers to the rich Reformation heritage that is already theirs.⁷ While guarding against an uncharitable “anti-Catholicism” or an unattractive and pinched parochialism, the book aims to demonstrate to evangelical readers that the spiritual depth and seriousness they rightly long for can be found without having to look to Rome or Constantinople.

Locating Our Reformation Heritage

If the main burden of this book is to retrieve a Reformed approach to spiritual formation for the benefit of contemporary Christians, then

⁷ Kenneth J. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

we need to be clear on just what it is we are attempting to retrieve. To that end, we need to plot something of the historical territory—exactly who and what are we talking about? When we refer to “our Reformation heritage,” we are focusing our attention mostly on the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers and their seventeenth-century post-Reformation successors. Within these pages we often use the label “early modern” to refer to this period of history (ca. 1500–1800). Early modern Protestants are our primary focus because it was these men and women who recovered the distinctively word-centered approach to the spiritual life we are concerned with and faithfully preserved, advanced, and elaborated its legacy in subsequent centuries.

And though we sometimes speak more broadly of “Reformation Christianity,” we should note at the outset that our primary touchpoint is the Reformed tradition, which represents one important and distinctive strand within the larger Protestant Reformation. Typically, historians have divided the Protestant Reformation into three such distinctive strands: the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the Radical. The first two, the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, are often grouped together and described as constituting the “magisterial Reformation.” This term is used because both Lutheran and Reformed churches worked in cooperation with the state, enjoying the official sanction of the various “magistrates” under whose protection they operated. This contrasts with the so-called Radical Reformation, a label popularized in 1962 by historian George Huntston Williams and used as a sort of catchall term to describe various Protestants who broke away from Rome but were also at odds with the magisterial Reformers.⁸

8 George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000). The term Radical Reformation is widely used and generally understood. We should, however, mention in passing that the term is also deeply problematic because it lends a sense of unity and coherence to what was, in fact, a widely dispersed and ideologically variegated group of people who often had no real connections to one another. See Kat Hill, “The Power of Names: Radical Identities in the Reformation Era,” in *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 53–68.

All three of these Reformation expressions rejected the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and all three sought to reform the church in a manner consistent with the principles of *sola Scriptura* and justification by faith alone.⁹ For this reason, it is appropriate to group them all under the common banner of the Protestant Reformers, and yet this common identification should not obscure the fact that the three branches have their own distinctive qualities as well.¹⁰ Many of these characteristic emphases represent the varying degrees to which the three streams sought to either preserve or reject the medieval Catholic doctrine and religious culture that preceded the Reformation. In key respects, especially on issues relating to liturgy and worship, Lutheranism was the most conservative of the three—in the sense of wishing to “conserve” traditional inherited forms—while the Radical Reformers, as the name suggests, were the most eager to wipe the inherited slate clean and start afresh.¹¹ The Reformed tradition landed somewhere in the middle, happy to retain and preserve a catholic inheritance wherever possible while also looking to boldly follow Scripture even when it led to sharp breaks with the medieval past. And while most of what is said in the present volume would apply to all evangelical Protestants, it is also true that the sources I draw on and some of the distinctive ideas I defend come specifically from the Reformed tradition.

In terms of its starting point, the Reformed tradition began with the Protestant churches of sixteenth-century Switzerland, a group led

9 Given the extreme range of individuals comprehended under the label Radical Reformation, one would hesitate to state that absolutely *all* of them agreed about anything beyond, perhaps, their desire to break from the bishop of Rome. But with that caveat in place, the statement above stands as a useful general observation.

10 One classic work that introduces these distinctions well is Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers*, 25th anniversary ed. (1988; repr., Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013).

11 On Lutheranism as conservative, see Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 95–96. On the meaning of *radical*, the word comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning “root.” To speak of “radical” change thus suggests change that goes all the way down to the very roots of an issue, the opposite of a change that was merely superficial or surface level.

by men such as Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who succeeded Zwingli in Zurich, and, of course, the Genevan Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564). Because of Calvin’s international reputation and tremendous literary output, he is sometimes equated with Reformed Protestantism itself, a trend reflected in and bolstered by the use of the term Calvinism. And yet while the Calvinist label is long-standing and widely used, it’s important to recognize that the Reformed tradition extends well beyond the theology and legacy of any one individual, however significant he might be.¹² Indeed, while originating in Switzerland with Zwingli as “the father of Reformed Protestantism,” this particular flavor of Christianity quickly spread throughout France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, England, Scotland, Ireland, and eventually North America.¹³

And as the tradition spread geographically, it also became increasingly varied theologically, admitting greater variation in its approach to subjects like church government, the sacraments, the proper role of the civil magistrate, and the precise relationship between the biblical covenants, all while retaining an identifiable core that would continue to differentiate Reformed Protestantism from its alternatives. Through the production of confessional documents like the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession (1646),

12 For caution regarding the use of the term Calvinism, see Willem J. van Asselt, “Calvinism as a Problematic Concept in Historiography,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 74, no. 2 (2013): 144–50. Examples of recent scholarly literature making prominent use of the term include Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Crawford Gribben and Graeme Murdock, eds., *Cultures of Calvinism in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Bruce Gordon and Carl Trueman strike a helpful balance by acknowledging both that Calvin was not “a singularly authoritative source for all that came after him” and that “he was, and remains, arguably first among equals as a source for Reformed thought.” Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl R. Trueman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

13 Peter Opitz, “Huldrych Zwingli,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, ed. Paul T. Nimmo and David A. S. Fergusson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 117.

and the Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), the substance of the Reformed tradition was codified in forms that still guide churches around the world right up to the present day.¹⁴ And though these confessional statements do not agree in every detail, they are all connected by common themes and emphases and a distinctive doctrinal consensus on key issues. As Paul Nimmo and David Fergusson explain, across its various representative texts, “the Reformed tradition sets forth a particular agenda of theological discourse in a remarkably symphonic way” and is marked by “an identifiable set of theological instincts, of doctrinal impulses—a certain Christian sensibility.”¹⁵

And while Protestant evangelicals today express a wide range of opinions regarding the Reformed tradition, all of us are indebted to it whether we continue to identify with it or not. “From one point of view,” writes Sinclair Ferguson, “most evangelical theology in the English-speaking world can be seen as an exposition of, deviation from or reaction to Reformed theology.”¹⁶ Of the three major Reformation divisions we discussed earlier, the Reformed stream represents something of a majority report among those who would go on later to identify with the evangelical movement. This analysis applies across the spectrum of evangelical theology, but for those of us who identify with one of the Reformed confessions named above or even for those who see themselves fitting in more loosely with a more general

14 For the complete text of these and many other Reformed confessions, see James T. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014). Although in this book we will adopt a relatively broad understanding of what constitutes “the Reformed tradition,” we should note that the question of just how broadly the label should be applied has been a subject of some debate among scholars. For a range of views on this topic, see Matthew C. Bingham, Chris Caughey, R. Scott Clark, Crawford Gribben, and D. G. Hart, *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity*, Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

15 Paul T. Nimmo and David A. S. Fergusson, “Introduction,” in Nimmo and Fergusson, *Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, 4–5.

16 Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 47.

“Calvinism,” looking to the Reformed tradition to take our historical bearings makes good sense.¹⁷

In exploring how that tradition has approached spiritual formation, I of course take an interest in what John Calvin had to say, but I also draw on a range of other Reformed voices. This includes movements such as the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*, or Further Reformation, a movement of renewal within the Netherlands that featured profound explorations of spirituality from writers such as Willem Teellinck (1579–1629), Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), and Campegius Vitringa (1659–1722).¹⁸ It includes soundings from the eighteenth-century North American Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), a pastor-theologian described by one near contemporary as both “the possessor of a mighty mind” and “one of the most holy, humble and heavenly minded men, that the world has seen, since the apostolic age.”¹⁹ One particularly rich source for Reformed reflection on spiritual growth comes from the so-called “Old Princeton” theologians, a group including Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), Charles Hodge (1797–1878), and B. B. Warfield (1851–1921). While these individuals have long been recognized for their contributions to Reformed scholarship, in recent years they have been increasingly appreciated for their sustained attention to “the formation of Christian character and the cultivation of ‘vital piety.’”²⁰ But among all the varied

17 For that more general Calvinism, I’m thinking here of the contemporary religious subculture described in Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); Flynn Cratty, “The New Calvinism,” in Gordon and Trueman, *Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, 641–55.

18 Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Theological Study from Our Reformed and Puritan Heritage* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2006), 289–94; Hart, *Calvinism*, 169–72.

19 Ashbel Green, *Discourses Delivered in the College of New Jersey* (Philadelphia: E. Littell, 1822), 317. For Edwards and spiritual growth, see John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Dane C. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God*, *Theologians on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); George M. Marsden, *An Infinite Fountain of Light: Jonathan Edwards for the Twenty-First Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023).

20 James M. Garretson, ed., *Princeton and the Work of the Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 1:xix; see W. Andrew Hoffercker, *Piety and the Princeton Theologians: Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed,

pools of Reformed thought from which we draw in the pages that follow, perhaps no single source is as significant as that of the English Puritans.

Defining just what exactly constituted “Puritanism” has been a long-standing source of historical controversy and debate.²¹ For our purposes here, we can happily understand the English Puritans as a group of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Protestants who wanted to bring the Church of England into closer alignment with the Reformed tradition that we’ve just been describing.²² Beginning under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) and continuing into the second half of the seventeenth century, these men and women wanted to “purify” the English national church of any remaining inappropriate attachments to Roman Catholicism and thus to reform it “according to the word of God, and the example of the best reformed Churches.”²³ In so doing, they developed a religious culture that thrived across English, Scottish, Irish, and North American contexts, producing some of the finest pastor-theologians that the church has yet seen.²⁴ Names

1981); Mark A. Noll, “Charles Hodge as an Expositor of the Spiritual Life,” in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 181–216; Fred G. Zaspel, *Warfield on the Christian Life: Living in Light of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

- 21 Patrick Collinson, “A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, no. 4 (1980): 483–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046900044791>; John Coffey, “The Problem of ‘Scottish Puritanism,’ 1590–1638,” in *Enforcing Reformation in Ireland and Scotland, 1550–1700*, ed. Elizabethanne Boran and Crawford Gribben (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Ian Hugh Clary, “Hot Protestants: A Taxonomy of English Puritanism,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 41–66.
- 22 For a relatively brief and accessible historical introduction to Puritanism, see Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 212 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a wonderful treatment of Puritanism’s rich spirituality and theology, it is still hard to top J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990). For those looking for something more substantial, the best scholarly survey of Puritanism is David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
- 23 This phrase comes from the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant, a document through which Scottish and English leaders expressed their shared vision for church reform across the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, “The Solemn League and Covenant (1643),” accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.rpscotland.org/>.
- 24 Although this book focuses primarily on Puritanism as it developed in England and North America, for Puritanism within Scottish, Welsh, and Irish contexts, see Margo Todd, *The Culture*

like Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), John Owen (1616–1683), Thomas Watson (1620–1686), and John Flavel (ca. 1627–1691) were steady-selling authors in their day and continue to draw appreciative readers in our own.

There are at least four good reasons to give the Puritans the sustained attention they receive in this book. First, for English-speaking Christians looking to retrieve a Reformed Protestant heritage, the Puritans are a logical center point for the simple reason that they were early modern Reformed Christians who spoke and wrote primarily in English, making their enormous body of theological and pastoral writings much more accessible to English speakers today. If one wants to discover what early modern Reformed Christianity looked like in an English-speaking context, then one is necessarily looking to Puritan authors to do so. Indeed, when historian David Hall is asked the question “What was Puritanism?” his answer is “to emphasize everything the movement inherited from the Reformed and how this inheritance was reshaped in Britain and again in early New England—as it were, the Reformed tradition with a Scottish, English, or colonial accent.”²⁵ This linguistic proximity to us means that English-speaking Christians today can enjoy reading Puritan authors in their own words and without the need for translation.

Second, moving beyond this linguistic continuity, a deeper and more substantive thread connects early modern Protestants with contemporary evangelicals. The eighteenth-century Great Awakening that birthed the evangelical movement can be credibly interpreted as taking up the theological and spiritual mantle of the Puritan movement that preceded it. While evangelicalism was shaped by several key streams, none were as singularly significant as Puritanism for influencing its priorities, theo-

of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Crawford Gribben, “Puritanism in Ireland and Wales,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 159–73.

²⁵ Hall, *Puritans*, 1–2.

logical emphases, and inner logic.²⁶ Key figures like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) embodied and advanced the warm Calvinist piety that characterized the Puritans before them. Even John Wesley (1703–1791), whose Arminian theology put him out of step with the aforementioned evangelical leaders, had great admiration for Puritan devotional writing, including many Puritan extracts in his fifty-volume *Christian Library*, a collection of abridged devotional works intended to help itinerant Methodist ministers.²⁷ Such observations lend force to the conclusions of historian John Coffey:

The terms “Puritanism” and “evangelicalism” force us to chop the history of the tradition into separate slices, breaking up the flow of the story. But again and again, one finds that it is simply impossible to account for key features of modern evangelicalism without reference to their roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁸

For contemporary evangelicals, then, if we want to better understand how our theological forebears understood spiritual formation, we cannot ignore our Puritan inheritance.

Third, the Puritans devoted an incredible amount of time and attention to the subject of spiritual formation. “At its heart,” writes historian

26 Some historians have emphasized the discontinuity between Puritanism and evangelicalism, often stressing the theopolitical nature of Puritanism, pointing out that the Puritan dream was to reform the national church, something that was never on the Great Awakening’s agenda. This is, of course, correct as far as it goes. But when one views Puritanism from the perspective of the broader religious culture it fostered, its continuities with the subsequent evangelical movement become more obvious and compelling. On the case for continuity, see John Coffey, “Puritanism, Evangelicalism, and the Evangelical Protestant Tradition,” in *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2008), 252–77. On the case for discontinuity between Puritanism and evangelicalism, see Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*, vol. 1 in *A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 49.

27 It should be noted, though, that Wesley often edited Reformed authors, “chopping out the Calvinist bits.” Hall, *Puritans*, 347.

28 Coffey, “Evangelical Protestant Tradition,” 273.

Charles Hambrick-Stowe, “Puritanism was a devotional movement, rooted in religious experience.”²⁹ Whether using the language of “keeping the heart” or “practicing piety,” Puritan authors wrote at length on what it means to live and grow as a Christian. “Insofar as Protestantism experienced an era of consolidation in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” writes historian Dewey Wallace, “Puritanism can be seen as an important (perhaps the most important) phase in the development of a distinctly Reformed piety and spirituality.”³⁰ In part, this prodigious output of devotional literature flowed from their reflexive understanding that Christian living and Christian theology were mutually reinforcing and in no way at odds with one another. When the Puritan theologian William Ames (1576–1633) sought to define theology, he drew on precisely this connection, writing that “theology is the doctrine or teaching of living to God.”³¹ Among other verses quoted in support of this definition, Ames drew his readers’ attention to Acts 5:20, where the angel, after freeing the apostles from prison, instructs them, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The apostolic preaching and teaching about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit was not mere information transfer but was instead the God-appointed means through which real spiritual life is conveyed. The Puritans were deeply impressed by this reality, and it led them to produce an enormous body of devotional literature still unrivaled in its quality and fidelity to Scripture.

Finally, the fourth reason for this book to give a disproportionate share of its attention to the Puritans is that Puritan authors wrote with a biblically grounded spiritual intensity that twenty-first-century evangelicals sorely need. Sinclair Ferguson has observed that “for those

29 Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), vii.

30 Dewey D. Wallace Jr., “Introduction,” in *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: An Anthology*, ed. Dewey D. Wallace Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), xii.

31 William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 77.

unacquainted with their writings, a first encounter with Puritan literature can be like entering a world where people seem bigger, wiser, and years older.”³² Similarly, J. I. Packer (1926–2020) has argued that when we measure modern evangelicals against the Puritans, we discover, to our shame, that “the Puritans, by contrast, as a body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God.”³³ Others have made similar observations, noting a sense of contrast between the depth and power of the Puritan vision and the relative shallowness and weakness of our own. Whatever reasons we might posit for this contrast, it seems that what the Puritans had is what we now desperately require.³⁴

As taste-making voices in pop culture, academia, and the corporate world conspire to make the thought world of Scripture seem ever more implausible, remote, and offensive to contemporary, post-Christian sensibilities, the temptation for evangelical Christians will always be toward a sort of reverse discipleship in which the claims of Christ are accommodated ever more to the claims of culture and in which believers become conformed to this world rather than being “transformed by the renewal of [their] mind” (Rom. 12:2). This is, of course, a perennial temptation in every age, but given that we in the West are now witnessing the collapse of many heretofore foundational societal assumptions about morality, sexuality, and what constitutes real human flourishing, the urgency of our need for countercultural biblical formation feels especially pressing.³⁵

Under such conditions, the Puritans offer real help. Where we doubt and lack confidence in the authority and relevance of Scripture across

32 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers: Reflecting a Biblical Vision of What Every Minister Is Called to Be* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2017), 167.

33 Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 22.

34 Insightful recent attempts to explain the shallowness of modern evangelicalism include Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

35 For a powerful analysis of our current cultural moment and how we got here, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

all areas of life, they speak with vigor and conviction. Where we feel tempted to water down the biblical worldview to bring it more in step with the spirit of the age, they double down. Where we seek refuge in a therapeutic Christianity that appeals to our wounded pride but is ultimately foreign to a scriptural worldview, the Puritans remind us afresh that sin before a holy God is our most serious problem and that Christ and his gospel are our only solution. In a word, the Puritans speak with a freshness and fire that can correct some of the characteristic weaknesses of our present cultural moment, and this makes them most excellent conversation partners as we look to retrieve a Reformed approach to spiritual formation.

The Shape of What Is to Come

Before we go any further, three caveats should be made to set expectations for what this book is and is not. First, in presenting a “Reformed approach” to spiritual formation, this book is not trying to suggest that everything that follows belongs exclusively to the Reformed tradition. Certain ideas, of course, are genuinely definitional for Reformation Christianity and are not easily found elsewhere. And yet all three historic branches of Christianity—Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy—are indeed branches from a common trunk, sharing core concepts, convictions, and sensibilities. At many points throughout this book, then, you will find ideas, practices, and attitudes ascribed to the Reformed tradition that surely admit numerous parallels and continuities with other Christian traditions. The point is not to argue that Reformed spirituality represents a hermetically sealed capsule unto itself but rather to recognize both that there is a characteristic shape to how Reformed Christians have pursued spiritual formation and that its distinctive contours are well worth our patient attention.

Second, the reason this book pays so much attention to Reformed spirituality is because I am persuaded that a Reformed approach to spiritual formation is consistent with what the Bible itself teaches. In focus-

ing on a particular Christian tradition, then, we are not attempting to recommend tradition for tradition's sake. Reformation-minded Christians want to pursue a faith that takes the Bible alone as the ultimate authority for life and doctrine and do not wish to accept an idea simply because that is what has been taught before. We want to listen to and learn from those who went before us, and we should think long and hard before dismissing theological insights that have nurtured the faith of many, but ultimately, our doctrine must derive from Scripture.

Third, scanning the table of contents, readers might note what could appear to be a glaring omission: there is no chapter on the church. Though I talk about Christian relationships in chapter 8, this is not equivalent to a proper treatment of the local church's role in our spiritual formation. Note that this omission is intentional and should not be taken to imply that the church is unimportant. In fact, the reality is precisely the opposite: the role of the church and the questions it raises in terms of polity, the sacraments, church discipline, the Lord's Day, and the role of ordained ministers are, collectively, too deep and too wide for the current volume. Our focus here is on the individual Christian and how he or she ought to think about spiritual formation in light of the wisdom offered by our Reformation forebears. That should in no way diminish the significance of the local church, but it is to signal at the outset that this is not our purpose here. For a bit more on this topic, please see the appendix, "A Brief Note on Spiritual Formation, Individualism, and the Church."

With those caveats out of the way, let's briefly preview what's to come and how it fits together. This book is divided into four main parts. In part 1, "Foundations," we lay the groundwork for all that follows. If our overarching purpose is to set forth a "Reformed approach" to "spiritual formation," consider the two chapters of part 1 as an attempt to unpack both of those key terms—chapter 1 considering what we mean by spiritual formation and then chapter 2 looking more specifically at how that concept fits with a commitment to Reformed theology.

Part 2 presents what I am calling the “Reformation triangle,” a nexus of Scripture intake, meditation, and prayer that represents the heart of both Reformed piety and this book. In part 3, “Widening Our Scope,” we take the three Reformation triangle disciplines and apply them more broadly to three additional means of grace: self-examination, an appreciation of the natural world, and Christian relationships. Finally, part 4 addresses two challenging topics: the role of the body in spiritual formation and what to do when our pursuit of spiritual formation doesn’t proceed according to plan.

PART 1

FOUNDATIONS

Spiritual Formation

A Simple Concept with a Complicated History

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT living the Christian life. And a basic biblical assumption about the Christian life is that it ought to be a growing life. When the Bible describes walking with God, the expectation is that it will never be a static, settled affair but rather a journey characterized by continual development, increase, and forward movement. The Christian “press[es] on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Indeed, an expectation of growth is built into the very idea of being “born again” (John 3:3). Birth marks the beginning of new life, which will be characterized by subsequent maturation and growth. Thus we read that having been “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” Christians are like “newborn infants” who “long for the pure spiritual milk” of God’s word “that by it [they] may *grow up* into salvation” (1 Pet. 1:3; 2:2).

Such growth in Christ is, first and foremost, the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. When the apostle Paul writes that Christians are “being transformed . . . from one degree of glory to another,” he describes the transformation in passive terms, as something that is

happening *to* the people of God as the gracious result of the Spirit's work in their lives: "For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). And yet while the overarching transformation is God's work in us and not ultimately our work in ourselves, the Bible also makes clear that growth in the Christian life involves our active, intentional effort and energy. Shortly after Paul attributes our spiritual growth to the Spirit's work in us, he urges believers, without any embarrassment or sense of tension, to work for spiritual growth themselves: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Clearly, then, the Bible portrays Christian growth as both God's work and, in some lesser but no less real sense, our work. The question of how these two ideas relate to each other in harmony rather than contradiction has been the subject of much controversy throughout the history of the church, and in chapter 2, we examine more closely how Reformation-minded Protestants have understood that relationship. But for now, let's simply note that the Bible puts both ideas forward and that in this book we are primarily concerned with the second idea, that believers must be actively involved in Spirit-wrought Christian growth.

In recent decades, the term *spiritual formation* has been adopted by many as a helpful way of referring to the active role we take in pursuing godliness. As we see in this chapter, the term has a somewhat complicated history and is not without its critics. Yet when properly contextualized, it's a term that can still helpfully communicate what we are interested in here. What distinguishes our interest in spiritual formation from other books discussing the same is that here we are working to understand what spiritual formation sounds like when set in a distinctly Reformed-evangelical key.¹ To do that, as mentioned in the introduction, we are drawing on the work of early modern

1 We will say more about this Reformed-evangelical tradition in chap. 2.

(ca. 1500–1800) Protestant theologians, pastors, and devotional writers, looking to understand how they brought “holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1) so that we might better do the same today.

What Is *Keeping the Heart*?

When we think specifically of the active role that believers are called to play in their own spiritual growth, one of the Bible’s loveliest exhortations comes from Proverbs 4:23:

Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

This verse was a favorite of the English Puritans, who used it during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to capture and communicate a sense of the Christian’s overarching spiritual task. If you are a Christian, your main business before God and other people is to “keep your heart” in and through all life’s varying circumstances. The Puritan pastor John Flavel expounded this verse at some length in his work *A Saint Indeed: or, The Great Work of a Christian, Opened and Pressed* (1668). “The greatest difficulty in conversion,” wrote Flavel, “is to win the heart to God; and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God.” He described keeping the heart as “the very pinch and stress of religion” and “the great business of a Christian’s life.”² Flavel’s writing on this theme is perhaps the best known, but other Puritan authors such as Stephen Marshall (ca. 1594–1655) and Richard Alleine (1610–1681) appealed to the verse as well, finding in it a pleasing distillation of the Bible’s approach to godliness and growth.³ Marshall, for example, suggested that “there is not one Pearl of greater price, one sentence of more divine use than” Proverbs 4:23.⁴ The English Puritan theologian John Owen

2 John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 5:423, 425.

3 Richard Alleine, *Instructions about Heart-Work* (London, 1681).

4 Stephen Marshall, *The Works of Mr. Stephen Marshall* (London, 1661), 128.

insisted that “watching or keeping of the heart” is that “which above all keepings we are obliged unto.” Elsewhere, appealing directly to Proverbs 4:23, Owen stressed that among a person’s various “keepings” or concerns—for family, for possessions, for reputation—one must “attend to that of the heart” above all else. “There is no safety without it,” wrote Owen, for if you “save all other things and lose the heart, . . . all is lost.”⁵

But what exactly does it mean to keep the heart, and why did these early modern pastors find it such a helpful concept? Flavel explained it like this:

To keep the heart . . . is nothing else but this constant care and diligence of such a renewed man, to preserve his soul in that holy frame to which grace hath reduced it [i.e., led it back to], and daily strives to hold it. . . . [T]o keep the heart is carefully to preserve it from sin, which disorders it; and maintain that spiritual and gracious frame, which fits it for a life of communion with God.⁶

The idea here is that the “renewed man” (i.e., the regenerate or born-again believer) has been powerfully changed by the Holy Spirit in a basic, fundamental way—“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17)—and yet he must now, with God’s help, actively press after a greater, more thorough realization of that new life that is already his—“Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

This involves battling sin, of course, but beyond that, the idea of *keeping the heart* also suggests a positive cultivation, an active maintenance, and a daily “fight for joy.”⁷ To keep the heart is not just saying

5 John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 201, 331.

6 Flavel, *Works*, 5:426.

7 This last phrase is a favorite of John Piper, who, in *When I Don't Desire God* and throughout his works, well articulates this important Puritan and biblical theme. See John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*, 10th anniversary ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

no to sin but actively saying yes to God and the things of God. As a Christian strives to keep her heart “with all vigilance,” she will be aware of a nagging tendency for her heart to drift toward false gods of every description, and her active attention will return again and again to how she might untangle herself from idols and instead, as Flavel put it, “maintain that spiritual and gracious frame, which fits it for a life of communion with God.”⁸ Thankfully, God gives us means or tools to use in this struggle, and the burden of this book’s later chapters is to examine those as they were taken up by our Reformation-minded fathers and mothers in the faith.

One chief attraction of the phrase *keeping the heart* is the way it nicely captures the biblical sense that our Christian walk is holistic, encompassing all that we are and all that we do. This is primarily because in the conceptual world of the Bible, “the heart” is an all-encompassing term, and thus to “keep it” implies an all-around self-watch. When David says, “My heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices,” the parallelism of the psalm suggests an equivalence between his “heart” and his “whole being” (Ps. 16:9)—as David’s “heart” goes, so goes David. Likewise, when he laments, “My heart is in anguish within me” (Ps. 55:4), this clearly means that David himself is in anguish. Elsewhere, David’s request to God “Unite my heart to fear your name” (Ps. 86:11–12) suggests a desire to see a comprehensive reordering of his entire person, an integration in which “the lines meet at a point beyond himself, the fear of the Lord.”⁹ When the Old Testament prophets celebrated the wholesale renewal of the human person that would accompany God’s new covenant, they employed this same heart language, with God promising, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26; cf. Jer. 31:33). Here these two hearts, one of stone and the other of flesh, suggest two completely different orientations toward life and

⁸ Flavel, *Works*, 5:426.

⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 344.

love and godliness. Later, Jesus drew on such Old Testament heart imagery when he wished to contrast superficial, external rule keeping with a deep and abiding commitment to God and the things of God. Quoting Isaiah's warning against a people who "honors me with their lips, / but their heart is far from me" (Matt. 15:8; cf. Isa. 29:13), Jesus went on to describe a wrongly oriented heart as the real source of a person's subsequent sinful thoughts and actions (Matt. 15:19).

Across Scripture, then, the heart is depicted as the vital center of a person's consciousness, feeling, and will, and thus the state of one's heart will dictate how one thinks, speaks, and acts. The heart, wrote Flavel, "is the source and fountain of all vital actions and operations."¹⁰ Contemporary biblical scholars and theologians describe the Bible's use of "heart" in similar terms:

The heart in Hebrew thought is not significant primarily for its role in organic existence, but as the hidden control-center of the whole human being. The entire range of conscious and perhaps even unconscious activities of the person is located in and emanates from the heart. It experiences emotions and moods, it has personality and character traits, it is the locus of thought and deliberation, choice and action, and it is above all the source of love or hate of God and neighbor. It may be hidden from other people and perhaps even from oneself. But God searches its depths and knows it altogether.¹¹

Thus, across all life's varied circumstances, my sense of myself as an individual agent with emotions, ideas, desires, loves, and hatreds is captured with reference to the inner motions of my heart. And thus to keep my heart will involve all of me.

¹⁰ Flavel, *Works*, 5:424.

¹¹ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 42; see also Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 171–72.

Moreover, this sense that heart keeping involves all of me is both comprehensive and intensive. It is *comprehensive* in the sense that all my activities, relationships, and roles are affected by it. Whether I am worshiping on Sunday morning at church, entering data into a spreadsheet at work, or sharing a meal with friends, I am obligated across various contexts to “keep my heart with all vigilance” (cf. Prov. 4:23). The actual work of heart keeping and the means employed to do it might differ across those varied contexts, but the concern for it never disappears.

But heart keeping is also *intensive* in the sense that the task touches on the deepest realities of the inner person, depths that are often invisible to others and sometimes invisible even to ourselves (e.g., Ps. 19:12). For this reason, Flavel insisted that “without this” genuine heart keeping, “we are but formalists in religion.”¹² A person can externally participate in religious activity without any corresponding inner spiritual life, and thus the Christian life cannot be reduced to propositions learned or actions performed (though it certainly entails both). Rather, our spiritual walk is bound up ever and always with the inner motions of the heart—with desire, affection, and love. And for this reason, “keeping the heart” is “the most important business of a Christian’s life.”¹³ The question of *how* we keep it is the subject of this book.

In this chapter, our goal will be first to trace some of the recent history of evangelical engagement with the concept of *spiritual formation*, then to advance a working definition of the term, and finally to disentangle the concept of *spiritual formation* from three related words that don’t capture quite the same idea.

What Is *Spiritual Formation*?

We will return to the phrase *keeping the heart* in a moment, but first we need to think about another similar phrase that is far more frequently

¹² Flavel, *Works*, 5:424.

¹³ Flavel, *Works*, 5:429.

heard in our day: *spiritual formation*. Popularized among evangelicals during the second half of the twentieth century by writers such as James Houston, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard (1935–2013), and Eugene Peterson (1932–2018), the term *spiritual formation* can now be found attached to a range of ministries, books, retreat centers, and theological degree programs. Indeed, in 2008 the Talbot School of Theology’s Institute for Spiritual Formation launched the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, a peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated exclusively to the subject.¹⁴ Another telling measure of the degree to which spiritual formation looms large within contemporary American Protestantism is the fact that it must now be included within a master of divinity degree program in order for said program to be accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.¹⁵ As Kirsten Birkett observes, “‘Spiritual formation’ has come to be seen as the dominant mode of understanding Christian life.”¹⁶

Clearly, spiritual formation is of great and growing interest, and it is equally clear that this interest has, at least among evangelicals, been largely directed toward remedying perceived weaknesses within the evangelical religious subculture. As referenced in the introduction to this book, Richard Lovelace helpfully identified a “sanctification gap” among evangelical Christians—that is, a blank space in our preaching and teaching where the rich “Protestant tradition of spiritual growth”

14 On the history and development of the spiritual formation movement, see Chris Armstrong, “The Rise, Frustration, and Revival of Evangelical Spiritual Ressourcement,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no. 1 (2009): 113–21; Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 3–10; Nathan A. Finn, “Spiritualities in the Christian Tradition,” in *Biblical Spirituality*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 230–34.

15 An accredited program’s “articulated learning outcomes” must address “personal and spiritual formation, including development in personal faith, professional ethics, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and spirituality.” Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools, “2020 Standards of Accreditation” (2020), 5, <https://www.ats.edu/>.

16 Kirsten Birkett, “Spiritual Formation: The Rise of a Tradition,” *Churchman* 4, no. 133 (2019): 346.

ought to reside.¹⁷ Those who have popularized the spiritual formation movement in evangelical circles have been motivated by this same problem and a desire to see it solved. In this vein, Chris Armstrong argues that the spiritual formation movement “was one of reaction” against some of the excesses and deficiencies of mid-twentieth-century Protestant fundamentalism. Such problematic aspects of conservative Protestantism, on Armstrong’s reading, included a tendency to “identify the Christian life with cognitive belief” such that “discipleship, or growth in spiritual things, took a back seat,” and an “unreflective pragmatism” focused on evangelism to the detriment of discipleship.¹⁸ To the extent that twentieth-century evangelicals have neglected discipleship and formation—and it seems irrefutable that a great deal of neglect has occurred—then we are right to seek a better way.

And yet while few would take serious issue with this diagnosis, some evangelicals have nonetheless expressed concern that the remedies proposed by advocates of spiritual formation come with serious side effects that we neglect at our peril. As many have correctly observed, as a matter of historical development, the term *spiritual formation* seems to have originated from mid-twentieth-century Roman Catholic theological education, a potentially inconvenient fact that has prompted some to wonder, not unreasonably, whether *spiritual formation* is an appropriate term to use in Reformed-evangelical circles.¹⁹

Moreover, during the latter half of the twentieth century, as the so-called spiritual formation movement spread outside Catholic seminaries and began to gain momentum among Protestant evangelicals, its chief proponents demonstrated a willingness to cast their theological nets well beyond the usually consulted, Reformation-minded

17 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, expanded ed. (1979; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 232.

18 Armstrong, “Rise, Frustration, and Revival,” 114.

19 Birkett, “Spiritual Formation,” 348–51.

evangelical sources. For example, in his bestselling *Celebration of Discipline* (1978)—a book that one historian describes as “the symbolic beginning of the spiritual formation movement among evangelicals”²⁰—Richard Foster draws variously from Protestant authors such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin, Roman Catholic authors such as Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and Thomas Merton (1915–1968), and various others such as the pre-Reformation mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1328) and the twentieth-century Anglo-Catholic Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). Throughout his book, Foster intermingles citations and recommendations of these and many other authors without caveat or explanation.²¹

In this aspect, *Celebration of Discipline* is characteristic of much that appears under the heading *spiritual formation*. The problem with this ecumenical sampling is that it seems to imply a far greater degree of coherence and overlap between the authors cited than is actually warranted by a careful study of their works. Even if we momentarily set to one side the not insignificant question whether John Calvin or Ignatius of Loyola represents a more sound and biblical guide to gospel growth, it would be very difficult to argue that they are consistently pointing readers in the same basic direction. Moreover, even if we grant that a person committed to the tradition of either Calvin or Ignatius could still profitably learn from aspects of the other’s work without compromising his or her own overall position, far too much of the literature within the spiritual formation movement fails to acknowledge the deep theological differences between the spirituality of a Calvin and that of an Ignatius. According to historian Carlos Eire, Ignatius’s most famous guide to the spiritual life, his *Spiritual Exercises* (1548), represents “a thorough repudiation of Protestant theology and a practical application of Catholic principles dismissed

20 Finn, “Spiritualities in the Christian Tradition,” 231.

21 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, study guide ed. (London: Hodder, 2008).

by Protestants.”²² Yet one would never gain any inkling of this through an encounter with much of the spiritual formation literature marketed toward evangelical Protestants. Instead, authors with very different theological and biblical outlooks are presented on a more-or-less even footing as helpful guides to the Christian life for which all believers should give hearty thanks. Such an eclectic approach to identifying spiritual mentors, an approach that could be described as either generous and charitable or naive and dangerous depending on your perspective, has led many thoughtful evangelicals to shy away from anything bearing the *spiritual formation* label.

As I hope is clear, I would share many of these concerns, and yet I have used the term *spiritual formation* to describe what this book is all about. Why? Let me offer three reasons. First, some—though certainly not all—of the concern about spiritual formation inevitably leading Protestants astray seems overheated. As Tom Schwanda has argued, much of the loudest evangelical reaction against the idea of spiritual formation demonstrates “a general disdain for anything even remotely comparable to Roman Catholic spiritual practices” that lacks “any awareness of how Protestants from the sixteenth century onward adapted Roman Catholic practices that they inherited according to their own emerging Protestant sensibilities and theology.”²³ I would be the first to object to the sort of naive ecumenical pastiche that sees no difficulty in uncritically mingling medieval mystics with Reformation stalwarts as though each represented an equally faithful guide to walking with God according to the Scriptures. And yet it is far too easy for a right reaction against something unhelpful to morph into an unmeasured overreaction that is almost as unhelpful as what it sought to repudiate.

22 Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 445.

23 Tom Schwanda, “‘To Gaze on the Beauty of the Lord’: The Evangelical Resistance and Retrieval of Contemplation,” in *Embracing Contemplation: Reclaiming a Christian Spiritual Practice*, ed. John H. Coe and Kyle C. Strobel (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 98–99.

Second, as a way of concisely expressing a clear biblical reality, the term *spiritual formation* is undeniably attractive.²⁴ In the first place, it highlights that our deepest need is not physical, intellectual, or, strictly speaking, emotional, but spiritual. When Jesus asks, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26), the implied answer is that it will not ultimately yield him anything at all. Scripture consistently portrays deep and lasting satisfaction and fullness as that which flows from spiritual rather than material flourishing. “You have put more joy in my heart,” declares the psalmist, “than they have when their grain and wine abound” (Ps. 4:7). It’s not that a biblical worldview forbids enjoying nonspiritual blessings; rather, in biblical perspective, the only reliable route to actually enjoying the real but relatively lesser joys of “grain and wine” is to prioritize spiritual realities, “seek[ing] first the kingdom of God,” knowing that only then will “all these [other] things . . . be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). As God’s image bearers, our longing for spiritual restoration and satisfaction thus both unites and transcends the host of other (lesser) longings we experience, and the term *spiritual formation* nicely underscores this point.

Furthermore, the term *spiritual formation* draws attention to the way our spiritual needs are most often to be met: slowly. The word *formation* does not call to mind an instantaneous, rapid, overnight sort of thing. Rather, to describe something as being *formed* naturally suggests something in process, something taking shape slowly over time. It invokes both organic images of flowers emerging from buds and babies strengthening their limbs to stand and walk, and also artisanal images of pots gradually taking shape with each spin of the wheel and finely rendered landscapes emerging more beautifully with each new application of paint. One can argue that the felicity of the phrase and its obvious biblical touchpoints—think of Paul’s expression of the

²⁴ For a fuller sense of how the term and its related linguistic permutations intersect with biblical realities and language, see Morgan, *Biblical Spirituality*.

Christian need to “set the mind on the Spirit” (Rom. 8:6) and his hope that “Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19)—can be paired with its widespread usage within evangelical discourse as a way of capturing a biblical truth in short compass. And if so, it would be a shame to abandon this particular form of words simply because some have used it in a manner less helpful than we might have wished. Rather, my hope would be that we might reclaim and represent the phrase in a manner consistent with our Reformation heritage.

Third, the basic form of the project proposed by advocates of the spiritual formation movement is a timely and helpful one, even if people like myself would like to see the substance of said project more tightly tethered to our Reformation heritage. Describing that basic form, Armstrong notes that early leaders of the spiritual formation movement like Foster and Willard were dissatisfied with the same “sanctification gap” that bothered Lovelace, and in response, they “discovered what they were looking for in the historical spiritual traditions of the Christian faith.” In so doing, they “began to teach that the spiritual resources of the past are a much-needed medicine, potent to heal us from a serious disease.”²⁵ The instinct to seek wisdom from those who have gone before is a good one, but the past offers a multitude of counselors, and agreement on the need to look backward doesn’t necessarily imply agreement on precisely where to look. Too often the old paths proposed by some spiritual formation advocates have led away from rather than back toward the Reformation heritage that has long nourished evangelical Protestantism. Armstrong describes a “new openness” toward “barrier-crossing within evangelicalism,” in which advocates of spiritual formation began “using contemplative prayer techniques, attending retreats, sitting under spiritual directors, and reading Catholic and Orthodox books.”²⁶ To my mind, such “openness” is unhelpful because it fails to appreciate the good theological reasons

25 Armstrong, “Rise, Frustration, and Revival,” 114.

26 Armstrong, “Rise, Frustration, and Revival,” 113.

that led the Reformers and their heirs to reject many of the things that the spiritual formation movement has rushed to embrace. This does not mean, however, that those early advocates for spiritual formation were wrong in either their diagnosis of evangelicalism's spiritual malaise or their basic desire to seek deeper and more satisfying remedies through an appeal to those who went before.

The burden of this book is to take up that same animating impulse that has propelled the broader spiritual formation movement but to argue that good, biblical solutions to evangelicalism's "sanctification gap" are readily found within the pages of historic Reformed authors. The Reformation heritage that gave birth to evangelicalism already has a rich and biblically faithful tradition of spiritual formation, such that we do not need to create a pastiche of spiritual practices drawn from medieval mystical, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox authors. If an evangelical thoughtfully concludes that those non-Reformed paths represent a more faithful way to walk with God, then he or she will not be the first to do so and is certainly free to make that choice. But what is unfortunate and frustrating is to see evangelical Christians depart from the Reformation's heritage of spiritual formation under the false assumption that no such thing actually exists. In other words, if you are going to reject your inheritance, you should first make sure you know what's in it. The hope is that this book will help readers make that (re)discovery and might persuade some along the way that the historic Reformed approach to spiritual formation is, in fact, the biblical one.

Spiritual Formation as Keeping the Heart

Throughout these pages I will use *spiritual formation* and *keeping the heart* more or less interchangeably as we explore the approach toward Christian growth that our Reformation-minded forebears exemplified and that we now may wish to emulate. *Keeping the heart* is an older form of words drawn directly from Scripture (Prov. 4:23), while *spiritual formation* is newer and attempts to pull some different biblical threads

together. Both formulations capture and convey what we are trying to get at. But because these expressions are also open to misunderstanding, I will provide a definition before proceeding any further:

Spiritual formation is the conscious process by which we seek to heighten and satisfy our Spirit-given thirst for God (Ps. 42:1–2) through divinely appointed means and with a view toward “work[ing] out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) and becoming “mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28).

A Conscious Process

Several aspects of this definition are worth unpacking, beginning with the idea that spiritual formation as we are describing it is *a conscious process*. In other words, this isn't something that simply happens to us whether we are paying attention or not. Rather, it's something we actively pursue. The sort of heart keeping that this book has in view is not a mere background operation that every once in a while we pause to take note of. This is not to say that such background heart work isn't happening—of course it is, all the time! The Spirit of God is *always* working in and through *all* things—conscious, subconscious, planned, unplanned, noticed, unnoticed, and so on—to conform believers to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28–29). This larger, all-encompassing process, however, is better termed *sanctification* and will be further distinguished below. When we talk about *spiritual formation* and *keeping the heart* in this volume, we are indicating that part of Christian growth in which we are active, aware, conscious participants working and striving toward growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Concerned with Desire

Spiritual formation and keeping the heart are fundamentally concerned with our innermost desires and the orientation of our hearts. To say that we are concerned with inward realities like desire does not mean, of course, that we are not also interested in outward realities like concrete obedience to Christ's commandments and the pursuit of a holiness that is visible to our neighbors. Spiritually growing Christians will also be growing in their obedience to God's moral law. And yet a conceptual distinction can be drawn between our concern for external conformity to God's will (the kind of conformity that others might observe) and the internal, more difficult-to-track world of desire, motivation, and love—that is, the world of the heart.

The Bible teaches that these inner and outer realities can sometimes be at odds with one another—as they were in the case of the Pharisees and the wayward Israelites condemned by the prophets (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:7–9). But the wonder of regeneration and the Spirit's work in the hearts of believers is that said inner and outer realities can also be in sync, in harmony with one another, exhibiting a mutually reinforcing cycle in which growing desire *for* God leads to growing obedience *to* God. This is precisely the relationship between desire and obedience that Jesus says will characterize his followers: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). In that formulation, love *for* Jesus precedes and motivates obedience *to* Jesus. In this same way, our exploration of spiritual formation in this book takes as its starting point and primary locus of interest the ways Christians can kindle and stir up their desire for God and the things of God, with the expectation that such heart work will naturally lead to the fruit of greater conformity to God's revealed will. The pursuit of spiritual formation is a quest to lean into the psalmist's cry in Psalm 42:1–2:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,
 for the living God.
 When shall I come and appear before God?

Keeping the heart means, as noted above, that “we seek to heighten and satisfy our Spirit-given thirst for God,” both as an end in itself—indeed, “man’s chief end”—and as the starting point for a Spirit-wrought overflow of obedience to God’s law that is truly Christian in nature.²⁷

Using Divinely Appointed Means

Another key component of our definition is the stipulation that biblical spiritual formation will employ “divinely appointed means”—that is, those means or methods that God plainly reveals to us in his word. God is the author of spiritual life, and in Scripture he has given clear and sufficient guidance for how we are to pursue it. To this end, the Bible repeatedly highlights some things rather than others as the tools that God has given his people for growing in their walk with him. Our job, then, is not to invent new “spiritual practices” that seem attractive or appealing to us but rather to take up with fresh vigor and appropriate creativity those practices already given.

This is important to underscore because one persistent feature within much of the literature on spiritual formation is the implicit (and sometimes explicit) suggestion that any imaginative practice we might come up with could properly be used to pursue communion with God. Sometimes these practices are obviously outside the scope of what the Bible commends to us—think of something like a prayer to Saint Joseph for protection.²⁸ But the drift away from a spirituality tied tightly to God’s

²⁷ The Westminster Shorter Catechism famously begins with the question “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” In *Creeches, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 411 (q. 1).

²⁸ One such prayer reads as follows: “Remember, O most chaste spouse of the Virgin Mary, that never has it been known that anyone who asked for your help and sought your intercession was

word can also be much more subtle. One book, for example, suggests “40 simple spiritual practices” that are meant to “help open the door to a deeper understanding of God and a more mindful way of faith.” The practices described often seek to engage the senses and include things like deliberately enjoying “strongly scented flowers” or savoring a piece of chocolate while reflecting on the ingredients in the chocolate and “all of God’s love that went into creating those ingredients.”²⁹ There’s nothing wrong, of course, with enjoying flowers or chocolate, and if these items prompt reflection on Christian truth, then so much the better. Indeed, in chapter 7, we investigate how the Reformed would regularly meditate on creation and the natural world. In their meditations, they would come very close to something like the aforementioned reflection on chocolate. So what’s the problem?

The problem arises when such things become disconnected from the sort of word-based spirituality that the Bible constantly commends and are instead repackaged as stand-alone spiritual techniques and activities. In Psalm 104, after celebrating God’s marvelous creativity and care as it is displayed in the natural world, the psalmist says,

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being. (Ps. 104:33)

If a person spends her morning meditating on the passion and logic of Psalm 104, then it seems good and right that her own enjoyment of God’s creation later that afternoon—whether marveling at an oak tree or eating a piece of chocolate—would result in a spontaneous eruption of praise to the God who has made oak trees grand and chocolate deli-

left unaided. Full of confidence in your power, I hasten to you, and beg your protection. Listen, O foster-father of the Redeemer, to my humble prayer, and in your goodness hear and answer me. Amen.” “The Memorare to St. Joseph,” in Joseph Pronechen, “8 Powerful Prayers to St. Joseph You’ve Never Heard Of,” National Catholic Register, May 1, 2021, <https://www.ncregister.com/>.

²⁹ Sally Welch, *How to Be a Mindful Christian: 40 Simple Spiritual Practices* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2016), x, 48, 116.

cious. “I will sing to the LORD as long as I live” (Ps. 104:33). But an unhelpful shift has occurred when such things are isolated from their natural context within a word-based spirituality and prescribed on their own as “spiritual practices” that help us find “the fullness of life that Christ promises.”³⁰ This conceptualization overloads these things with a religious weight they cannot comfortably bear. There is a subtle but ultimately profound difference between encouraging a Scripture-saturated mind to reflect on the beauty of God’s creation (something the Bible expressly encourages) and teaching highly specific “spiritual” techniques and practices that are several steps removed from anything explicitly revealed to us.

Once this broader and more imaginative approach to “spiritual practices” takes hold, it then creates a context in which it becomes increasingly easy to drift further from Scripture’s clear prescriptions and increasingly difficult to exclude anything that might be deemed “helpful” by its practitioners. And conversely, as the range of acceptable approaches to spiritual formation expands, it begins to feel more and more problematic to insist that those means of grace actually prescribed in Scripture are indeed nonnegotiable and mandatory for all believers. One book on this topic, for example, maintains that though

the aims and task of Christian spiritual formation are definite and universal, the means of formation vary and are personal. . . . I repeat: the means of formation vary. Practices, possessions, relationships, attitudes, and more all can be employed as vehicles through which God’s presence is welcomed.³¹

³⁰ Welch, *Mindful Christian*, back cover.

³¹ In this section, Howard also states that “there is a defined set of distinctly Christian means that Christians employ to cultivate growth in their relationship with God.” But he then broadens that “defined set” considerably through an appeal to Peter’s charge to “make every effort” to grow in faith (2 Pet. 1:5): “The reasonable conclusion is that, in this effort, we would be making use of a wide range of means.” As argued later in this chapter and touched on in chapter 6, sanctification and providence are the more appropriate concepts by which we can relate the breadth of

Later the author indicates that one of the “unhealthy ways of approaching our relationship with spiritual disciplines . . . is the way of legalism.” In this context, “the way of legalism” is defined as that “in which one identifies a few ‘required’ practices that all ‘good Christians’ engage in regularly.” The result of “this rigid standard” is that “we subtly impose some disciplines on others, effectively dividing the body of Christ.”³²

While one could certainly imagine a rigid and unhealthy approach to Christian growth that could fairly be described as “legalistic,” it seems a mistake to apply this label to any who wish to see spiritual formation pursued exclusively according to those means of grace explicitly identified as such in Scripture. And though it is true that all life’s varied circumstances are used by God to sanctify us, it is unhelpful to label anything and everything as a tool of spiritual formation. We have other words, categories, and concepts to talk about how God works across the entire breadth of history and human experience (e.g., providence, sanctification), and it muddies the waters considerably when we stretch the language of spiritual formation to include all that breadth. Our focus in this book, then, is on those “divinely appointed means” that God has clearly given in Scripture and that the Reformed tradition has consistently commended as unambiguously biblical and therefore consistently edifying.

Directed toward Conformity to Christ

Finally, our definition would be radically incomplete without underscoring the end toward which our spiritual formation must be directed: conformity to Christ. Only by upholding Christ as the end or telos of our spiritual formation can we ensure that the process is, in fact, authentically Christian. Within the wider popular culture, taking an interest in “spirituality” is typically presented as a means through which an individual can come to better understand not Christ but oneself.

human striving and experience to the concept of Christian growth. Howard, *Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 102.

32 Howard, *Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 108–10.

My “spiritual journey” becomes a process through which I come not to bow the knee before the Creator God who is my Judge and King but rather to realize that divine transcendence was actually inside me all along. This is what the columnist and cultural critic Ross Douthat has termed “God within” theology, a creed that he argues has become “the religious message with the most currency in American popular culture.” In the following passage, Douthat identifies and analyzes a striking example of “God within” theology in the pages of Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestselling book *Eat, Pray, Love*:

Her final theological epiphany is the same as her first one. A journey that began with God speaking to her in “my own voice from within my own self”—albeit “as I had never heard it before”—ends with the realization that the Elizabeth Gilbert-ness of that Voice is the key to understanding the nature of divinity itself. The highest spiritual wisdom, she writes, isn’t just that God waits for us inside our own hearts and minds and souls. It’s that “God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.” The best way to remedy our “heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment,” then, isn’t to remake ourselves in imitation of Christ (or Buddha, or Krishna, or whomever), but rather to recognize that “somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme self who is eternally at peace. That supreme Self is our true identity, universal and divine.”³³

It’s difficult to imagine a description more antithetical to Christian spiritual formation than that. Christians are not called to go deeper into themselves for answers but are instead called out of themselves and into new life in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), and the Christian’s unfolding hope as he marches toward glory is

³³ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 214–15, quoting Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 192, 122.

that this new life will wax as the old life wanes. The converted person looks outside herself toward Christ and says with John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Christian spiritual formation, then, is not about recognizing that we are actually just fine where and as we are but rather about “work[ing] out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) and becoming “mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). And this maturation involves not diving deeper into the self but denying the self and following the one in whom real fullness can be found (Matt. 16:24).

Three Related Words and Their Meanings

One prominent theme in this chapter has been the meaning of various words and phrases and why certain words and phrases might be helpful or unhelpful depending on their usage and context. To this end, we have considered why this book will use the phrases *keeping the heart* and *spiritual formation* to label the kind of deliberate cultivation of spiritual life that we explore in the pages that follow. But before we conclude the chapter, let’s press a bit further into words and their meanings by briefly considering three words that are closely related to spiritual formation but do not mean quite the same thing.

Spirituality

New Testament scholar D. A. Carson has described *spirituality* as a potentially “frightening” word. It’s not so scary in and of itself, but Carson suggests that it has become so through its increasing popularity and usage across an enormous range of disparate contexts. Through this frequent and varied deployment, spirituality “has become such an ill-defined, amorphous entity that it covers all kinds of phenomena an earlier generation of Christians, more given to robust thought than is the present generation, would have dismissed as error, or even as ‘paganism’ or ‘heathenism.’”³⁴

³⁴ D. A. Carson, “When Is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 3 (1994): 381.

It is not hard to see what he is talking about. Within the wider popular culture, interest in what might be deemed “spirituality” can be observed in everything from television shows with pagan and occult themes to the quasireligious descriptions used to market candles and herbal teas. These themes have gained such traction within the realm of consumer branding that one major marketing research firm has recently deemed “spirituality” to be “‘the next big thing’ in millennial-focused marketing.”³⁵ In an attempt to clarify just what people mean when they talk about “spirituality,” the Canadian researcher Galen Watts interviewed millennials who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious.” His conclusions are fascinating, if somewhat nebulous:

When people call themselves spiritual they are basically signaling three things: first, that they believe there is more to the world than meets the eye, that is to say, more than the mere material. Second, that they try to attend to their inner life—to their mental and emotional states—in the hopes of gaining a certain kind of self-knowledge. Third, that they value the following virtues: being compassionate, empathetic and open-hearted.³⁶

Clearly, the broader senses of *spirituality* and being *spiritual* are not entirely congruous with traditional Christianity, and yet despite all this recent pop-cultural baggage, the terms are not entirely foreign to the language of the Bible either. Long before millennial trendsetters were identifying as “spiritual but not religious,” the nineteenth-century American theologian Charles Hodge explained that the Bible uses the term *spiritual* to indicate those things that come from the Holy Spirit: “Spiritual gifts and spiritual blessings are gifts and blessings of which the

35 Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 58.

36 Galen Watts, “What Does It Mean to Be Spiritual?,” *The Conversation*, November 16, 2017; <https://theconversation.com/>.

Spirit is the author. Everything that God does in nature and in grace, he does by the Spirit.”³⁷ If that last statement is correct—and it seems to be—then the theme of spirituality can be understood biblically as something that intersects with all redemptive history from creation to consummation.³⁸ And the spiritual life, in a biblical sense, would be a life that is given, sustained, and directed by the Holy Spirit. In the incarnation, Jesus offers the perfect example of such a life, as one whom “God anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38) and who, in his humanity, depended on the Spirit in all circumstances (e.g., Luke 4:1, 14).

As those who are in Christ, Christians are likewise called to pursue the spiritual life in this sense, and the word *spirituality* could be used in connection with exploring the quality, purpose, and character of such a life. This way of thinking about spirituality would dovetail nicely with the definitions of Christian spirituality offered elsewhere: “Christian spirituality is the domain of lived Christian experience. It is about all of life—not just some esoteric portion of it—before God, through Christ, in the transforming and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ Such definitions of *spirituality*, with their strong emphasis on a holistic experience of life lived in the Spirit, seem to be getting close to what we mean when we talk about spiritual formation and keeping the heart. And yet these terms don’t quite align perfectly.

Clearly, they are closely related, but *spirituality* and *spiritual* seem to have a wider scope than what we are interested in here. If, as Hodge

37 Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), 164.

38 See Christopher W. Morgan and Justin L. McLendon, “A Trajectory of Spirituality,” in Morgan, *Biblical Spirituality*, 19–53.

39 Glen G. Scorgie, “Overview of Christian Spirituality,” in *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 27. For examples of other definitions, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 2; Philip Sheldrake, “What Is Spirituality?,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 25; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 16.

said, the term *spiritual* is used “to indicate those things that come from the Holy Spirit,” and if all God’s works and ways in creation, redemption, and consummation are done by the Spirit, then these words paint with a far broader brush than we intend when we use the term *spiritual formation*. Our interest is in that narrower slice of Christian life in which redeemed men and women actively use God-given means to pursue richer fellowship with the triune God and better cultivate what theologian John Murray (1898–1975) called “God-consciousness” or “an all-pervasive sense of God’s presence.”⁴⁰ A person doing that could certainly be described as taking an active interest in biblical spirituality or spiritual things, but spiritual formation would still be just one aspect of those much larger categories.

Sanctification

Another term closely related to *spiritual formation* but not entailing quite the same thing is *sanctification*. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) defines sanctification as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁴¹ Upon reading such a definition, one might imagine that what the catechism describes is precisely what we are after when we seek to define spiritual formation. After all, what sort of “formation” are we looking for if not the sort by which we are “enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness”?

There is an obvious logic to this thinking, and indeed, one often finds people using the terms *spiritual formation* and *sanctification* more or less synonymously. For instance, when the twentieth-century Reformed apologist Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984) wrote *True Spirituality*, he explained that his “study of the Christian life and true spirituality”

⁴⁰ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 1:183.

⁴¹ “Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 418 (q. 35).

was “in reality a study of the biblical teaching of sanctification.”⁴² One popular book canvassing different perspectives on this subject is titled *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*.⁴³ The relationship between the title and the subtitle expresses this same common perception that reflection on spirituality and spiritual formation is essentially reflection on the doctrine of sanctification.

I would argue, however, that spiritual formation can helpfully be distinguished from sanctification by identifying the former as a subset of the latter. Sanctification is a much broader concept than spiritual formation. Sanctification includes spiritual formation, but it also includes a whole lot more within its conceptual scope. Scripture teaches that God uses *all* our circumstances to sanctify us and conform us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28–29). Whether we experience trial and suffering (e.g., Rom. 5:3–5; 2 Cor. 4:17) or blessing and victory (e.g., Ps. 128; Acts 3:8–10), the Spirit of God is at work in the people of God to build them up in faith and Christian virtue (Phil. 4:12–13)—that is, to sanctify them. Spiritual formation, by contrast, refers more narrowly to those God-appointed means that we actively and consciously employ in the pursuit of spiritual growth.

To see the distinction and its significance more clearly, consider something like the sudden death of a loved one. Under such circumstances, a Christian should be encouraged by the biblical promise that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). This promise means, among other things, that God will use even this tragic loss to bring blessing, blessing that, in the context of the passage, is explained in terms of God’s good purpose to conform his people to the image of Christ—that is, to sanctify them (Rom. 8:28–29). The Spirit’s work of sanctification thus continues not in spite of difficult

42 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 3:269.

43 Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

circumstances but actually in and through them. But does it make sense to describe the loss of a loved one in terms of spiritual formation? This seems a very unhelpful way to speak, as it blurs the distinction between tools and means that we are encouraged to seek out and tragic events that we rightly hope to avoid. Because sanctification is ultimately God's gracious work in us, we trust that it continues through all life's ups and downs, but insofar as our spiritual formation is something we are called to consciously choose and actively pursue, it makes sense to think of it as a subset of God's larger work of renewal in our lives.

Piety

Finally, we must say something about the word *piety*. Defined in a modern dictionary as “reverence and obedience to God,” *piety* was the preferred term among early modern Protestants when they sought to capture what a Christian was trying to cultivate through his or her religious exercises.⁴⁴ For the Swiss Reformer John Calvin, piety (Lat. *pietas*) was “the shorthand symbol for his whole understanding and practice of Christian faith and life.”⁴⁵ Calvin introduced the concept quite early on in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), defining piety as “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”⁴⁶ Similarly, across the channel, the most popular English devotional manual during the seventeenth century was titled *The Practice of Piety* (1611). In the book, author Lewis Bayly (1575–1631) invoked Jesus's parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–12) and urged his readers to “get forthwith, like a wise virgin, the oil of piety in the lamp

44 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “piety (*n.*),” accessed July 17, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1007268312>.

45 Ford Lewis Battles, ed., *The Piety of John Calvin: A Collection of His Spiritual Prose, Poems, and Hymns* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), 27.

46 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:41 (1.2.1). See also Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin on Piety,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125–52; John Calvin, *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 2001), 2–6.

of thy conversation, that thou mayest be in a continual readiness to meet the bridegroom, whether he cometh by death or by judgment.”⁴⁷ That passage captures something of both Bayly’s use of the word *piety* and also the emphasis we’ve established already on *keeping the heart* as the Christian’s perpetual and joyful duty.

Clearly, when an earlier generation of Protestant authors spoke of piety, they were coming very close to what we are interested in here when we speak of spiritual formation and keeping the heart. And if this book were strictly a historical study, *piety* would probably be our preferred term. In the present volume, however, we are more interested in historical retrieval than historical study strictly for its own sake, and in a modern context, spiritual formation is a more widely recognized term, one that doesn’t carry some of the old-fashioned connotations that the word *piety* can sometimes carry. Moreover, the term *piety* focuses our attention on the desired result rather than the means to get there, piety being the quality we want to cultivate or stir up. By contrast, *spiritual formation* and *keeping the heart* carry a dynamic sense that nicely draws attention to the active, ongoing nature of the endeavor we have in view.

Our goal in this chapter has been to unpack what we mean when we talk about spiritual formation and keeping the heart. Our goal in subsequent chapters is to explore how that formation takes place by listening carefully to those who went before us.

Spiritual formation is not an easy task. For John Flavel, earnest heart work is “the hardest work” in which a Christian can engage: “to shuffle over religious duties with a loose and heedless spirit, will cost no great pains; but to set thyself before the Lord, and tie up thy loose and vain thoughts to a constant and serious attendance upon him: this will cost

⁴⁷ Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety: Directing a Christian to Walk, That He May Please God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Soli Deo Gloria, 2019), 101.

thee something.”⁴⁸ It will cost us because it requires us to put aside the quick and easy attractions of our entertainment-entranced world. It will cost us because it requires us to engage in a spiritual battle “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). And it will cost us above all because real heart work requires that we say no to our own sinful impulses and desires, denying ourselves and attuning our hearts to the God who made us in his image and now calls us back to himself. It is a work that will not cease this side of glory: “The keeping of the heart is such a work as is never done till life be done: this labour and our life end together.”⁴⁹ But if we pursue it, the rewards are great, both in this life and the next.

Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life. (Prov. 4:23)

⁴⁸ Flavel, *Works*, 5:428.

⁴⁹ Flavel, *Works*, 5:428–29.

