

Christian Spiritual Formation

for the sake of others

What is *Christian Spiritual Formation*? [Five Minute Group Discussion]

Backwards

I think it is easier to understand if we read it backwards. Rather than Christian Spiritual Formation, let's try Formation of the Spirit to be like that of Jesus. How's that? Let's take a brief look at each of these pieces.

Formation

Here's the thing about formation. Formation itself is not a choice. Each of us, every moment of every day is being formed. Some of it is intentional. Some is not. We are formed by our culture, our environment, our families, our friends, our backgrounds, our genetics. We are also formed by what we choose to do, what we choose to read, what we choose to watch, as well as where we spend our time online or not. Regardless of who we are, we are being formed. So, the question isn't: *are we being formed?* The question is: *By whom or by what are we being formed?* This is especially critical in the case of Christian Spiritual Formation.

Spiritual (or Spirit)

The Spirit in its broadest sense is the inmost dimension of our being. It is sometimes referred to as Heart or Will. We will treat these as synonymous. The Spirit / Heart / Will forms the executive center of the Soul. When we talk about *Spiritual Formation*, we are talking about forming (or re-forming) the inmost dimension of our being. So, to restate our previous question: *By whom or by what is our Spirit being formed? Whose image do we wish to bear?*

Christian

In the case of Christian Spiritual Formation, there are exactly two options. We are either moving toward Christ, or we are moving away from Christ. There is no third choice. This is the heart of Christian Spiritual Formation. At its most basic level, it is about our moving toward Christ *for the sake of others*. It is never something that we undertake as a self-improvement project. Nor is it a faddish new label for old activities. It is about transformation in one direction only.

Here is how Dallas Willard defines it: “Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being. ... It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.” That inmost dimension of the human being is the Will (or Heart or Spirit).

Will

When Dallas speaks of the Will in this context, he further clarifies it in terms of three dimensions: the Impulsive Will, the Reflective Will, and the Embodied Will. These three dimensions of the Will are foundational to the framework for Christian Spiritual Formation. *Let’s take a quick look at each.*

Impulsive Will: Impulsive Will is outwardly directed and moved by and toward things that are simply attractive. With this Will, we simply choose what we desire.

Reflective Will: Reflective Will is oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not merely to what is desired. With this will, we choose what is good, and especially as Christians, we choose what is good under God within the context of the Kingdom of Heaven and for the sake of others.

Embodied Will: Embodied Will is where one of the other two Wills has sunk down into the body to such an extent that it automatically does what it dictates. The key word here is automatically. In general, there is no conscious choice involved with the actions of the Embodied Will. It is just acting on behalf of one of the other two.

Peter provides us with an example of both of these scenarios with the Embodied Will in the Gospel of John. In Chapter 18, Peter is accused of being one of Jesus’ followers, and all three times, Peter immediately denies it. This is an epidermal response. It is the response of the Impulsive Will that has become bonded to the Embodied Will.

Then, in Chapter 21 after the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus appears to seven of the Disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After a shared breakfast, he asks Peter three times in different ways, “Simon, do you love me?” Peter responds with words to the effect, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” This is the response of the Reflective Will that has now become bonded to the Embodied Will.

It is this coupling of Wills that is the key to understanding *Christian Spiritual Formation*. A more formal definition from Dallas Willard is: “If you’ve got that picture, I hope I can now say very clearly what it means to have been spiritually formed in Christ, for spiritual

formation in Christ transforms your embodied will. It transforms your embodied will so that what comes out of you automatically are the words and deeds of Christ.”

To say this another way, *Christian Spiritual Formation* is about the process whereby we are transformed from having *faith in Christ* to having the *faith of Christ*. It is how we become apprentices to Jesus within the Kingdom of Heaven here and now for the sake of others.

Okay, so how do we actually go about doing this? There are three parts to that answer, three parts to a framework.

VIM

The three parts form the acronym V.I.M., vim. The parts are Vision, Intention, and Method, and the order is important.

Vision: Vision is first because without that, the other two are meaningless. Our vision is to be apprentices (students) of Jesus learning how to do all things that he commanded us and all things that he showed us. This requires that we truly believe that Jesus is who Jesus says he is and that he is someone whom we wish to be like.

Intention: Intention is next. This is simply deciding that we do really want this. Pearl of Great Price, want it. And that we are willing to do whatever it takes to do it. It requires action and effort on our parts.

Method: Method is actually doing those things that are necessary to fulfill our Intention to bring about our Vision.

This now brings us to our last piece for today: The Spiritual Disciplines.

The Spiritual Disciplines

With all of this background, we are now in a position to understand the place of The Spiritual Disciplines within the context of Christian Spiritual Formation. It should come as no surprise that The Spiritual Disciplines are the Method part of VIM. But how? How do they fit in with the larger framework of Christian Spiritual Formation?

Let's take Anger as an example. Let's suppose that I am not happy about being angry all the time, especially in traffic. Let's suppose that I also believe that unbridled anger is incongruent with being an apprentice to Jesus. A natural approach would be to have a

stern self-talking-to and to resolve to never be angry again. This is the white-knuckle approach, and it never works long term. Worse yet, it turns the whole thing into a Law, into the Righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees. The issue is not about ridding oneself of anger, but rather it is about becoming the kind of person who blesses rather than curses, especially in traffic.

So how do we do this without a frontal attack? We have to come at it sideways. We have to find a way to put some space between the Impulsive Will and the Embodied Will. If you remember, an Impulsive Will that is also Embodied acts without any conscious thought. It just happens. We simply, automatically share our sign language skills with the person who just intentionally cut us off in traffic. No thought, just action.

We need to open a gap between the Impulsive Will and the Embodied Will so that the Reflective Will has a chance to step in and change things, and we must do this sideways, or it won't work. We also need the Grace of the Holy Spirit to assist us in this.

So, for instance, continuing with the Anger example, I could begin to practice the Spiritual Discipline of Silence. Silence gives us time to listen, time to think, time to realize all of the unnecessary noise that we allow into our lives. Silence helps us to be present to God, to the other, to the world in which we live. All of this changes us, helps us to choose peace, to be more present. Do you see how all of this could help open that gap between the Wills?

We practice The Spiritual Disciplines not for the sake of The Spiritual Disciplines. Rather, we practice them for the sake of learning to be and do the things that Jesus told us to be and do as his apprentices for the sake of others. We do them so that the Reflective Will can become bonded to the Embodied Will, so that we naturally "observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." - Matt 28:20