

Transforming Discipleship: Foundations of Christian Spiritual Formation

Richard E. Averbeck
Spiritual Formation Forum
May 19, 2004

The Spiritual Formation Forum had its beginning back in 1997. It arose out of a need to have a place to talk about spiritual formation at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where I teach Old Testament studies. We soon learned that there was also a need for some kind of forum in which Christian leaders from all walks of ministry, here and around the world, could engage in a serious discussion of spiritual formation. We were then, and continue to be, especially concerned that this be done on the basis of a sound *biblical* understanding of what it is we are talking about. We need to know, for example, what we mean when we use the terms “discipleship” and “spiritual formation,” and why we understand them to mean that. The Bible, God’s written revelation to us is the primary and authoritative source for this. The first great commandment of Jesus is from Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (NRSV). The very next verse goes on to say: “These words which I am commanding you today shall be *on your heart*.” The connection is important. After all, if you truly love someone, you pay close attention to what they say. You take their words very seriously. I have noticed that my wife keeps telling me that!

The Forum quickly turned into a kingdom wide ministry, and since that day it has felt like we have “had a tiger by the tail,” so to speak. Our main focus has been to try to keep in step with and keep up with what the Holy Spirit is doing through spiritual formation. It has been, and continues to be, an exciting ride. It reminds me of what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:21 about the prophets who spoke from God “being *moved along* by the Holy Spirit.” The term

“moved along” is the same as that used in Acts 27 (vv. 15 and 17) to describe how Paul’s ship was “driven along” by a storm wind on his way to Rome, eventually shipwrecking them on the island of Malta. That was a wild ride too, literally.

This is our third major conference. We chose the title “Transforming Discipleship: Leading the *Church* in Spiritual Formation” for a specific reason. Although “spiritual formation” has long been a term used in other traditions, in the evangelical world it first came into use in the context of academic higher education in the 1980’s and early 90’s, as a term for helping Christians individually and in their communities of faith go deeper with Christ. By the late 90’s, however, it had begun to penetrate in earnest into the evangelical world at the local church level. But there was at that time and there still is today a great deal of confusion and sometimes suspicion about what “spiritual formation” really is or should be in the evangelical context, and how it relates, for example, to “discipleship” and “sanctification.” Therefore, since we are a “forum” about spiritual formation, it seemed important that we take on the discussion of what is involved in leading the church effectively in spiritual formation.

Along the way we have become aware of the fact that God seems to be making spiritual formation common ground on which the different ministry arms of the church could come together for mutual benefit and cooperation, including, among others, local churches and denominations, academic institutions, international ministries, campus ministry groups, and counseling ministries. God Himself may be providing us with a relatively unprecedented opportunity to pull together in using all the gifts God has given the church in a combined effort to profoundly transform the lives of believers, the church, and even the world through Christ. All of us have this in common: we are hungry for deep intimacy with God, personal Christ-like integrity and character, meaningful relationships with others in redemptive community, and

effectiveness in the Gospel mission. At the end of the day, this is what we are all called to in our individual lives and our ministries, and this is precisely what spiritual formation is about.

The Wind of the Spirit of God

The image of wind driving a sailboat along is a good one for understanding some of the essential features of spiritual formation. We do not provide the wind. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. If there is no wind blowing, one might as well forget the sails. They will do no good. And it will do no good to have the people on the ship blow into the sails either. No matter how much we huff and puff, we cannot make the ship move. We cannot create our own wind. Only God can do that, and He does it through the Holy Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity. In fact, as is well-known, the term for “spirit” is the same as that for wind in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.

Recall, for example, the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, from which we get the song “dem bones dem bones, dem dry bones.” The bones lie dead and dried out on the valley floor until the “wind” (the same word as “spirit”) comes and begins bringing them to life. We find out later in the chapter that the “wind” is the “Spirit” of God Himself (the same word is used). Jesus employed a similar image in John 3 in his conversation with Nicodemus. In a play on words He said: “The *wind* (the Greek work *pneuma*, from which we get words like *pneumonia*) blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (*pneuma* again).” Being born of the Spirit, the “wind” of God, is essential to the new birth from above.

The fact of the matter is that in spiritual formation we do not provide the driving force. Only God can provide the wind. And he does it through His Holy Spirit, His own divine wind. That is one of the main biblical reasons for calling it *spiritual* formation. It is first of all, above

all, and throughout the work of the Holy Spirit. We are desperately dependent on God working by His own hand through the Holy Spirit for real formation into the image of Christ to take place in our lives and through us in the lives of others. That is why God has actually given the Holy Spirit to indwell us as individuals and communities of faith in Jesus the Messiah. The wind of God is always in us, working to drive us along, so that we grow closer to Him and live more effectively for Him in the world.

Holy Spirit and Human Spirit in Spiritual Formation

So we *are* dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit for spiritual formation. But that does *not* mean we have no part in it. We are not passive. At the core of spiritual formation is the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit of the genuine believer. Each person has a human spirit. We know that we are “more than” just a physical body. One way to talk about this “more than” in scripture is by referring to our human “spirit.” This is the part of us that departs when our physical body dies. When the body is dead, the spirit is gone from it. Jesus’ last words on the cross were, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). The Apostle John reports that “Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). James reflects the same basic understanding when he writes, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). Perhaps the most helpful passage on the human spirit as it relates to spiritual formation is 1 Corinthians 2:10-12:

. . . *The Spirit* searches all things, even the deep things of God. (11) For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the *man’s spirit* within him? . . . (12) We have not *received* the spirit of the world but *the Spirit who is from God*, that we may understand *what God has freely given us*.

The Holy Spirit knows the depths of God, and the human spirit knows the depths of a person. Spiritual formation is empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit as he takes “what God has

freely given to us” in Christ Jesus and brings it to full effect in and through the human spirit of the believer. As Romans 8:16 puts it, “The Spirit (of God) himself testifies with our (human) spirit that we are God’s children.”

I would argue that the meaning of the term “spiritual formation” is best derived from passages in the Bible that refer to the Holy *Spirit* in the context of forming, *transforming*, or *conforming* one's life toward Christ-likeness. For example, Romans 8:27-29 tells us that “. . . the *Spirit intercedes* for the saints in accordance with *God’s will*. . . For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to* the likeness of *his Son*” (NIV; cf. similarly Romans 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Properly speaking, therefore, "spiritual formation" consists of the Trinitarian work of God in the lives of genuine believers in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. A spiritual formation ministry is one that is devoted to stimulating and participating in this work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. The verbal idea in the word “formation” (i.e., to form, transform, conform) emphasizes the active focus of spiritual formation in terms of, first, the *dynamics* between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit, and, second, the *activities* or ways and means by which we purposefully engage in the dynamics of spiritual formation individually in our private lives and/or in relationships with others who have the same purpose and direction in life.

In our analogy of the wind, if the Holy Spirit is the wind, then we Christians are the boat. The point here is that the wind will not take us very far if our sail is down; that is, if our *human* spirit is not engaged. Just as the writers of scripture needed the Holy Spirit to drive them along in writing the Bible, so every Christian needs the same divine wind to drive them along in living the Christian life. The discipleship and spiritual formation practices that we engage in are like putting up the sail. They are ways of getting our human spirit engaged with

the Spirit of God. Again, it will do no good to raise the sails or turn the rudder of the boat without the wind of God blowing. Doing these things does not *cause* spiritual formation to happen, just as putting up the sail on a boat does not *make* the wind blow. The various spiritual disciplines, for example, are not magic wands that we wave in order “get spiritual.” But they *can* help us put up the sail of the Christian life and trim it well in order to catch the wind of God as He blows into and through our lives. God often works in ways that seem strange to us, and sometimes it may seem that the wind is blowing in the wrong direction, or not blowing at all, but *that* is up to God. *Our* part in it is getting the sail up and keeping it up by the way we live life, privately, in community, and in the world.

Transforming Discipleship

The term “transforming discipleship” in the title of this conference can be understood in two ways: “transforming” can be either a verb or an adjective. So, on the one hand, the expression “transforming discipleship” *could* mean that we are concerned about transforming discipleship *from* what it is, *to* what it should be. On the other hand, it *could* mean that we are talking about a kind of discipleship that is *by nature* transforming. Actually, both are true. Discipleship discussions in the literature have not characteristically focused on the work of the Holy Spirit. The term “disciple” refers to a person who is an adherent to a particular teacher – a learner, or pupil, or apprentice. So a *Christian* “disciple” is one who learns and follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus commissioned his apostles to “*make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism and discipleship are close related in the New Testament. Through baptism one gains a new identity and commits to a new way of life. I have a very good friend who talks about his walk with Christ as “living out his baptism.”

In the same place, Jesus goes on to emphasize “*teaching them to obey* everything I have *commanded* you” (Matthew 28:19-20; cf. Acts 14:21). This is not just cognitive learning, but a kind of learning that transforms the pupil into an obedient follower. Yes, obedience is important. It arises out of a new identity and a commitment to that identity that is deeply immersed in relationship with and practicing the very presence of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Matthew emphasizes the Gospel of the Kingdom of God into which we are called to enter through faith in Jesus Christ. We move from one kingdom to another, and we live accordingly. As a tax collector, Matthew knew much about the corruption of the world, and had been deeply immersed in that kingdom for a long time. The call he had as one of the Apostles was to spread the good news that one can live in this other kingdom, the “Kingdom of God,” which is *already* present even though it is *not yet* fully manifest on the earth.

Since the beginning of the church age, becoming and living as a disciple has always been closely linked to receiving and being transformed by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2). The Holy Spirit is the one who God the Father, at the request of Jesus the Son, has given us in this day and age to guide and enable us to function as followers of Jesus (John 14:16-17). This is one of the main emphases spiritual formation brings to the Christian life when it is defined and understood from a biblical point of view.

Spiritual formation is, first, *dynamic* in its emphasis on the divine power and means of formation, and, second, *deep* in its focus on the inner workings of the human person, the human spirit. The Spirit of God reaches into the spirit of the person to do the core of his work (see, e.g., Romans 8:16, 23-27). God has not called us to something without enabling us to do it. He is not sitting by to see how we do. Jesus did not leave us with commands and no power to fulfill them. There is a divine person, the Holy Spirit, continually at work in us, who acts

directly on the deepest parts of us, our human spirit (Romans 8:16, 26-27; 1 Corinthians 2:10-13, 16). ***This*** is spiritual formation.

Worship as the Dynamic Core of Spiritual Formation

Now, if there is one main thing I would like to convince you of here today it is this: the central unifying principle of truly biblical spiritual formation is ***worship***. Worship is ***the*** spiritual practice *par excellence*. I am convinced that until we get this straight in our minds and work it into our daily lives and communities of faith we are just going to be working harder at the Christian life and getting nowhere. For a few weeks this spring at our home in southern Wisconsin two robins were continually flying right into one particular window in the front and one in the back of our house, off and on, for about an hour each morning. We would hear the banging and even sometimes watch them for awhile. It seems that they saw their reflection in the window and somehow thought they could fly through it. They were persistent. I will give them that. But all they were managing to do is worthlessly expend their energy and perhaps get a pounding headache, or perhaps I should say, beak ache. They were getting nowhere because they kept running into this invisible barrier. Sometimes we do the same as Christians. It reminds me of the passage in James 1:22-24:

-²²- Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. -²³- Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror -²⁴- and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. (NIV)

You may recall the passage about being filled with the Spirit of God in Ephesians 5. It begins this way:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but ***understand what the Lord's will is.***

So what is the “will of the Lord” in this passage? The next few verses develop Paul’s argument further:

¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be *filled with the Spirit*. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-20)

Earlier in the same epistle Paul wrote about being “filled up” with the “fullness” of God the *Father* (Ephesians 3:16-19) and Jesus His *Son* (Ephesians 1:23; 4:13). Most importantly for us here, Ephesians 3:16-19 describes Paul’s desire that we be strengthened “with power *through his Spirit*” in our “*inner being*” (v. 16) that we “be *filled* to the measure of all the *fullness of God*” (v. 19).

Being “filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:18 amounts to being *filled up* with the *fullness of the Spirit* of God in the “inner being.” Another way of talking about this is that Holy Spirit is the wind of God *filling the sails* of our human spirit. As Jesus Himself puts it to the woman at the well (John 4), God is spirit, so we must worship Him in spirit and truth, and *this is the main concern of the Holy Spirit as He fills us with His presence*. The imperative “be filled with the Spirit” in verse 18 is followed by a series of participles that develop the impact such filling would have in the church: *speaking* to one another in worship, *singing* and *making music* in the heart (v. 19), always *giving thanks* to God (v. 20), and *submitting* “to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21, continuing through vv. 22-23). Being filled with the Spirit of God manifests itself first of all and above in a human spirit filled with worship and that, in turn, brings with it a willingness to submit to one another out of reverence for the Lord we worship together.

We will be doing a lot of worshiping at this conference. The main reason for this is that whether as individuals or as communities of believers, Christians are first of all and above all

“worshippers.” The first best thing we can do together is worship, because that is what puts everything else we do in proper perspective, whether in our lives, our churches, or even this forum. God becomes the focus of attention, and that, in turn, has a profound effect on the way we engage in everything else we do. The most spiritually transforming activity we can engage in is genuine worship of God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

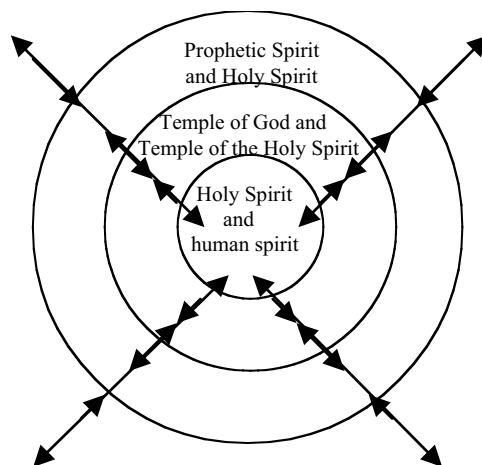
Worship is about seeing God: who He is and what He has done. We do this with “the eyes of our heart,” an expression the Apostle Paul used in Ephesians 1:18 for the way we encounter God. One thing is for sure: if we really see God, like Isaiah in the throne room of heaven, we will most certainly be impressed. One of the main problems we have to deal with in our own lives and in our ministries is that we are all too often impressed with the wrong things. The deepest kind of transformation takes place in us when we become so deeply impressed with God and His purposes in and through our lives that our will, our volition, becomes engaged in the process of change and growth. When what we are impressed with changes, then what we desire changes with it. Worship is about God and about desiring Him more than anyone or anything else. Deep and meaningful change takes place when the things that matter to us change. The Holy Spirit’s goal in worship is to overwhelm us with God, and the things He has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:12, cited above), as the primary driving force behind our spiritual transformation.

But worship is not *just* about seeing God. No, it is about seeing God *while looking life squarely in the face*. Worship is not an escape from life, but a presentation of our life to God, whether personal or communal. When we present our life to Him in worship we actually have a chance to put it in perspective – divine perspective. The Psalms teach us this. As in the Psalms, sometimes we give thanks in worship, because we are in a thankful place in life; sometimes we

lament in worship, because that is where our heart is at the time; sometimes we proclaim our faith, our confidence in the Lord; sometimes we confess our sinful corruption; sometimes we cry out for help; sometimes we praise; sometimes we pray. We cannot leave life behind in order to worship, if our worship is to be authentic and genuine. No. We come into God's presence and offer whatever is there to Him. In worship we have a chance to bring to God what is true in our life, look Him straight in the face with it, see it in the light of His presence and purpose, leave it there before Him as an offering of prayerful worship, and sooner or later go forth from there transformed because life looks different when we look at it with God at the center of our vision.

Dimensions of Spiritual Formation

I have a short summary article on our website that treats the three dimensions of the spiritually forming work of the Holy Spirit (www.spiritualformationforum.org). The images, concepts, and institutions on which they are based are distinctive, but each has its roots set deep in the soil of the Old Testament with explicit, meaningful, and traceable trajectories into the New Testament for the church and the Christian life. They are presented in the chart as three concentric circles (see below). Each dimension has important implications for any "spiritual formation" ministry, practice, or program. Furthermore, they are intimately bound together, not mutually exclusive or isolated from each other, and they have direct impact on the effective working of each other in the lives of believers. This is illustrated by the four lines traversing the concentric circles, with arrows pointing in both directions. These dimensions of spiritual life reverberate in mutual stimulation of each other in us and among us.



It is not my purpose here to treat all three dimensions in detail. However, I do want to say a few things about each of them, especially about how they actually look when lived in the life of a real person.

First, in the center is the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit of the genuine believer. I have treated this dimension in some detail earlier in this address. Spiritual formation actually begins when we become believers in Christ through the Gospel of grace through faith alone (Eph 2:8-9), since it is through salvation that one receives the Holy Spirit in the first place (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 1 Cor 12:13). One implication of this is that spiritual formation is for everyone who knows Jesus. It is not elitist. It is not just for a supposed special few who are really serious about following Christ. All who know Jesus are called to follow Him, seriously. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-4:12 gets at this issue in an important way. All believers are exhorted to love one another fervently and keep increasing in it more and more. Along with this the regular Christian is called to “⁻¹¹⁻Make it *your ambition* to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, . . . ,⁻¹²⁻so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, NIV). What we

are looking for is the kind of spiritual formation that will work in the daily life of the regular working Christian. It does not have to be esoteric and complicated to be profound.

Another implication, however, is that a person engaged in spiritual formation does not run frantically through life. This dimension of spiritual formation highlights the need, significance and, indeed, power for the Christian life derived from personal private *solitude and devotion* with God, practicing his presence. For many people in our western culture today this alone will require massive change in their lifestyle. I myself am needing to take better account of this in my own life these days. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus made an offer: ⁻²⁸⁻ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ⁻²⁹⁻ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (NIV). The tragedy is that many Christian lives are anything but restful. There is a rest in the soul that brings with it an easier and lighter load in life. This is what Jesus wants us to have. We cannot be well-formed spiritually without it.

Second, since the Holy Spirit is actually "present" in us as he works in our human spirit, therefore, we are the *temple* of God the Holy Spirit today. This is an essential part of our identity in Christ individually (1 Cor 6:19-20) and corporately (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:19-22; 3:14-21). It should cause us to emphasize "practicing the presence of God" through *relational love, worship, and personal purity*. We are bound together as the people of God in love for our Lord and one another. One implication of this is that a person who is well-formed spiritually will love well. We have all heard far too many stories and seen way too many examples of Christians who talk about love while, in the meantime, relationally leaving a trail of blood wherever they go. To be sure there is such a thing as doctrinal heresy, but there is also what I

would call *relational* heresy. There is no such thing as a well-formed Christian who does not love well. In fact, we are even called to love our enemies. As Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount, anyone can love someone who loves them back. What makes the Christian different is his or her commitment to love even those who hate us (Matthew 5:43-48), as Jesus did.

Moreover, since a temple is, by definition, a place of worship, another implication of this second dimension is that worship must be at the very center of our experience in Christ. We talked about this earlier too. The significance of the holiness and purity of God also stands out as an implication here. When Isaiah was ushered into the throne room of God in Isaiah 6 he was struck with both the holiness of God and his own impurity; so much so that he cried out, “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

There is a common *mis*understanding about spirituality in this regard. It is often thought that the closer one comes to God the holier they will feel. On the contrary, the closer we get to Him, the less holy we will feel because we will be struck with His overwhelming holiness and purity. At the same time, however, it is in this place that God’s grace to us will stand out more and more. Yes, we become more aware of our own sin, but we are even more overcome with His grace, as Isaiah was when the seraph purified his lips. And it is from here that we have the potential of losing all interest in everything else except serving God. As Isaiah put it, “Here am I. Send me!”

This brings us to the third dimension of spiritual formation, the prophetic dimension. The same Holy Spirit who indwells and transforms us also empowers us for prophetic ministry. We are all called to stand out and step up in the world for God, very much like the Old Testament prophets did in their day. One implication of this is that we cannot stay in our

comfort zone, fearful and shrinking back from bearing effective witness to the Gospel of Christ as God gives us opportunity. We look for opportunities to display Christ to the world, and we speak the truth in love. A second implication is that we must not fit into the world. We are called to stand out. The last thing individual Christians or communities of faith should do is fit in. We are supposed to “stick out” because we stand up for the Lord in the midst of the perverse situation in which we live. If we get too comfortable something is terribly wrong.

Conclusion

A group of theological and cultural thinkers have gathered together several times over the past couple of years to develop a set of what we are calling “Descriptors of Biblical Spiritual Formation.” They are available on our website with some elaboration. You may have already seen them there. I highly recommend them to you, but will not take the time here to read through them. Finally, please keep in mind that this meeting is really a “forum,” and a forum is place where ideas can be floated and discussed with vigor. We should hear each other, even when we disagree on certain points or even if our whole perspective on spiritual formation is challenged. On my part, I hope we can all agree that the power of spiritual formation comes from God and God alone, and that the word of God, inspired by the Spirit of God and brought to bear upon our lives through His indwelling presence, is the essential foundation of the kind of spiritual formation that is pleasing to God.

We will worship a lot these next few days, partly because that’s who we are first and foremost as Christians, and partly because it is in the context of worship that spiritual formation is best understood and practiced. In fact, as I come to a close, let me repeat my main point.

Worship is the most transforming experience we can engage in as Christians. It really is the spiritual formation practice *par excellence*. It provides the most appropriate and most effective

context for everything else that needs to take place in and through the life of the Christian and the church. It is here that the two dynamic sides of spiritual formation come together in earnest. The Holy Spirit and the human spirit can soar together in heavenly places even now, right here, ***in*** us, ***among*** us, and ***through*** us.

For more on worship see Richard E. Averbeck, "Worshiping God in Spirit," and "Worshiping God in Truth," in *Authentic Worship: Scripture's Voice, Applying Its Truth*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 79-133.