

SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

From a biblical point of view, probably the best way to define “spiritual formation” is to consider passages that refer to the Holy *Spirit* in the context of (trans- or con-)forming one’s life toward Christ-likeness (Galatians 4:19).¹ Understood in this way, spiritual formation is first of all, above all, and throughout the shaping (i.e., “forming”) work of the divine Holy Spirit, carried out according to the will of God the Father, for the purpose of conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:27-29 NIV):

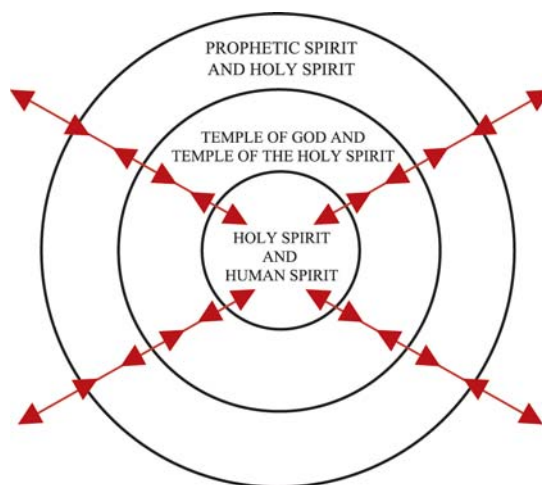
. . . the *Spirit intercedes* for the saints in accordance with *God’s will*. . . For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to* the likeness of *his Son*.²

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 through the ways and means revealed in scripture.

There are basically three dimensions of the spiritually forming work of the Holy Spirit (see the three concentric circles in the chart below). Each of them has important implications for any biblically based “spiritual formation” ministry, practice, or program. These dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit are intimately bound together, not mutually exclusive or isolated from each other, and have direct impact on the effective working of each other in the lives of believers (see the four lines traversing the concentric circles, with arrows pointing in both directions). The images, concepts, and institutions on which they are based are distinct, 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.

¹“Spiritual formation” is a synonym of “spiritual growth,” “sanctification,” and “discipleship,” and is sometimes used interchangeably with them. From a biblical point of view, however, the term “spiritual formation” focuses our attention more on the dynamics of how the Holy Spirit works this in us. See the discussion below.

²Compare also, e.g., Romans 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18.



Holy Spirit and human spirit

First, 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. This is the element or component in each of our lives that departs when our physical body dies (James 2:26; cf. Luke 24:46, John 19:30). The terms for “spirit” and even “(Holy) Spirit” in both the Old Testament (Hebrew *ruakh*) and the New Testament (Greek *pneuma*) are the same words that are used for “wind” or “breath” (cf. English “pneumonia”). This has important implications for understanding not only the “Holy Spirit” of God but also the “human spirit,” “spirituality,” and the process of “spiritual formation” (note esp. John 3:5, 8). 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.”

Spiritual formation begins when we become believers in Christ through the Gospel of grace through faith alone (Ephesians 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 Corinthians 12:13). Paul clarifies the relationship between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit in several passages. For example, consider 1 Corinthians 2:10-12:

. . . *The Spirit* searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the *man’s spirit* within him? . . . 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*.³

Thus, the Holy Spirit knows the depths of God, and the human spirit knows the depths of a person. Spiritual formation is based on the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit as he takes “what God has freely given to us” in Christ Jesus and brings it to full effect in the spirit of the believer. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16). This dimension of spiritual formation should cause us to focus on the significance and, indeed, power for the Christian life derived from *solitude and devotion* before God, in his very presence.

³Compare also, e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:3-6 with the background of Ezekiel 36:24-27 and Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Temple of God and Temple of the Holy Spirit

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 Corinthians 6:19-20) and corporately (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:14-21). This dimension of spiritual formation emphasizes the importance of “practicing the presence of God” through *worship, personal purity, and relational love*.

A temple is, by definition, a place of worship, so worship is to be at the very center of our experience in Christ. Worship is seeing God while looking life squarely in the face (see the Psalms). When we experience God in worship we see our lives in the light of who he is, and that puts everything else in perspective. Everything looks different, so what is important to us changes, and when what we want changes, our lives change along with it. One of the main goals of our lives is to become better worshippers. Real worship, in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24), is one of the most transforming experiences Christians can have.

In the Old Testament, God manifested his presence in many ways. One of them was his physical visible occupation of the tabernacle and later the temple in the form of a glory cloud (Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11, etc.). In the New Testament, “The Word became flesh and *made his dwelling among us*. We have seen *his glory, the glory of the One and Only*, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). He has now passed this glory on to us (John 17:22), and he sees us as the means by which his glory shines in the earth:

Now *the Lord is the Spirit*, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect *the Lord’s glory*, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is *the Spirit*. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)⁴

We actually become the glory of God in the world as we worship and serve our creator and redeemer. In order to function well in this calling, however, it is essential that we maintain our personal and corporate holiness and purity.

Holiness is the foundation for being able to love well: “Since you have in obedience to the truth *purified your souls* for a *sincere love* of the brethren, fervently *love one another from the heart*” (1 Peter 1:22 NASB; cf. vv. 15-16). One cannot love well without having a pure soul. In fact, it is this inner personal purity and the love that issues forth from it that is to be our goal in reading, studying, and teaching the Bible: “. . . the goal of our instruction is *love* from a *pure heart* and a *good conscience* and a *sincere faith*” (1 Timothy 1:5 NASB). After all, the requirements of the whole Old Testament law and prophets can be summed up in terms of love for God and people (Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14, 22-23, etc.). Love for one another is to be the mark that distinguishes us as the body of Christ in the eyes of the world (John 13:34-35). Love is more important than any talents or even spiritual giftedness that we may possess (1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13).

⁴Actually, see all of 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 and its continuation in 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, 16-18, and 5:5.

Prophetic Spirit and Holy Spirit

The same Holy Spirit who indwells and transforms us also empowers us for ministry, specifically, prophetic ministry. This is the essence of our *mission* in the church and in the world, which should cause us to focus significant attention on the believer's *witness, service, and special spiritual giftedness* for Christ in the church and in the world.

There is, of course, no small amount of debate about the work of the prophetic sign gifts of the Holy Spirit in this day and age. Our concern here is not with this debate, but with what we should all hold in common as those who are genuine believers in Christ. In the Old Testament, the empowering work of the Holy Spirit is closely linked to the prophetic institution (see, e.g., Numbers 11:25-29). The quote of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:17-21 connects this to the New Testament baptism of the Holy Spirit:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

Jesus anticipated this before his ascension (Acts 1:5 “in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”; cf., v. 8 and Luke 3:16). It is under the compulsion and dynamic work of the Holy Spirit that we are to serve as God’s prophets in this age, much like the prophets did in the Old Testament days (Matthew 5:11-12).

This does not mean that we all have “the gift of prophecy” (Acts 12:28, etc.), but it does mean that 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. The various gifts we have been granted by the Holy Spirit are important tools for doing just that (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a). We need to use these gifts as those who are filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-20) and his fruits (Galatians 5:22-23). There is a sense in which the Holy Spirit intends to be the one who “carries us along” in this prophetic ministry in life, similar to the way he “carried” the prophets “along” in the writing of scripture (2 Peter 1:21).⁵

Conclusion

A “spiritual formation” ministry helps to stimulate and participates in these three dimensions of the Holy Spirit’s work in order to promote a truly Christ-like “spirituality” in the lives of believers. There are various kinds of spiritualities and spiritisms that pervade our “New Age” postmodern culture today. We need to learn how to bring the true spirituality that we seek to practice in our lives and ministries to bear on those around us who are lost amid the confusing and deceptive array of modern alternatives.

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⁵The image here is once again “wind,” using the same terms associated with the wind driving a ship along (see Acts 27:15 and the remarks on “spirit” as “wind” above).