

What is Spiritual Formation?

Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit for the sake of others.

Galatians 4:19 – “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until *Christ is formed in you...*”

It is a recognition that truly following Christ flows first from the inner person and does not consist solely of outward acts of compliance or obedience. The standard Jesus sets is not at all measured by outward obedience; rather, it consists of a heart which operates on the level of the spirit of the law, not simply its letter. *It is an invitation to inner change through interaction with Jesus himself.*

Becoming like Christ does not happen magically. There are no formulas or steps that guarantee real transformation. But once we realize it is God’s nature to seek us out and draw us to Himself, we begin to cultivate and engage in practices that keep our hearts focused and alive to what God is doing to keep us in relationship with him. Over time, as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we are conformed into the image of Christ.

What follows are a few thoughts on this spiritual formation process. They have been gleaned from Scripture, spiritual writings from history and experience. Again, as before, these are in no particular order. These are not steps to complete. These are merely some of the important components of the spiritual formation process.

1. Spiritual formation into the image of Christ is for all of His followers, not the spiritually elite.

God’s invitation to us all to become more like Him is a Biblical imperative (Romans 12:1-2) and an organic reality (Galatians 4:19) intended for every follower of Christ. This is not for the select few or special category of Christians. It is for all believers. Transformation is normative, and the call to follow Christ is also a call to be transformed into His image. 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:28-29

2. Spiritual formation happens in community with other people.

Spiritual formation is always lived out and made complete in community. Biblical truths and message are hammered out on the anvil of faithful community living. Because God is a community, experienced within the Trinity, we cannot grow into his image apart from regular, intensive, and sustained engagement with other Christ followers in which our jealousies, irritations and resentments are confronted and the virtues of forbearance, love and forgiveness are given regular opportunities to be practiced. Hebrews 10:19-25

3. Spiritual formation happens by the direct work of the indwelling Holy Spirit progressively conforming us to the image of Jesus.

We cannot, by direct effort, change our heart. The active agent in the transformation process is the Holy Spirit, who regenerates, enlightens, motivates, and empowers believers in their inner being by God's indwelling presence to grow in their likeness to the Lord. While this transformative job is initiated by the Holy Spirit, He invites our participation. Ephesians 3:16-19

4. Spiritual formation happens as we cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit through intentional effort.

Our intention in spiritual formation refers to our ongoing decision to do our part so we experience Jesus more fully and become the person He has redeemed us to be. Intention is often the least talked about aspect of authentic spiritual growth. We talk about God's grace. We talk about forgiveness of sins. We talk about the Holy Spirit's role. We talk about the fact that we can't manufacture spiritual growth on our own. But we don't always carefully consider the importance of our purposeful effort to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in what He is trying to do in us.

Spiritual transformation, "recovering your life" is a partnership with God. God initiates and enables the process of spiritual formation, while our responsibility is to co-operate with the Holy Spirit by discovering and responding to the initiative, movements, and already-on-going activity of God in our lives.

Often, but not exclusively, this comes through the intentional practice of a spiritual discipline. The disciplines that help us to "walk with and work with" Jesus are not "spiritual principles" or "moral guidelines" we perform as a way to go about improving our condition. They are not a formula we follow so we look godly.

But they are practices that can transform us. They are *indispensable* to a life of faith *but* only to the degree that they allow us to "keep company" or connect with God. Often it is through a spiritual discipline we make space for him to work for that is when we open ourselves to him. Spiritual practices are our way of responding to God's invitation of transformation through an authentic encounter with God. 1 Timothy 4:7-8

5. Spiritual formation involves a radical internal change and is not a matter of external activity alone.

Transformation is the changing of who we actually are. Paul warned us not to fall into the trap of outward conformity to some set of "spiritual" standards. It's not

about “shoring up our behavior.” Instead, we are to pursue God Himself and experience the genuine metamorphosis of spiritual transformation.

Spiritual formation is the great reversal: from acting to bring about the desired results in our lives to being acted upon by God and responding in ways that allow God to bring about God’s purposes.

There is a universe of difference between self-improvement efforts and learning to know God. It is the difference between hoping we are “good enough” and staying alert to His presence and work within us and cooperating with it. One is a workout in self-righteousness. The other is what Paul called keeping “in step with the Spirit.” Gal. 5 & 6

6. Spiritual formation is a life long process.

There is not short cut to transformation. Real change takes time, and lots of it. Because the Holy Spirit uses life and disciplines to teach us Himself so we may experience the fullness of the abundant life, the process of spiritual formation is always slow. It is a time-intensive process that defies instant solutions and short-term strategies. It is a collaborative process that requires the believer’s cooperation and active engagement over the long haul. 2 Corinthians 3:18

7. Spiritual formation is the process of transforming the whole person.

It is a holistic process that involves the entire person, including one’s physical, cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions. As such, it requires us to be refreshingly honest about who we are including our sins, past insecurities and the wounds in our soul. This is the slow, grueling process of peeling off our false self. God graciously heals us, using a variety of means, as we venture into sometimes painful, uncomfortable areas of who we are. Ephesians 4:22-24

8. Spiritual formation happens in an individual for the glory of God and the sake of the world.

Many think spiritual formation is about feeding our souls for the sake of our well-being. On the contrary, it is intensely practical. In fact, Christ is not fully formed in us until it is expressed through love and sacrifice for the sake of others. The more we become like Jesus the more we will love people. The more our heart becomes like his heart, the more we are moved to reach out to the poor and the marginalized in society. It never starts with us...we are merely responding to God’s initiative in our lives....and it never ends with us...it’s complete only as it’s converted into action. Colossians 3:17

9. To Not be Spiritually Formed is Costly

If our hearts are not changed; if our inner beings are not “morphed” supernaturally into the image of Christ, we will forfeit true peace, true joy and

contentment. In times of great struggle we will not be able to *know*, in the depth of our being, that God is great and loving and all-together trustworthy because we've not trained our hearts to "be still." (Psm. 46:10) We'll not experience perfect peace in the midst of pain and confusion because we've not trained our minds (hearts) to be "stayed" on God (Isa. 26:3). If our hearts are not trained for godliness we will miss the fullness of the abundant life Jesus promised and settle for a lesser, counterfeit version of it.

"Christ entered our broken world to give us life in all its fullness, in every situation, every relationship and every activity. As you learn to recognize and welcome Christ's presence into every moment, ordinary days become filled with a tangible sense of God's presence. Suddenly, you are experiencing all of life with God. Even more, He is transforming you in the process. You begin to experience the kind of ongoing, close connection to God you've longed for." John Ortberg