

SECOND EDITION

GROWING IN CHRIST THROUGH COMMUNITY

Spiritual
Formation
as if the
Church
Mattered

James C. Wilhoit

FOREWORD BY Dallas Willard

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Foreword

BY DALLAS WILLARD

James Wilhoit has written a book of special urgency for our times. In it he addresses *the* central problem facing the contemporary church in the Western world and worldwide: the problem of how to routinely lead its members through a path of spiritual, moral, and personal transformation that brings them into authentic Christlikeness in every aspect of their lives, enabling them, in the language of the apostle Paul, “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1 NASB).

For most of the current century, we have been in a period of time when Christian churches have been distracted from the central task of teaching their people how to live the spiritual life in a way that would bring them progressively to enjoy the character of Christ as their own. But in the last few decades, a sense of spiritual shallowness and emptiness, in individual lives as well as in church groups and activities, has led to a renewed use of the ancient language of “spiritual formation.” Spiritual formation (really, *transformation*) is the process, in Paul’s language, of “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, and not organizing our lives around the satisfaction of our natural desires” (Rom. 13:14 author’s trans.). In that process, we “put off the old self, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and are renewed in the spirit of our mind; and . . . put on the new self, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:22–24 author’s trans.).

In the period we have recently come through, our church activities have simply had no serious intention of fostering the individual transformation of members of the group. Becoming the kind of person who routinely and easily

does what Jesus told us to do has generally been considered out of reach and therefore not really necessary for what we, as Christians, are about. Paul, in conformity with the central teachings of the whole Bible, is referring to the type of life transformation from inside to outside—“first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may also become clean,” as Jesus said (Matt. 23:26 NASB)—that won the ancient world to Christ. If what we have more recently seen of Christianity in the Western world had been all there was to it in earlier centuries, there would be no such thing as Christianity today, or at best it would exist as a museum piece. How the church fell onto such thin times is, no doubt, a subject worthy of thorough examination. But the practical problem is this: How do we move back into the powerful form of life that won the worlds of the past and alone can meet the crying needs of our world today? Here is where this book comes in.

The answer to the question is that *the local congregations*, the places where Christians gather on a regular basis, *must resume the practice of making the spiritual formation of their members into Christlikeness their primary goal, the aim that every one of their activities serves*. Another way of putting the same point is to say that they must take it as their unswerving objective to be a body of apprentices to Jesus who are devoted to learning and teaching one another how to do, through transformation of the “inner self” (Eph. 3:16 NASB), everything Jesus said for us to do. That is what it means to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14).

Unless this course of action is adopted in the local or neighborhood congregations, the now widespread talk about “spiritual formation” and the renewed interest in practices of the spiritual life in Christ will soon pass, like other superficial fads that offer momentary diversion to a bored and ineffectual church *primarily* interested only in its own success or survival. But the church is the local group of apprentices whom God has chosen as his primary instrument in his redemptive work on earth. No doubt wisely, for only such a group is suited to be the place where humans learn to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34 author’s trans.). And as long as the local assemblies do not do this transforming work as their central business, everyone, church and world alike, will assume—as in fact they do now—that there is an acceptable alternative form of Christianity other than spiritual transformation into Christlikeness. Indeed, that is the assumption that produces the now standard form in North America of “nominal” Christianity: the curse of the valid aspirations of humanity and the perennial Golgotha of Jesus’s trajectory across human history.

Currently, pastors and leaders of congregations do not seem to understand this. Their education, their models of success, and their understanding of what

salvation or life in Christ is supposed to be like point them in other directions. The result is the absence of any overriding intention to devote their central effort toward constant transformation of all members of the group. Indeed, radical transformation is not what our folks are prepared for in “going to church.” It is not what is in their “contract” with the preacher or the leadership. Thus you will find here and there congregations that spend months or years trying to develop a “mission” statement. Almost never—never, to my knowledge—do they come out at the point Jesus left with us: to be disciples (apprentices of Jesus in kingdom living) who make disciples and form them in inner Christlikeness in such a way that they easily and routinely do the things Jesus told us to do (Matt. 28:18–20).

In order to respond faithfully to Jesus’s instructions, pastors, teachers, and leaders must form the intention and make the decision to live out the New Testament vision of apprenticeship to Jesus in the local congregation, as Jesus articulated it in his life on earth and as Paul articulates it in Ephesians 4:1–16: the vision of a body of disciples (not just Christians as now understood) building itself up in love and mutual ministry and life together. Then they can begin to think about what they do “in church” and in life that can effectively carry forward on a regular basis spiritual formation in Christlikeness in all the attendees. They will learn how to deal with the fine texture of relationships and events, within the redemptive body and beyond, in such a way that all might “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18 NASB)—no hype!

It is hard today for pastors and leaders to form this intention and begin to put it into practice. Generally speaking, this is because they do not know how to make the group a context of honest spiritual formation, and they fear that, if they try to, they will fail by the current standards of “success.” But there is a way forward, and it is *the details* that matter. That is where this book, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, is uniquely helpful. Dr. Wilhoit, with a warm heart and a gentle and intelligent manner, helps us see, in great detail, what we can do to relocate spiritual transformation to the center of *what we do* in gathering as disciples of Jesus. He helps any serious person engage the project from where they are, discover what really works for Christlikeness and what doesn’t, and assess outcomes realistically to make needed adjustments as they go. No special equipment or ability—not even a budget—is required. As disciples, we learn what we need to know as we go. Remember, the churches have always been at their best when they had the least but were simply obedient to Christ.

Preface

This book had its beginnings in conversations with my students about the spiritual nurture they received in their families and churches. These conversations naturally arose during advising visits, over lunches, and in classes, and I soon became fascinated by the variety of formational practices that students had experienced. As I reflected on their stories, I began to look for the presence of formational principles. This led to a more intentional set of interviews with church leaders about patterns and practices of spiritual formation. I realized that some churches are marked by the presence of a “culture of formation,” and while others may have many programs and much activity, they lack the presence of such a transformative culture. In the spring of 1989, I taught in a newly reopened seminary in Tallinn, Estonia, then still part of the Soviet Union, and I observed how churches had formed disciples who remained faithful even in a hostile environment. These churches all lacked the buildings and program structure that I had come to associate with Christian education and spiritual formation, but they had a definite culture of formation.

I write as an evangelical and one who is deeply concerned about the erosion of intentional practices of spiritual formation in many of our churches. My concern is that many of the formational patterns that served us well for several generations have quickly been set aside. To be sure, some of these practices of formation may have become stale and unattractive. But, tragically, it seems like we have often abandoned practices without adopting alternatives. Some practices that were common in evangelical churches for several generations and that have recently been set aside include an emphasis on systematic Bible teaching; Bible memorization and reading; Sunday evening services with an emphasis on testimonies, missions, and global Christianity; observing the Sabbath; sharing church-wide meals; practicing hospitality; attendance at

nurture-oriented summer camps; pastoral visitation; and significant intergenerational socializing. These changes represent a sea change in our formational structures, and its effects will take a generation to fully manifest.

This book is not so much about reversing a trend as it is about a call to intentionality about our formation and to repentance about how we have tried to engineer formation more than prayerfully seek to open our lives and our churches to God's grace. I have sought to provide guidance on community-oriented and educationally based spiritual formation that has stood the test of time. I am grateful for the teaching and writing of Dallas Willard, who has reminded us that our spiritual formation must be grounded not merely in spiritual abstractions but in the life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus. I am distressed that so much Christian spirituality seems content to focus on a vague spirituality rather than on the life, teaching, and actual indwelling of Jesus.

I am grateful to those who have assisted me in this process. Faculty members from several schools have met under the leadership of Evan Howard for a gathering of Evangelical Scholars in Christian Spirituality. I am grateful for the comments on various chapters provided by members of this group: Paul Bramer, Klaus Issler, Michael Glerup, and Evan Howard. Tom Schwanda read the entire manuscript at an earlier stage and provided valuable comments. Portions of this new edition were worked on during a semester at Biola University's Center for Christian Thought, funded in part through a grant from the Templeton Foundation, and I am indebted to the Center for providing space for writing and intellectual engagement. The project was also made possible by the support of my family, who took an active interest in it, listened to pieces over dinner, provided illustrations, and critically read portions. Thank you, Carol, Elizabeth, and Juliana.

ONE

Formation through the Ordinary

The Pathway to Flourishing in Christ

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Jesus (Matt. 28:19–20 NLT)

I know of no current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan and practice for teaching people to do “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”

Dallas Willard¹

It takes time, and the penetration of the truth, to make a mature saint.

Richard F. Lovelace²

Spiritual Formation: The Task of the Church

The church exists to carry out Christ’s mission in the world, and accomplishing this spiritual formation must be a central task of the church.³ It represents

1. “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What It Is and How It Might Be Done,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 4 (2000): 256.

2. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 143.

3. In the first edition I began with the more provocative statement “Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period.” I understand how that statement can be misunderstood,

neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body of Christ. Spiritual formation (hereafter referred to as Christian Spiritual Formation, or CSF) is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence.⁴

Christian Spiritual Formation is the pathway to flourishing in Christ. It is the way of rest for the weary and the overloaded. It is the way of Jesus's easy yoke and light burden (Matt. 11:28–30), of the good tree that cannot bear bad fruit (Luke 6:43), of building one's life on the foundation provided by Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–15), of "being rich in good deeds" (1 Tim. 6:18 NIV), of clothing yourself with love (Col. 3:14), of accepting the word planted in you (James 1:21), and of abiding in the vine and bearing much fruit (John 15). On this path, we discover that God's "commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NIV). We learn that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). We see that in those who truly abide in God's love there indeed flow "rivers of living water" to a thirsty world (John 7:38). We are more inclined to do that which the Lord requires of us—namely, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8) and to live so that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).⁵

The message we need to hear is not one of self-improvement but the good news of the gospel—the message that Jack Miller taught many of us: "Cheer up! You are worse than you think" and "Cheer up! God loves you more than you know!"⁶ You couldn't be more loved than you already are. The Lord has already provided for us every provision that we need: "By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life" (2 Pet. 1:3 NLT). You can't earn any more love and acceptance by your striving. So you are free to be your own person, the person you were truly meant to be. In seasons of self-doubt, I have taken great comfort from Revelation 2:17, which tells us that Jesus knows us so deeply that he will call us by name—a name we have

and I modified this sentence and was influenced in this rewording by John H. Westerhoff III, *Inner Growth, Outer Change: An Educational Guide to Church Renewal* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 54.

4. In this second edition I have elected to use the term *Christian Spiritual Formation* (CSF). I am increasingly concerned that "spiritual formation" is understood to be a generic human process marked by attention to the nonmaterial and the cultivation of spiritual practices with only passing reference to the work of God in our transformation. I use CSF to underscore the unique salvific component of true spiritual formation.

5. From James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, "The Wisdom of Christian Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 13, no. 1 (February 5, 2020): 5–21. Used by permission. Material from this article is incorporated at several places in this volume.

6. C. John Miller, *Saving Grace: Daily Devotions from Jack Miller* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2014), xv.

never heard—and we will immediately recognize it: “And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one understands except the one who receives it” (NLT). God knows you fully, loves you, and calls you to rest in his love.

The church was formed to form. Our charge, given by Jesus himself, is to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey his commands (Matt. 28:19–20). The witness, worship, teaching, and compassion that the church is to practice all require that Christians be spiritually formed. Although formation describes the central work of the church, and despite a plethora of resolutions, programs, and resources, the fact remains that spiritual formation has not been the priority it should be in the North American church.

Spiritual Formation Is Similar to Public Health

A safe food supply, clean drinking and recreational waters, sanitation, and widespread vaccinations have improved the quality of our lives. These interventions have eliminated diseases like smallpox and polio. These advances, and scores more, are part of the fruit of the public health movement that came to fruition in the twentieth century. I take many of these for granted, assuming they are just part of life, but in many parts of the world, they are not. Currently, 150,000 children die every year from measles, a disease easily prevented through vaccinations.⁷ We take for granted public health initiatives of the last century that have had measurable, positive social benefits. In medicine, the two tasks of prevention and cure must work hand in hand. Cures may provoke media attention and buzz; however, the preventative measures and public health interventions generally provide the real “bang for your buck.” Likewise, CSF makes its most significant contribution through quiet, hardly noticeable, behind-the-scenes work that places an emphasis on “prevention” and equipping rather than just on crisis interventions or headline-grabbing public conferences and programs.

Consider the effects of the painstakingly established public health infrastructure in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Since 1900, the average lifespan of persons in the United States has lengthened by greater than 30 years; 25 years of this gain are attributable to advances in public health.”⁸ The quiet and seemingly ordinary work of public health has made a tremendous difference in life expectancy

7. World Health Organization, “Measles” fact sheet, last modified December 5, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/measles>.

8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Ten Great Public Health Achievements—United States, 1900–1999,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 48, no. 12 (1999): 241–43.

and the overall quality of life. When one looks at the list of the CDC's "Ten Great Public Health Achievements," the achievements appear so reasonable that their implementation seems to be evident to all. The list includes now widely accepted "best practices" such as vaccination, motor vehicle safety, safer and healthier foods, and the recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard. Yet society implemented these strategies, which seem so commonsensical today, only after long struggles, careful science that established their efficacy, and the slow and ongoing work of public education.

Some years ago, a young physician summarized his medical-care trip to Central America by telling of the long days he worked caring for patients. He concluded his story by saying that he was convinced that he could have done more long-term good with one hundred meters of PVC pipe. So many of the people he treated suffered from medical conditions that were the result of the village's contaminated water supply—a problem that could have been easily remedied.

In this chapter, I want to begin to identify what the spiritual formation equivalent of safe drinking water and vaccinations might be. What are the patterns in Christian community life that make a positive contribution to CSF? What are the community practices that we can so easily overlook or underutilize but that help create a climate of formation in a church?

Methodology and Approach

For many years I have been listening to the stories of how faithful people have grown in grace. These accounts pulse with deep drama. I've realized that Paul was not using hyperbole when he told the Galatians, "I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). These stories are unique—unique as the people who tell them—and I want to be careful not to simply reduce these amazing tales of grace to a few abstract principles. While themes and patterns do emerge when we look at the stories as a whole, there does not exist anything approaching a "technology of spiritual formation." Formation remains a messy and imprecise business in which character, wisdom, and faith play a far more significant role than theories and techniques. Ironically, one value of deliberate engagement in formation is that it drives us to prayer because it reminds us, more than popular how-to books do, that true formation comes from grace and by grace, channeled through our humble efforts. This is not to deny what others have observed, that "spiritual formation in Christ is an orderly process."⁹ CSF is certainly a

9. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 10.

multifactorial process that requires us to continually ask God what we should be doing rather than rely on our power and skill.

C. S. Lewis famously set out in his World War II BBC “Broadcast Talks” to explain in a compelling way “mere Christianity,” the beautiful and straightforward core of the faith that has marked the church throughout the centuries.¹⁰ In a similar vein, I am seeking to set forth “mere spiritual formation,” which has characterized the best practices of the church from its founding. And so because I desire to be helpful to the various faith traditions of my readers, when we come to essential practices like the Lord’s Supper, I am going to write in a general way; therefore, I will be less specific than if I were writing just for my church or tradition. However, unlike Lewis’s popular theology, any applied writing on CSF needs to be placed in a specific context. For this book, that context is the evangelical church in North America.

In this book, I will suggest principles and patterns for communal CSF, and the reader will understandably wonder about my evidence: Why do I suggest that my approach is “the best way to do spiritual formation”? In response to that excellent question, I will demur and say my claim is more modest than that. I am not suggesting that I am setting forth “the best way,” but I will identify patterns and practices that I discern to be compatible with the great pastoral tradition of the church, patterns and practices that are grounded in orthodox theology and informed by findings from contemporary studies of human flourishing and well-being.

I understand CSF to be, first and foremost, a theological discipline. The word *spiritual* has come to mean, in the broader culture, a positive, subjective experience of an interior/nonmaterial/sacred dimension. That is a far cry from the New Testament’s understanding of the term *spiritual*, and yet this vague sense of spirituality has affected contemporary writing on spiritual formation. For example, at a recent conference, several prominent speakers on spiritual formation focused on spiritual formation as the process of shaping, healing, and forming one’s interior through coaching and spiritual practices. There was virtually no reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. An interior focus is a necessary part of spiritual formation, but first and foremost, by CSF, we mean formation by the Holy Spirit. We are only facilitators for the work of the Spirit in CSF; all actual formation is the work of God.

Gordon Fee has persuasively argued that in the New Testament, *spiritual* (*pneumatikos*) “refers universally and unequivocally to the Holy Spirit” and

10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

“has to do with who the Spirit is and what the Spirit is doing.”¹¹ He documents how English translations have consistently hidden the Holy Spirit’s work by using the vague adjective *spiritual*. The foremost New Testament Greek lexicon makes a similar point that *pneumatikos* “in the great majority of cases . . . [has] to do with the (divine) spirit.”¹² In writing about spiritual formation, we need to begin with an understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and assume that the Spirit is the primary agent in the work of formation.¹³ Throughout this book, there is an assumption that CSF describes processes, strategies, and practices we undertake to open ourselves and our faith communities to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, who ultimately forms us.

In terms of the theological foundations for CSF, my reflections begin with Scripture. The Bible accurately describes the human condition, the nature of our redemption, and the work of the Spirit, who remakes us so that “you [plural] also, like living stones, are being built into a temple of the Spirit to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5 TNIV, marginal reading). The letters of Paul and the book of Acts directly address issues of spiritual formation through questions about discipleship and church life. This book will cite these sources regularly. I am grateful for the emphasis Dallas Willard places on learning from Jesus’s program of spiritual formation. When I first heard Willard’s lectures and read his *Spirit of the Disciplines*, I was struck by how a faulty Christology had led me to underappreciate Jesus’s own spiritual formation. I implicitly acted as though he was a “little God” who did not need to develop as a person in his earthly life; I assumed that he pursued various spiritual practices because they just came naturally to him. Willard challenged my implicit Apollinarianism, my mistaken sense that Jesus’s divinity had absorbed his humanity, and Willard showed me how Jesus underwent real spiritual growth and development. “Because of the contemporary bias with which we read the Gospels, . . . we have great difficulty seeing the main emphases in his life. We forget that being the unique Son of God did not relieve him of the necessity of a life of

11. Gordon Fee, “On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 39, 41.

12. “*pneumatikos*,” in William Arndt, Frederick Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 837.

13. The use of the term *Spirit-ual* was suggested by Cherith Fee Nordling in “Practice Resurrection, Live Like Jesus,” in *Tending Soul, Mind, and Body: The Art and Science of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd A. Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 122–33.

preparation that was mainly spent out of the public eye.”¹⁴ I also benefited from Gerald Hawthorne’s cogent exegetical study of the Spirit’s connection to Jesus: “God-in-a-body, as one might describe the Jesus of Apollinarianism, could never be called a human being in the true sense of the word.”¹⁵

Many Christians do not think of Jesus undergoing spiritual formation. When they consider Jesus’s spiritual life and development, they easily imagine that his spiritual life must have been largely baked in at birth and rather static. After all, he was the Son of God, and, as the creeds say, he was “very God of very God” and “of one substance with the Father.” Yes, he possessed the divine nature fully, so one can wonder if there could be any real sense in which Jesus “developed” in his spiritual life. Yes, Jesus lived a sinless life, always did the will of his Father, and lived in intimate and unbroken union with his Father.

All true, but there is an important sense in which Jesus’s spiritual life was anything but fixed and set at conception: constantly listening to and obeying the Father gave him a dynamic and growing spiritual life. The New Testament says of him that “he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8) and “increased in wisdom” (Luke 2:52). His perfect obedience did not eliminate growth; it accelerated it. He aced every lesson, as it were, and was quickly immersed in advanced formation activities.

Jesus’s spiritual growth was real. Luke tells us of Jesus’s personal development, and the author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to emphasize the reality of Jesus’s true humanity. He is “fully human in every way, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:17–18 NIV). This text makes it clear that Jesus’s temptations, sufferings, and resulting growth were genuine as could be and akin—not in magnitude but in kind—to our spiritual growth. In our study of CSF, we will examine time and again the life and formation of Jesus.¹⁶

There is a well-developed tradition of CSF that comes to us through various orthodox Christian faith traditions. Willard implores those seeking to practice CSF, “The Christian past holds a huge store of information on spiritual formation. It is a treasure—a God deposit—in Christ’s people. We must

14. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 5.

15. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 201–2.

16. Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 59–72.

take the trouble to know it and to own it in ways suitable to today.”¹⁷ It is my sincere hope that I can honor the impulse of Thomas Oden, who teases out what he calls “Classical Consensual Ecumenical Teaching” in his *Classic Christianity*. He goes so far as to claim, “The only promise I intend to make, however inadequately carried out, is that of unoriginality. I plan to present nothing new or original in these pages.”¹⁸ In no small measure, the proper originality in CSF is not in the theory or theology itself but in the analysis of one’s own cultural and ecclesiastical reality and the timely application of gospel-driven CSF to that situation. One of the ways I access this classic CSF tradition is through Adrian Van Kaam’s formation science, as found in his eleven volumes on formation science, formation anthropology, and formation theology. His comprehensive work respectfully captures many of the contributions of a wide range of writers on CSF throughout church history.¹⁹

Guidance about how to conduct our CSF comes from a variety of sources. Historical, theological, and biblical resources offer or suggest specific practices and strategies. In the past forty years, a variety of wise, measured books on CSF have been published that emphasize specific ways to “do formation.” I have read widely in these sources and used their wisdom and guidance throughout this book. The positive psychology movement has much to offer too in suggesting practices and strategies; some, such as Robert Emmons’s work on gratitude, has clear application to CSF, while others apply less directly but are equally useful.²⁰

God and Formation

The practices of faith are not ultimately our own practices but rather habitations of the Spirit, in the midst of which we are invited to participate in the practices of God.

Craig Dykstra²¹

The Bible opens with a description of God’s formative work in creation: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). And

17. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 249.

18. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), xv.

19. Van Kaam’s theory of formation is well presented in this accessible volume: Rebecca Letterman and Susan Muto, *Understanding Our Story: The Life’s Work and Legacy of Adrian Van Kaam in the Field of Formative Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

20. Robert Emmons, *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

21. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 78.

creation, we read, involved a formation process. God created the stuff of the universe, but “the earth was formless and empty” (1:2 NIV). And God was at work, forming his creation. The image of God personally forming humankind furthers this picture: “The LORD God formed a man’s body from the dust of the ground” (2:7 TLB). The personal creative activity of forming humankind established a bond between God and the first human, Adam. God deepened the relationship by preparing a garden, where “he put the man whom he had formed” (2:8). God also “formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air” (2:19). The creation—personally fashioned, crafted, and formed by God—pleased the Artist/Creator. “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31).

The contrast between the formless primordial cosmos (Gen. 1:2) and the harmony of the properly formed creative order (1:1–2:25) is an implicit reference point throughout Scripture. God established precedence for formation. Whereas other religions view good and evil as eternal constants, Scripture presents God as eternal, in contrast to sin, which is a parasitic, temporary condition bent on unraveling and destroying creation. I have found the term *spiritual entropy* helpful to describe our world’s tendency toward spiritual decay, disunity, and dysfunction. God’s love/grace acts powerfully against that entropy.²² Love/grace is the powerful force that works against entropy.

In contrast to the formative work of God, chaos/entropy characterizes rebellion against his rule. Paul anchors his rebuke of the Corinthians for their disorderly worship in an appeal to God’s character: “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33 NASB). Chaos and injustice mark any society, culture, or institution that divorces itself from the one in whom “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The connection between spiritual bankruptcy and the decay of the moral, spiritual, and civil order is a recurring prophetic theme. The biblical worldview recognizes an ever-present spiritual entropy at work in the fallen world. It is ceaseless because sin, the flesh, and our idols never rest in their battle against the human soul and God’s kingdom claims on it. So we cannot accomplish CSF by merely setting up programs and writing policies. There is nothing “once and for all” about formation.

The difficulty of the divine work of formation is illustrated in the events of the exodus. We read that while Moses was on the mountain meeting with God, his brother Aaron “took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf” (Exod. 32:4). The event represents a sad but constant reality in Scripture. God invites us to shalom, to peace, to wholeness, but

22. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 268.

Our Aim: The Triumph of God in Our Lives

If all is not organized around God's plan for spiritual formation, what difference does it make if we regard some churches and ways of "doing church" as more "successful" than others? Biblical and historical "Christianity" has brought forth children of light to be, with Jesus Christ, the light of the world only in those times and places where it has steadily drawn people into his "kingdom not of this world" and taught them to live increasingly in the character and power of God.

No special talents, personal skills, educational programs, money, or possessions are required to bring this to pass. We do not have to purify and enforce some legalistic system. Just ordinary people who are his apprentices, gathered in the name of Jesus and immersed in his presence, and taking steps of inward transformation as they put on the character of Christ: that is all that is required.

Let that be our only aim, and the triumph of God in our individual lives and our times is ensured. The renovation of the heart, putting on the character of Christ, is the unailing key. It will provide for human life all the blessing that money, talent, education, and good fortune in this world cannot begin to supply, and will strongly anticipate, within this present life, a glorious entry in the full presence of God.^a

a. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 251.

instead of accepting his transformative formation, we choose to form idols that meet our pressing needs. A theme running through the entire biblical narrative is humans' constant rejection of God and our ambivalence toward his grace-filled invitation for humanity to be formed—actually, transformed from our brokenness—into his beloved children. Humans generally select the expedient route of forming idols, whether actual or conceptual, instead of submitting to God's gracious formation.

All of our work in CSF must be set against the backdrop of the God who forms us in love. CSF is part of God's ongoing providential rule. God actively sustains the physical world through Christ, who "sustains all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). Thus God's love gives the world the only deep and true order we know. As we think about CSF, we must remember that all positive formation in the world has its origin in God's love for humanity. CSF has a specific goal and unique means provided by the cross and the incarnation. Still, it shares with all positive formation the power of love

overcoming spiritual entropy/decay. “Let us love one another, for love comes from God” (1 John 4:7 NIV).

In What Sense Is Spiritual Formation Universal?

Every person is being shaped spiritually: their heart or spirit (the core of their being) is undergoing formation. Willard describes the universal nature of formation as “a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable, as well as the most admirable of persons, have had a spiritual formation. Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed. Period.”²³ The formation may be in either a positive or a negative direction. It may involve the cultivation of virtues that promote social harmony and care or may leave persons wary, self-protective, and unable to promote the welfare of society.

Christians have frequently concluded that since the presence of social virtues does not necessarily indicate a sustaining faith in God, their cultivation is of little spiritual value. This belief has contributed a sad chapter to our social witness and downplayed some essential strategies for personal growth. All persons of goodwill, Christian and non-Christian, should celebrate the presence of virtues that promote a society of shalom and justice. I recall a conversation I had with a missionary couple who were distressed by fellow Christians who made an effort to recycle household waste. To this couple, it seemed pointless because it had no direct salvific benefit and promoted the idea that we could improve society apart from God; they thought that such labor was being “wasted in non-kingdom work.” While they represent a small minority, this couple illustrates a tendency to bifurcate formation into that which is radically Christian and beneficial and that which is ordinary and of little importance. Such orientation comes very close to Gnosticism.

We need to see that all true formation has its origin in God, who through Christ is reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:18–20). We must be very sober about the power of sin, and we need to see Christ, who “sustains everything by the mighty power of his command” (Heb. 1:3 NLT), as being behind the growth in virtue, in love, and in justice. This has a very practical implication. It means that Christians may avail themselves of ordinary avenues of change that promote the presence of virtues. Our change does not come in two forms: good Christian church-based change and ordinary secular change. All true formation has its origin in God, and we must humbly receive it as a gift. I have sat with several well-meaning Christians who

23. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 19.

were hesitant to participate in physician-recommended programs designed to help address their debilitating anxiety because the programs were “not Christian.” The irony is that the most frequent command in Scripture given “again and again, by God, by angels, by Jesus, by prophets and apostles” is “*Don’t be afraid! Don’t be afraid! Fear not. Don’t be afraid.*”²⁴ Reducing one’s anxiety is part of Christian discipleship. We must be discerning, but much of what contributes to our positive spiritual formation may be ordinary activities that, when humbly received, are used to weave the beautiful tapestry of our formation.

All persons have their hearts deeply formed through both the ordinary events of life and intentional processes. In his *Confessions*, Augustine uses an illustration drawn from ancient physics in which objects were thought to have a “weight” or affinity. Rocks fall and fire rises, the thinking went at that time, because their weights bring them to their sources: rocks fall because their weights draw them to the earth, where they originated, and sparks rise from the fire because their weights draw them to the stars. “A material object works its way toward its own place by means of its own weight. A weight doesn’t simply direct its course to the lowest level, but to its own proper place. Fire moves up, stone down. These things are in motion through their own weights, and they seek their own places.

All hearts are formed. It may be in either a positive or a negative direction. As Christians, we uniquely undergo the Spiritual formation of the Holy Trinity designed to reshape us and conform us more and more to the ways of Jesus as we seek to live out in our churches the reality of the unity we have in Christ.

. . . My love is my weight. I’m carried by it wherever I’m carried.”²⁵

For Augustine, the critical questions of CSF are about our loves, and especially about what we are learning to love more and more. This emphasis is captured in two questions that Steve Garber poses: “What do you love, and what are you learning to love?”²⁶ Every human follows their deepest loves, and these loves are formed throughout our lives. That there is a universal formation of our loves is captured well in the phrase “you are what you love.”²⁷ We should not confuse the Holy Spirit’s unique spiritual formation of Christians with the universal shaping of our loves that every human being undergoes.

24. N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 68.

25. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Sarah Rudin (New York: Modern Library, 2017), 436.

26. Steven Garber, “Learning to Love What God Loves,” *Boundless* (blog), September 7, 1998, <https://www.boundless.org/faith/learning-to-love-what-god-loves>.

27. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

What Spiritual Formation Is and Why It Is Corporate

The Gospel orients us not so much to an object as to a person. The Gospel, then, is not so much belief *that* as it is belief *in*.

Kenneth J. Collins²⁸

CSF refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the definition that captures what I see as the essential features of CSF, and here I will highlight a few implications in the definition.

First, my description of CSF as an intentional process that requires our engagement is intended to distinguish it from the broad sense in which heart formation refers to all the cultural forces, activities, and experiences that shape people’s spiritual lives. In this book, I am interested in exploring the intentional and deliberate side of CSF—what is taught and sought rather than merely caught. With that said, those of us involved in the study of CSF should have the humility to admit that much of the most effective formation takes place through the quiet care extended by godly Christians who simply extend love, grace, and personal interest to those who cross their paths. A friend recently recalled how my mother welcomed him into our church as a new Christian more than fifty years ago. My mother’s hospitality was born out of her simple desire to “make people feel at home” in church.

How do we know it is a process that requires our engagement? Jesus’s parting words to his followers are to “make disciples” and teach them “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20 NIV). Paul calls his audience to “redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation” (Phil. 2:12 Message). In this book, I will make it clear that the grace of the gospel does not preclude our active engagement in our sanctification; it should engender gratitude and eliminate any sense that we have earned our growth in holiness.

Second, I have described CSF as communal—occurring in and through the church. God intends for the church to be the place of formation, worship, and mission, and Kevin Vanhoozer rightly asserts that, in part, “the church exists as a place to make disciples.”²⁹ The outcome of CSF is both personal and corporate; it affects the person and the church. Spiritual transformation must extend beyond the individual to the church, the family, and society. In

28. *Soul Care: Deliverance and Renewal through the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 110.

29. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), Kindle Loc. 1463.

God’s gospel, the outcome is not merely sanctified individuals but a holy people, the bride of Christ. As a *means* of CSF, the body of Christ is a primary vehicle through which the Spirit of God guides and matures us. Together we hear the Word preached and share the body and blood of Christ, and in this common celebration of the resurrection, we are ourselves raised as a people of God. We bear one another’s burdens, offer a prayer for healing, or share what we have with those who have need, and in this fellowship of heart and body, we encourage individuals and equip the body of Christ. The gifts and the fruit of the Spirit all are part of a vibrant, formative interaction of person and community.

Third, we can never accomplish CSF through our own power; we need the empowering of the Holy Spirit. CSF emerges from our saving experience of Christ. It is an appropriation of Christ’s work as we “contemplate the Lord’s glory,” thus “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor. 3:18 NIV). Our salvation is grounded in the work of Christ. Consequently, our participation in ongoing formation is working out what God has worked in us (Phil. 2:12–13). We live out the reality of our being “in Christ” (Eph. 2:10), our life “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3 NIV). Thus CSF is an expression of *faith*. It is the Christian believing in and responding to God’s work in Christ and the Spirit, giving assent to the truths of the gospel and trusting in the God who gave the Spirit, the church, and the means of grace as vehicles of ongoing salvation.³⁰

CSF (1) is intentional, (2) is communal, (3) requires our engagement, (4) is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, (5) is for the glory of God and the service of others, and (6) has as its means and end the imitation of Christ.

The Gospel and Spiritual Formation

Paul uses five key words to describe Christianity—grace, truth, faith, love, and hope.

Klyne Snodgrass³¹

The Message version of the Bible begins Ephesians 4 with this call: “In light of all this, here’s what I want you to do” (4:1). And that raises the question “In light of what?” As in many of his letters, Paul has spent the first half of this one discussing matters of faith and belief. He has laid the foundation

30. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Putting on Christ: Spiritual Formation and the Drama of Discipleship,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (2015): 147–71.

31. *Ephesians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 59.

of the Christian faith in God's grace and our union with Christ. The second half of the letter more directly concerns conduct issues, which flow directly from our new identity and the reality of Christ's reign.

The introductory section, Ephesians 4:1–16, forms a hinge between the two halves of the letter. This passage contains themes that need to be present in CSF programs in our churches. The passage begins with a call “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1 ESV). We are to walk according to the way of the gospel, meaning that we are to be grateful each moment for the gospel's reality and we are to continuously give our loyalty to Christ. We can do this by acknowledging the reality of the Christian unity given by Christ and the Holy Spirit and maintaining and guarding it diligently. Protecting, maintaining, and treasuring our unity is both a means and a fruit of formation. And our desire for unity flows out of our marveling at the gospel. “If God's love is so great, if his salvation is so powerful, if God has granted such reconciliation, then believers should live accordingly. They should value God's love enough to be shaped by it.”³² This unity reflects the very nature of God, as Trinity, and reconciliation is at the heart of God's redemptive work. The extent of this undergirding unity is seen in Paul's sevenfold description of the unity believers experience: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:4–6).

Living in true unity enables the church to become a mature body. One reason this passage is so crucial in CSF is that it speaks of maturing individual Christians and also of a maturing body. Becoming a mature body is not just about “producing a bunch of mature Christians.” The body's maturity finds expression through the practice of corporate virtues, especially those that promote and protect the unity of the church in gospel truth.

The body is to grow up into maturity as its leaders equip each member to exercise their spiritual gifts for ministry—“to knit God's holy people together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12 NJB). The ministry of God's redemptive work was revealed to Paul to unify all things in Christ, “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10). The church participates in this work of uniting as we live out the reality of our unity in Christ. We do this by cultivating the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peacekeeping and by training God's people to do the work of ministry. CSF is a way we operationalize the calling in Ephesians 4:1–16 to live worthy of the gospel as we seek to make our unity a lived reality through the formation of gospel virtues in the context of leadership that equips the church to minister in love.

32. Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 196.

CSF has a rich history with remarkable texts and well-honed practices to support it. Yet we must always remember that at its heart, it is about our being transformed through our union with Christ mediated by the Holy Spirit that is made available through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That may seem obvious, but I was nurtured in programs that tended to regard Christian education, discipleship, and spiritual formation as things that happened after the gospel was preached and believed. The diagram below captures how my mentors related the gospel and patterns of Christian nurture.

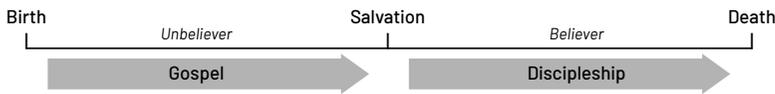


Figure 1. Gospel as pre-discipleship

In this view, the gospel contained both the indictment of our sin and the announcement of hope through the cross—a message that unbelievers certainly need to hear. This “gospel as pre-discipleship” was vividly set forth in a sermon I read recently. The pastor described the gospel as the sure foundation on which we are to build our spiritual house through discipleship and learning. There is a good measure of truth in this, but what is dangerous is when we think the gospel is merely the door by which we enter Christianity, something we leave behind as we grow spiritually. The other disturbing element of this sermon was its emphasis on “my building my house,” while little emphasis was placed on grace. Like so many sermons, it seemed to say, “God saved me (gospel); now I need to make myself holy (discipleship).”

The gospel must permeate any program of CSF. Returning to the cross in awareness of our sin, rebellion, and brokenness is the bedrock of CSF. CSF’s relation to the gospel looks more like figure 2.³³

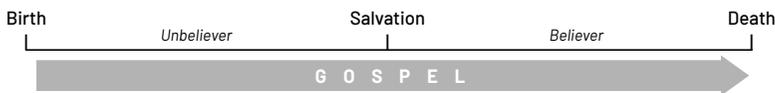


Figure 2. Gospel for spiritual formation

Much of our failure in conceptualizing CSF comes from our inability to keep the gospel central to our ministry. Too often, people see the gospel as merely the front door to Christianity or, worse, “heaven’s minimum entrance

33. Patric Knaak, whose clear gospel teaching has helped me immensely, suggested the diagrams on the gospel and spiritual growth.

requirement.”³⁴ A bifurcation of salvation into a grace-filled regeneration followed by sanctification through human striving leads to so many spiritual sorrows. The gospel is the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. It is not merely what we need to proclaim to unbelievers; the gospel also needs to permeate our entire Christian experience.

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The Gospel and the Christian

When I was a young adult, the gospel was explained to me in terms of a bridge diagram. In this diagram, a chasm separates God and humankind. This gap is the result of sin and is so enormous that humans cannot bridge it through their efforts and good works. The person who presented this diagram to me did so with great enthusiasm and drew various human bridges (e.g., morality, religion, piety, and good works) on the blackboard, showing that all fell short of crossing the gap.

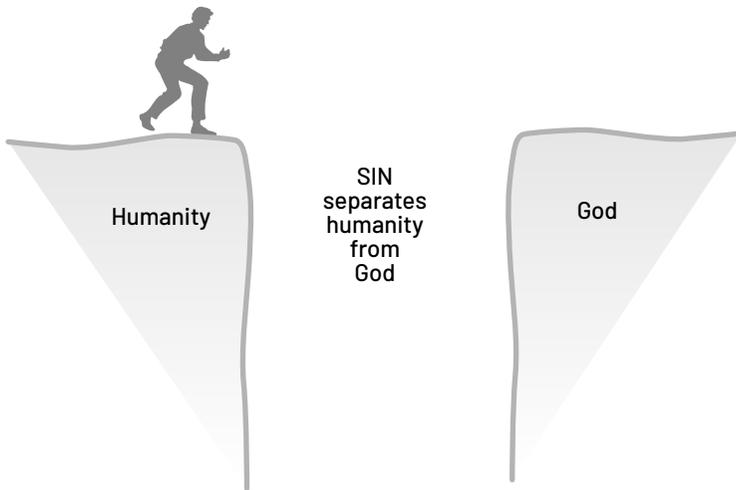


Figure 3. The spiritual chasm

I came to believe that the gospel was chiefly about bridging this gap. The cross fills the gap entirely and provides a way to traverse the great chasm. This is undoubtedly true, “For there is one God; there is also one mediator

34. John Ortberg, “True (and False) Transformation,” *Leadership* 24, no. 3 (2002): 102.

between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim. 2:5). Part of the glorious news of the gospel is that we do have a mediator, and peace with God is possible through the cross of Jesus Christ. God, in his love, has bridged the gap fully and invites us into fellowship with him. In figure 4, however, the person who has crossed the spiritual gap is still running. The cross seems to become a means of transportation rather than God’s means of transformation. That was my story: running, doing, serving, but thinking very little about the cross on a daily basis. In Richard Lovelace’s words, I was one of those Christians who did not “know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.”³⁵

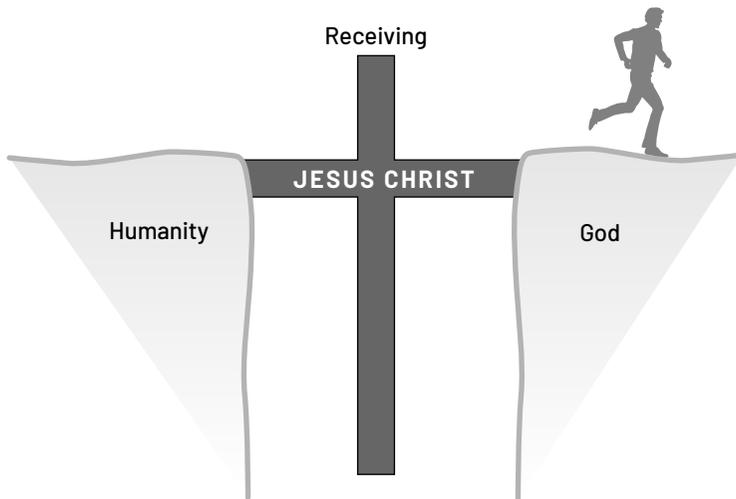


Figure 4. Bridging the gap

What I did not know then is how hard it is to live with a sense that the cross fills this gap. The person who showed me this diagram said something like, “Jim, this is true, just like $2 + 2 = 4$. It’s not about emotions, and you just have to believe it.” Not quite. All of my observed reality supports the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. Yet much in my life does not seem to support “Jesus paid it all.” My inborn pride rebels at this. The pain and guilt that are bitter fruits of my sin mock the atonement. Our society, which increasingly ties our worth to

35. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 101.

productivity, trains us to deny the cross. Learning that the cross is big enough is a lifelong vocation.

From personal brokenness and reflection, I have come to see that the gospel is not merely the door of faith: it must also be a compass I daily use to orient my life and a salve I apply for the healing of my soul. It is in returning again and again to the cross that we receive the grace that transforms us.

The metaphor of a gap between God and humans that needs to be bridged is surprisingly widespread. For instance, the chief priest of ancient Rome was called *pontifex maximus*—literally, “the chief bridge builder.” The sense of a divine-human gap is a universal spiritual intuition; even when people deny having this sense, they live as though they must bridge the gap. However, we must be careful to express the reality of this gap in deep spiritual terms. I have sat with people who had little sense that they were sinners but felt deep agony over their inability to walk free from addictions. A gap was present in their lives, but they did not understand it as the classic “sin gap.” To them, it seemed more akin to a hunger for true freedom.

Many Christians have learned the right answer, “Jesus paid it all,” yet still live with a nagging sense of shame and guilt. In times of spiritual counsel, I frequently listen to persons who can declare in abstract terms the power of Christ to forgive, heal, save, and restore but who are ravaged with guilt and have no perception of God’s love. Such people need to learn to rest in their identity as a child of God.

I remember hearing as a child about a single woman who had adopted an orphan boy from Germany after World War II. His parents had been killed during the war, and his postwar experience was horrific. While the woman loved her son deeply, it was only in adulthood that he finally began to love her as a son should. His adolescent years were marked by detachment and rebellion that brought his long-suffering mother great pain and embarrassment. The death of his birth parents and the betrayals his family had experienced made it so hard for him to live as a son rather than as an orphan. We, too, are beloved children who regularly “don’t get it” and live instead as spiritual orphans, constantly trying to earn God’s love and establish our worthiness.

For years, when I read a passage like Romans 1:15—“I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome” (NIV)—I assumed it meant that Paul wanted to come and hold an evangelistic campaign in conjunction with the church in Rome. Indeed, he was an evangelist, but he also had a deep burden that those who were already believers should hear and live by the gospel. He goes on to say that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (1:16). Salvation describes the complete process of redemption

Paul on Preaching the Gospel

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. . . . Hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Rom. 1:7-15)

Who do we usually think about preaching the gospel to?

- Non-Christians

Who is Paul writing to?

- Roman Christians: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints. . . . Your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (1:7-8).

Who is Paul eager to preach the gospel to?

- He wants to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome: "Hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (1:15).

What is surprising about this?

- We tend to think that the gospel is just for non-Christians.

(beginning with turning to Christ and proceeding through our sanctification to eventual glorification).

It is clear from the book of Acts and from Paul's letters that Paul was committed to the ministry of the gospel in his work. An essential part of CSF is presenting the reality of the gospel as a way of life and discerning the cultural patterns that work against our trust in God's love and grace as our sure foundation. What was true for Paul—"You are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal. 1:6-7 NIV)—is also true for us: the gospel is under attack.

True CSF will always carry out a twofold task in relation to the gospel. One task is preaching and teaching the gospel to promote a depth of understanding, greater trust, and spiritual cleansing and healing. This is the work of actively presenting the gospel so that people can engage it and use it in their lives. Paul describes the effects of this ministry when he says that as the gospel "is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the

Why do Christians need to hear the gospel?

- Over time, we simply tend to wander from the truth. As God said to his people through Jeremiah, “You love to wander far from me and do not follow in my paths” (Jer. 14:10 NLT).
- All of us have idols at hand, which we use as substitutes for the cross to gain divine favor. The problem of the Galatians is a problem all of us face: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6 ESV).

Why does Paul want to preach to Christians?

- He wants to encourage them and strengthen them spiritually: “I can share a spiritual blessing with you that will help you grow strong in the Lord. I’m eager to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. In this way, each of us will be a blessing to the other” (Rom. 1:11-12 NLT).

What is the gospel?

- The power of God for salvation (1:16). “It may well be said that, in Paul’s view, Jesus Christ is the gospel.”^a The gospel is the source of grace/power needed to live the Christian life.^b

a. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1072.

b. Questions adapted from *Discipling by Grace* (Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 1996), 1.3. Used by permission.

grace of God” (Col. 1:6). The language shows that we do not merely learn the gospel when we are converted and then move on from there. Paul asserts that the gospel continually works in us as we understand more and more of its truth and respond to it. We encourage the gospel’s work as we seek to live out its teaching about speaking the truth, turning away from lust, diminishing racially biased judgment, and reaching out to serve with the bold love and grace nurtured in the soil of the gospel. The gospel calls us to discipleship and contains the power to enable us to follow Christ.

The second task of CSF is to confront the false gospels and idols that are always present in our lives. In Galatians, we see an example of this. Peter and the apostles had insisted that Gentile believers adopt Jewish cultural forms to be “real” Christians, thus maintaining their attitudes of racial superiority. As a result, evangelism, worship, and fellowship suffered. Paul confronted Peter and the apostles about this, calling them to repentance. But when Paul rebuked Peter, he did not say, “Your attitude of racial superiority is immoral” (though it was). Instead, he said that the apostles “were not acting in line with the truth

of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14 NIV). The gospel was not growing and bearing fruit in the church because on this issue they had not understood God’s grace in all its truth. The doctrine of grace should end the self-justifying behavior of cultural pride, a form of works righteousness in which the human heart seeks to use cultural differences as measurements of personal worth. Paul applied the gospel, and the result was a renewal, a great leap forward for the church.

In much of the popular writing on CSF, there is a tendency to convey a stunted view of the gospel. We get the idea that what unbelievers need is the gospel. Then, once they accept Christ as Savior, they move on to “needing discipleship,” which consists of learning about Christ, developing the fruit of the Spirit, learning how to have a quiet time, and practicing spiritual disciplines. However, the New Testament paints a remarkably different picture. We must remember the description of the gospel as the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. Often we do not understand all the vast implications and applications of the gospel. Only as we apply the gospel more and more deeply and radically—only as we think through all its truth—does it bear fruit and grow. The key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is the persistent rediscovery of the gospel. *So many of our spiritual problems come from a failure to apply the gospel.* This is true for us both as a community and as individuals.

In our culture of self-improvement, which at times has turned spirituality into a narcissistic pursuit, it seems vital that we do not see CSF as just another route to personal empowerment. CSF is first and foremost about the gospel. As Peter reminds us, we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge” of the gospel (2 Pet. 3:18), not sit passively in it or take it for granted. Let the power of the gospel transform God’s church and his people.

Spiritual Formation Often Happens Quite Naturally

I am encouraged by George Gallup’s survey research that finds that a sizable group of persons in the United States have been so transformed by the gospel that others can notice their constructive behavior. Gallup observes that these “highly spiritually committed” people not only pursue the spiritual practices of prayer, forgiveness, and Scripture reading but also exhibit laudable social virtues. “These people are much more concerned about the betterment of society. They’re more tolerant of other people. They are more involved in charitable activities. And they’re far, far happier than the rest.”³⁶

36. George Gallup, “Vital Signs: An Interview with George H. Gallup,” interview by Jim Berkley and Kevin Miller, *Leadership* 8, no. 1 (1987): 15, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1987/fall/8714012.html>.

Imagine the benefits to a society and to the witness of the reality of God's kingdom if there were more of these people.

Since I first read Gallup's observation some thirty-five years ago, I have been engaged in a quiet "saint hunt." I am looking for people whose spiritual practices and gospel virtues are patently evident. Part of my purpose in writing this book was to report patterns of formation I have observed in what often appeared to be haphazard, messy, real-life spiritual development. I have asked, "What consistent circumstances, patterns of communal nurture, and experiences helped produce many of these genuine, godly folk I have met?" I have sought to learn what contributed to the transformations of the people who have grown in grace.

Meanwhile, I have also witnessed a disquieting trend. So many initiatives aimed at spiritual formation seem to have lost their bearings and have settled for secondary goals. We've learned new terminology while maintaining the old lack of healthy spirituality. Sadly, many of these spiritual formation programs remind me of third-rate manufacturers that crank out mediocre products and never seem to catch on that their manufacturing processes will consistently produce shoddy goods. As Dallas Willard reminds us, "Your system is perfectly designed to produce the results you are getting."³⁷

In summary, real spiritual formation is taking place all around us. Yet most of our Christian peers are not being profoundly changed by the gospel in ways that result in Jesus's promised lifestyle of peace, service, and spiritual authority. Our culture—and, sadly, many churches—seek to squeeze us into the mold of a sensible, consumer-oriented faith that meets our needs, asks us to be nice, and avoids offending anyone else.

For Further Reading

Boa, Kenneth. *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001. A thorough survey of twelve key dimensions of spiritual formation.

Brother Lawrence. *The Practice of the Presence of God; and the Spiritual Maxims*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005. A brief, classic presentation on keeping the presence of God in mind and heart.

Chandler, Diane J. *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014. A clearly written and careful integrative approach to CSE.

37. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 308.

- Dykstra, Craig R. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. A comprehensive treatment of community spiritual formation.
- Howard, Evan B. *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. A comprehensive overview of spiritual formation that is grounded in a mature reflection on Scripture and the great tradition of Christian Spiritual Formation.
- Mulholland, M. Robert. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016. A book that defines formation as “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” and provides sensible guidance on personal formation. A modern classic on spiritual formation that, as the title suggests, invites the reader to a deeper, transforming walk with Christ.
- Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. A reminder that we are most authentic when we understand and honor our sense of self and calling.
- Taylor, Jeremy, and Thomas K. Carroll. *Selected Works*. Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, 1990. A masterpiece on how to live well and die well.
- Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. A rich exploration of spiritual disciplines applicable to lay groups seeking spiritual formation.
- Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002. An accessible and comprehensive call for spiritual formation as a way of becoming more like Christ.