My Emerging Model of Spiritual Formation

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Part 1

One of the misunderstandings of spiritual formation is that people might believe spiritual formation begins after one is born again; however, this is not true. Since the beginning of time, God has woven his creation together in an interconnected, perfect system. Lowe (2018) describes the "original garden ecosystem consisting of several interlocking and nesting ecologies, " including a "spiritual ecology," which defines "the relationship between God and his human creation" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 20). Even before a baby takes its first breath outside the womb, the ecological system into which they are born begins to impact every facet of its life. According to Lowe (2018), "the social connections we have with other people and the interactions we create" have an impact on one's social surroundings "—for better or for worse" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 16). Therefore, it is important the environmental ecology one is surrounded by be healthy to allow for healthy growth in the six developmental dimensions outlined by Lowe (2018): moral, social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual.

For this emerging model of spiritual formation, this author has chosen to explore the connection between the health of today's family ecology and the impact on spiritual formation. As Pettit (2008) mentions, America is currently in a postmodern state. Regardless of the passage of time or the changes within culture, it is more important than ever that families affirm that *all truth* is grounded in the person of God (Pettit, 2008, p. 35). It is in this grounding people have a secure foundation to build upon.

 The introduction of sin into the world revolved around the enemy, a husband and wife (family), and a fractured relationship with God. The introduction of sin into God's perfect order had far-reaching implications, and "every subset of the larger ecosystem of the Garden of Eden felt the effect of human sin" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 43). As a result of disobedience to God's instruction, God pronounced consequences impacting the relationship between a husband and wife (Genesis 3:16) and man having to work the land (Genesis 3:17), the opposite of what God intended in his original design (Genesis 1:26–30). As the first man and woman began a family, their children deeply felt the impact of the consequences of sin. Unlike their parents, Cain and Abel were born into separation from God and never experienced the intimate and personal relationship with God their parents shared. The ecology of their environment was not functioning as it was meant to, and the manifestations of sin presented themselves within their brotherly relationship. As a result, wrong choices led to one sibling killing the other (Genesis 4:8), resulting in further admonishment and separation from God (Genesis 4:10–12).

Fast forward to today, and one can see that the family ecology has continued to spiral to a dire point. Fatherlessness and divorce abound (Baskerville, 2004), and more disruption within homes results in domestic violence, anxiety, addiction, and familial separation. If the whole of the earth, the *oikos*, is truly interconnected and interdependent, then what is done on the familial level dramatically impacts both the individual and their surroundings (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). As mentioned by Lowe (2017), spiritual formation "is not just about my own personal walk of faith, not just my personal relationship to Jesus, but that it fits within a larger ecological reference" (Liberty University, 2017). Therefore, the "it takes a village" mentality of raising families and living in community is essential in societies where individual needs are placed above communal needs. Pettit (2008) describes the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* when he writes the former is unified, and the latter is more individualistic (Pettit, 2008, pp. 73–74).

Families built on the word of God living in community with like-minded Christians contribute to proper spiritual formation within their families, and within every sphere of influence God provides to them. When parents understand and operate within their own personal ecology, they can be strong models for their children. Therefore, if one can help parents (or those thinking of becoming parents) understand the importance of their own spiritual formation, one can help families become healthy and positively impact the environment in which they live and operate. It is imperative one understands and appreciates that people do not exist to function as lone rangers but instead as worshippers of God who created every aspect of his cosmic ecology for his glory. Participation, aligned properly with his design, enables individuals to grow and to assist and encourage healthy growth around them every day.

Part 2

**Biblical Support**

God designed his creation to be in a reciprocal relationship with him. God loves what he created and saw that it was good (Genesis 1:31). He desires for his creation to love him and worship him not because he is prideful but because he knows that when his creation follows his design, all will be good. Unfortunately, as previously discussed, the fall of mankind broke the original design of the relationship between God and humanity. From the moment sin entered the world (Genesis 3:7), it distorted relationships and "disrupted the mutual harmony of reciprocally directed wills" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 175).

While in the Garden, God provided everything to Adam and Eve, and their daily tasks were delightful. After their expulsion from the Garden, their duties became laborious, and as most know, when work becomes laborious, and at times a struggle, joy and obedience can be extinguished from a home. The Bible does not explicitly say why Cain did not bring his best sacrifices to God (Genesis 4:3). Whatever was going on with Cain fed an unhealthy behavior in his heart. What began as an offense against God became an offense against another human, specifically his brother, Abel, whom he murdered (Genesis 4:8). He voluntarily left the presence of God (Genesis 4:16), traveled east of Eden, and founded a society who opposed God (Genesis 4:16–24).

It did not take long for sin to multiply. One might even wonder if Cain's disillusionment with God resulted from his mother's or father's attitude toward God. Perhaps there was disagreement between Adam and Eve about who sinned first, or one of them walked away from God for a period of time. Maybe this explains why one child was faithful to God while one was not entirely faithful. Although we might never know the whole story, we know that a parent's choices can positively and negatively impact a child's development and spiritual formation.

 The Battle for Godly Homes

 Sin permeates godly and non-believing homes; however, Christians must be good examples for the child(ren) one is raising and the legacy one desires to leave. Parents, called to lead their children, should not lead their children astray. As discussed by Lowe (2017), as part of the spiritual formation process, Christians must have a clear target in mind because if one does not know what they are aiming at spiritually, one will never achieve the targeted outcome of complete conformity to the image of Christ (Liberty University, 2017). For parents, Proverbs 22:6 illustrates the aim for their children's targeted outcome: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it."

Although Noah was a righteous and blameless person before the flood, sometime after the floodwaters receded and he cultivated a vineyard in the land, Noah became so drunk that he passed out naked in his tent (Genesis 6:9, 9:20–21). Two of his sons acted with honor toward their father and covered him appropriately for that time. Still, one disrespected his father and God by not obediently doing what his two brothers did (Genesis 6:22–23), resulting in more curses upon sons who should have been God-fearing men. One's respect toward people is reflective of one's respect toward God.

 The enemy is anti-relationship with God and his desire is for no one to have a relationship with God. The Bible declares the devil to be a sinner from the beginning (1 John 3:8), cunning (2 Corinthians 11:3), a murderer, and a liar (John 8:44). He went after the first family, and he will continue to go after families because he understands the model the family represents. Not only are believers God's adopted sons and daughters upon salvation (Romans 8:14–17), but they are also part of the larger household of God (Ephesians 2:19). Therefore, what one learns within the confines of their home will be taken out into every place they have connection or influence. As discussed by Lowe (2018), sociologists Urie Bronfenbrenner and Diana Garland agree about the impact the microsystem of the family has on the individual as it relates to the relationships that have nurtured and shaped the individual as well as how the social environment shapes, nurtures and influences the family. The family's relational component significantly impacts the spiritual formation process.

 As an individual, one is to love the Lord with all their heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). A parent is to love the Lord, know the Word, and teach their children to do the same (Deuteronomy 6:6–9). This love and lifestyle should permeate the home, and anywhere the individual goes. The why is described earlier in chapter six of Deuteronomy. God directed Moses to teach the people the commands so that the people's children and their children might fear the Lord and have a long life, be blessed, multiply, and inhabit the land God promised (Deuteronomy 6:1–3). The duty was on the elders and parents to teach their children to obey and fear God, and the blessing relied upon their obedience. The Israelites were a community of people who were to be like-minded in their end goal: love and obey God. The goal has not changed for today's Christian community.

The Influence of Godly Families

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had a very different kind of baby announcement. As a young, engaged teenager, the angel Gabriel visited her and told her she would give birth to a son through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26–35). Caught off guard, Mary had to believe all would be okay because the angel told her she was favored and the Lord was with her (Luke 1:28). Joseph, her fiancée, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace Mary, and after an angel assured him in a dream, it was of God for him to marry Mary (Matthew 1:18–21). Mary and Joseph, together, chose to be obedient to God's instructions for the benefit of many. It could have turned out so differently had Joseph decided to end the engagement. Instead, both raised young Jesus in the traditional ways of the Jewish people. They modeled for Jesus what it looked like to have godly parents who not only talked the talk but walked the walk. Just as God designed, Mary and Joseph cared for and nurtured Jesus, who, although he was God's son, could not care for himself as a child.

 Mary and Joseph's obedience to raise Jesus enabled Jesus to fulfill his purpose on earth. Because God did not want to continue in a fractured relationship with humanity, the opportunity to be reconciled with God became available through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 5:10). His plan resulted in wanting the best for his creation because he is love (1 John 4:8).

The experiences one has in their family microsystem impact one's ability to receive love, give love, know love, trust, and be faithful. Adam and Eve had a personal relationship with God; they experienced time with him and saw his good things firsthand. Once the fracture in the relationship occurred, it became harder to personally know God because of distance and the ugly lens of sin. This cannot be the model to follow. In order to build strong kingdom families, one needs to fight to remain in the place of intimately knowing God and being obedient to him in all things. The kingdom needs families fully living with Christ raising children who love God, who do not allow culture to impact them negatively but instead positively impact the culture for Christ.

Part 3

**Necessary Ingredients for Spiritual Growth**

 Because the microsystem of the family impacts the greater ecosystem, it is essential every member of the microsystem continue to move toward growth. If growth ceases to occur, it can lead to not only physical death but also spiritual death. Lowe (2017) states that God only has one process of growth for both the natural and the spiritual (Liberty University, 2017). The process terms for growth (the Greek word *auxano*) apply to every individual: growing, abounding, renewing, and transforming (Liberty University, 2017).

 As one understands the calling of God, the proclamation of the Gospel to all, the regeneration of the born-again believer by the Holy Spirit, transformation (the place in which growth takes place), and conformation (being conformed to the image of Christ), the targeted outcome is revealed. As saved individuals, the target is to be like Christ. Just as a seed should not remain a seed but should instead grow to what it is meant to become every individual's targeted outcome is to be like Christ and to mirror his image to those within their families, their communities, and wherever else God leads them.

 Growing

 To set one's mind on the target of becoming like Christ, one must remember that no one has arrived at full growth. Lowe (2017) quoted Martin Luther, who said one is continually in the process of becoming (Liberty University, 2017). Not only are parents continually in the process of becoming, but they are also responsible for nurturing and shepherding children in their growing and becoming. As parents move forward in their individual growth, their willingness to participate in the growth process affects those within their family microsystem and beyond into the greater ecosystem of creation. In the parable of the four soils found in Mark 4:8, Jesus used the word *auxano* in reference to good crops that grew not simply to exist but as crops multiplied in growth. Parents should desire to experience spiritual growth that grows deeply because of their faith roots planted firmly in Christ and the life-giving water he provides. As parents remain tethered to Christ, children will experience the benefit of their family's growth and, in turn, begin to formulate their journey of spiritual growth because they have seen it modeled.

 Abounding

 Abounding, the Greek word *perisseuo* means growth beyond measure (Liberty University, 2017). When people are operating in the overflow of the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22–23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—they display the character of Christ in them. To have good fruit means that not only will the individual be fed, but the family and their community will also benefit from their abundance. However, when the fruit is not good, this supplies very little, if any, nourishment to themselves, their families, or their community. Bad fruit stinks and has little value. To build strong families and communities, one must desire to abound in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. One abounds in his fruit as one develops a deeper relationship with the Lord through worship, prayer, and the reading and study of scripture. In these practices, one learns the attributes of the fruit of the Spirit through firsthand experience and knowledge.

 Renewing

 An individual is saved at the moment of salvation; however, it is a daily task to remind oneself to put on the new self (Colossians 3:10). Daily distractions, including the challenges of raising a family and the life/work balance, may cause some to stumble into unhealthy habits not aligned with the image of Christ. Pettit (2008) states, "Spiritual formation involves attention to *both* inside ("heart work") and outside ("mouth work")" and "we can invite God into the inner search" (Pettit, 2008, p. 126–127). The Old Testament dealt with behaviors and putting parameters and rules in place for those behaviors. The New Testament, through the teachings of Jesus, addresses the heart behind the behaviors. Rules alone do not work if the heart is the issue. Healthy families continually renewing their hearts and minds through the Holy Spirit can significantly impact their legacy, communities, and the world. On the contrary, spiritually lost families not led by the Holy Spirit may contribute to the hopelessness and despair increasing in the world today.

 Transforming

 Generally, most people will only do something to see a result. For example, people do not choose to go on a weight loss program with the hope of never losing weight or seeing inches lost. They want to see progress and reach their goal. The same desire should occur with spiritual growth. The end goal is to become like Christ, and this requires transformation. Since everyone is a sinner and falls short of the glory of God before salvation (Romans 3:23), the saved individual should look different after salvation and throughout the transformation process. The Greek word *metamorphoo* is where metamorphosis derives. Stages of life exist in the natural (*i.e.,* fetal development, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood) and the spiritual. One cannot remain in the same stage forever.

 Parents desiring to lead their families well must not be afraid of God and others within their community to do well-checks on their spiritual growth. Character development, one's aim to become like Christ, requires commitment and intentionality (Pettit, 2008, pp. 158, 161). Pettit (2008) states, "It is through our foundational character, whether good or bad, that we develop a value system that helps us make ethical or unethical, moral or immoral, decisions about what actions to take in any given situation" (Pettit, 2008, p. 144). Therefore, every Christian parent must have a foundational character built on the Gospel and be willing to continually develop and grow their character so they can model godly character development to their children. Lowe (2018) states, “According to Bronfenbrenner, reciprocal interactions between developing persons in various sectors of the social ecology (family, church, school) "are especially salient both as influences on and manifestations of development" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 174).

The growth process takes time and has victories and setbacks, but it should always be moving forward. Since the targeted outcome of spiritual formation is to be like Christ, love is the measure because God is love (1 John 4:7–21). If one loves God, one should love others "in every season of life and in every community" despite whether it is uncomfortable or challenging (Pettit, 2008, pp. 164, 176). If families love each other and others well, they are operating with the necessary ingredients to further their spiritual growth, individually and collectively.

Part 4

**Facilitating Spiritual Formation**

 As previously discussed, "Spiritual formation, growing in community toward Christlikeness, is the critical need of all Christ followers" (Pettit, 2008, p. 269). Pettit (2008) offers a four-pronged approach to spiritual formation: know one's identity in Christ, make oneself known in Christian community, pursue a lifetime of growth in integrity, and become fully equipped to glorify Christ by serving others. Spiritual formation is an individual and others-focused approach, which does not always align with American culture. However, the more informed parents are about their spiritual formation and their willingness to commit to participating in their spiritual formation process, the better they will be equipped to help facilitate their children's spiritual formation process from an early age.

The Role of the Faith Community

 While making church attendance a significant priority within family life, there is more to the Christian life than just attending services. Parents must model being a part of a faith community. While discussing the divine provisions for spiritual formation: God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's people, Lowe (2017) quotes James M. Howard, "There is little consensus regarding the role of the community" among many Christians (Liberty University, 2017). Community is necessary for spiritual formation but needs to be better understood. Lowe (2017) quotes C. Norman Kraus, who stated, "Individualism has appeared to be the child and ally of biblical religion" (Liberty University, 2017). Individualism not only affects one's biblical interpretation, but it also affects one's relationships within the faith community and beyond. The battle is between individuality and individualism. Individuality helps one understand they are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), while individualism focuses too much on self rather than on God and others. Lowe (2017) emphasizes this point when stating, "There is a place for individuality but not individualism….We need one another to grow spiritually" (Liberty University, 2017).

 Parents as Leaders

 Parents are the leaders within the home. Lowe (2017) believes that leaders may feel lonely because they isolate themselves and disconnect from their communities (Liberty University, 2017). Parents can often feel lonely or discouraged because they are not relying on spiritual resources available to them found in community. While children are in the home, parents need to have a community of people they can do life with to navigate the ups and downs of parenting. Their children cannot fulfill this reciprocal relationship role; it must be found with people in the same stage of life or those who have already raised children who can speak truth and encouragement into their life.

 Know the Call

 The primary call of the Christian is to live a dynamic relationship with God, and the functional call is how one lives out their primary calling and changes as one moves through stations of life (Pettit, 2008, p. 198). God is more concerned about a person rather than what a person does. As a parent, one must understand their relationship with God is of utmost importance and cannot and should not be set aside in the busyness of raising a family. One can only pour from themselves out of the overflow within them that the Holy Spirit provides. Through the hard days and the long years, joy must be in both the primary and functional calls in one's life.

Form a Healthy Story

 While God uses every part of our story to bring himself glory, one should not aim to have the most complicated story to tell. Parents should nurture the narrative within their homes to help ensure their marriages and their children's stories weave more of God's goodness in them instead of stories of caving into the pressures of the world. Each person's story is individual to them, but not meant to keep to oneself. One's story is individual and then corporate because it weaves with the larger meta-narrative of God's story (Pettit, 2008, p. 219).

 In speaking of stories, parents need to make the story of God through scripture the main story their children know and hear personally. Pettit (2008) states, "Story is a catalyst tool of God, growing the individual and building community" (Pettit, 2008, p. 218). Parents need to ensure their children hear stories, the primary genre in the history of communication. It is how information is passed down. Not only must parents share the stories, but they must also do it authentically because "Stories touch the heart and are remembered, while facts are often forgotten" (Pettit, 2008, p. 219). Parents must ask themselves what kind of story they are willing to offer their children. Will it be a story of their family and future generations serving themselves or serving God and others?

 Being Counter-Cultural

 Unity is the result of love (Philippians 2:2). Thinking of others before oneself is generally the opposite of popular culture. However, it is attainable and is accomplished through the sanctification process Jesus provides for believers to be spiritually formed (John 17:17, 19) (Pettit, 2008, p. 239). Because all believers are ministers of the Gospel, parents must assume the role of a pastor in their home. Parents must allow the Holy Spirit to continue to work in them as they are spiritually formed (Pettit, 2008, p. 247). Parents must be transformed first, just as preachers must be, by studying scripture so they can lead and teach their children in the ways of God (Pettit, 2008, p. 250). The best way for parents to do this for their children is to not only know scripture and teach scripture but also live out scripture. Children can pick up on hypocrisy faster than one might think.

 The parent and the child need to grow individually in all areas of their life, not just for themselves but also for the benefit of others. If families commit to continuing to work through the process of spiritual formation in unity alongside their faith community, the landscape of one’s city and state, schoolrooms, boardrooms, and newsrooms might look a lot different. It is an attainable reality available only through complete surrender to God first and then allowing him to shape you as he desires for his glory.

Part 5

**Targeted Outcome of the Spiritual Formation Process**

 As has been discussed throughout this paper, and as Lowe (2017) spoke of, one must "begin with the end in mind" as it relates to the targeted outcome of spiritual formation (Liberty University, 2017). The end is to become conformed to the image of Christ. Because this paper addresses family ecology, the conformity of Christ must be looked at in light of the parent/child relationship. As stated before, the health of a community relies on the health of the individuals within that community. One can only expect communities to reflect the image of Christ if the people within those communities are individually reflecting the image of Christ.

Raising Children of the Flesh to Become Children of the Spirit

 Samra (2008) states, "As a result of the first creation all humanity bear the image of Adam, now in the new creation believers are being transformed into the image of Christ" (Samra, 2008, p. 102). While Samra specifically addresses the believer as it relates to being transformed, we must also look at the influence within the home to mold and shape children to know, love, and follow Jesus. Individuals are all created beings made by God in his image; however, individuals are not adopted into God's family until the moment of salvation. Shaping the in-between of birth and salvation is critical, but salvation is not the only goal.

 With the increasing demand on people's lives, family life often suffers. While generations past have spent time together, today's families are often spread thin. Regardless, parents should be the people most responsible for shaping and nurturing their children, including training and educating them (Samra, 2008, p. 87). The family unit is a child's first community and should be a place of encouragement and building-up as they move out into their expanded communities (whether that be school, faith, sports, etc.). Children remain our children, but there is an expectation that they should grow up and become mature (Samra, 2008, p. 92). Parents cannot simply preach the Gospel to their children without including the ongoing work of teaching and discipleship. It is the responsibility of the parents to do this work and also to align themselves with a good community to come alongside them to help and train their children (Samra, 2008, p. 49).

The Apostle Paul felt a parental burden for the Corinthian church. Paul saw the Corinthians as people struggling between the spiritual and the flesh. He addressed them as babies in Christ (1 Corinthians 13:1) because they could not be addressed as spiritual and belonged to the world of the flesh. Their actions were not reflecting transformation. Paul believed the following were characteristics of Christlike behavior: faithful obedience; voluntary self-emptying and self-giving love; life-giving sufficiency and transformative potency; and hopeful expectation of resurrection (Samra, 2008, p. 55). Paul often concerned himself with the spiritual maturation process and his role in facilitating the process for the community he served (Samra, 2008, p. 52).

 Christ as the Example

 Lowe (2017) discusses the biblical goal of whole person transformation finding its origin in the Old Testament and the fullness of evidence in the New Testament through Jesus (Liberty University, 2017). Therefore, Christ and his characteristics are revealed from Genesis to Revelation. Humanity, through sin, became fragmented and created disunity, so our minds have a hard time grasping the concept of the whole. However, according to Lowe (2017), humans consist of different aspects functioning in unity, and "each vantage point of human wholeness interconnects with every other aspect in an ecology interplay of mutual, spiritual benefit and growth" (Liberty University, 2017). Mutual benefit is critical to the faith community. Individuals within the faith community must mature to know the fullness of Christ and grow up in all aspects (Ephesians 4:13, 15).

 Paul initially believed his mission to be that of taking the Gospel to the people. However, as Paul matured, Paul cared for and ministered to the communities. Because of the written Word, his example still impacts the faith community today. "Paul viewed his churches as essential for accomplishing the maturational aspect of his commission" (Samra, 2008, p. 36). He was not just a distant parent; Paul was very much involved in the spiritual growth of the people in his care. Samra (2008) provides both an encouragement and a warning: we should all see our individual responsibility in our community's successes and failures (Samra, 2008, p. 40), including within the family unit. A parent, however, does not bear all the responsibility for their children's spiritual growth. Just as Paul instructed the community at Philippi (Philippians 2:12), every individual is responsible for doing their own part in working out their salvation. Parents cannot work out a child's salvation, but they can show them what is necessary. The family unit is the communal place where godly individual growth should first take place for the benefit of the whole.

Our goal as parents should not be just the salvation of our children but the complete transformation of our children to be Christlike. Samra (2008) states, "Christ's attitudes and actions provide the standard or norm for believers," with Romans 15:3–9 outlining Christ as an example to be followed (Samra, 2008, p. 74).

 Mature in Christ

 While final perfection awaits the appearance of Christ (Philippians 3:20–21), the process of maturation has started in partial realization. Samra (2008) states, "Mature (spiritual, holy, free, wise, and strong) is to be a person who is like Christ, actualizing his character in contingent situations" (Samra, 2008, p. 74). These contingent situations are where the mature stand while the immature might crumble. In today's culture, where it might be easier to give in to fit in, a mature believer must put on the mind of Christ, not stumble easily, be holy and pure, know their freedom found in Christ, and receive wisdom provided only by God.

There is tension in the process of spiritual formation because learning and growing are involved. Parents should be people pursuing Christ in such a way their children choose to imitate them instead of imitating those who do not follow Christ. Samra (2008) states, "The promise of bearing the image of Christ is the hope of the Gospel" (Samra, 2008, p. 104). The Gospel is the Good News which transforms individuals, families, and communities and best reflects mature individuals bearing the image of Christ.

Part 6

**The Importance of Social Networks**

In today's vernacular, "social networks" might spark a flurry of emotions and comments. Many people automatically assume social networks refer only to things like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and other social media apps. However, the term "social networks" involves so much more. In discussing social networks, Dr. Mary Lowe (2017) provides the basis for the power and influence social networks have on individuals and communities, "Social networks act like a contagion" (Liberty University, 2017). For better or worse, we are not isolated individuals who do not impact others; isolation can cause a person not to function correctly within social networks (Lowe, Liberty University, 2017). Because this paper focuses on family ecology and spiritual growth, one must examine how social networks affect spiritual growth as it relates to the family.

 The Purpose of Unity

 If the expectation for the Church is unity, it makes sense that unity should also be found within the home. Unity within the faith community does not just mean the same mind but rather the same mind in Christ (Samra, 2008, p. 142). What should set the Christian family and the faith community apart from the world is that their minds are no longer set on a worldly point of view, but rather their "faith designates a person's orientation toward God" (Samra, 2008, p. 115). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul believed that as believers defined themselves more with Christ and their community of believers, the more their character would conform to the character of Christ, which is the end goal of spiritual formation (Samra, 2008, p. 112). In the same regard, a family unit must begin with and revolve around an orientation toward God and a desire to grow both individually and collectively as a family unit and within the larger faith community.

 If, as Lowe (2017) suggests, individuals have an important role in the development of others, including spiritual growth, it is critical for the betterment of our communities that parents understand the significant role they play in helping their children develop in all areas of their lives, including their spiritual development (Liberty University, 2017). Spiritual development is not meant to be done solely by the church but in connection with the church. The need for understanding is important because parents today are taking their children to church less than their parents did. In a recent Gallup study, sixty-seven percent of the adults polled said they attended church as a child; however, only thirty-one percent say they attend a place of worship today, and only nine percent nearly attend services weekly (Wingfield, 2023).

 Parents must lead the family to church as a foundational priority. The family unit is under significant attack not just by the principalities of the unseen world but also by the tangible world via television, movies, books, curriculum, and social media. Samra (2008) makes an interesting comment, "Community is failing because individuals are immature" (Samra, 2008, p. 136). Perhaps the issues within our communities lie within the fact people are not gathering together in community as the body of Christ. Just as Paul reminded his readers "that as a community they are a Temple of God because God's Spirit dwells among them," we may be experiencing less spiritual growth (maturity) today because people are not making community a priority to corporately experience God's presence (Samra, 2008, p. 144). Paul expected the believers to gather, and disunity disables growth when those who should gather do not.

The Wide-Reaching Effects of Community

 Social networks are not isolated to the secular world. Lowe (2018) states, "The more reciprocal exchanges we have with one another in the body of Christ, the more opportunities we have to spread the contagion of holiness" (Lowe, 2018, p. 131). Samra (2008) further reiterates this when he says, "The community is never far from view because the community is affected by the behavior of the individuals within the community" (Samra, 2008, p. 149). Not only is unity important for families, but so is holiness. Children's initial social networks are formed within the family unit and should be as healthy as possible. Families must desire their social contagion to be for good, to reflect Christ, and to build up those within their communities. One should want to reflect positive behaviors in a unified and loving manner to a hurting and confused world.

 Isolation distracts from a person's purpose to function as a complete body. It is within the body of Christ one learns how to excel in faith (2 Corinthians 8:7), grow in faith (2 Corinthians 10:15), and be strengthened in faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2) (Samra, 2008, p. 115). Gathering as a body of believers plays a critical role in developing the individual and the community. Community is the means through which the five components of the process of being conformed to Christ take place: identifying with Christ, enduring suffering, experiencing the presence of God, receiving and living out instructions from God, and imitating a Christlike example (Samra, 2008, p. 133). If one fails to participate within their community, their spiritual growth will be stunted, impacting not only themselves but those around them. Additionally, community is where the teaching of the Word takes place, and spiritual gifts are revealed, confirmed, and encouraged. While scripture learning can occur individually, "community brings a stronger connection between the wisdom from God found in apostolic teaching and the community" (Samra, 2008, p. 162).

 If social networks refer to "the connections people have with each other, the interactions that transpire across the connections, and the influence that results from these connective interactions (Lowe, 2018, p. 124), Christian families should lead well with a model for spiritual growth which results in conformity to Christ. The desire should be to have healthy families who are a contagion for developing others to be faith-filled believers growing more like Christ. A model such as this will have long-lasting positive effects on families within the body of Christ and those in their communities who are not yet walking with Christ.

Part 7

**The Digital Age and Spiritual Formation**

Throughout this paper, we have contemplated the necessary elements of spiritual formation. It began, as it should, with biblical support for spiritual growth. It progressed to the necessary ingredients of spiritual growth, the targeted outcome of spiritual growth, and the importance of community regarding spiritual growth. These topics serve as a foundation to help one understand spiritual formation and its significance. As a person intentionally matures in their spiritual formation, one must then move toward understanding how to properly apply what they are learning in their cultural context.

The Impact of Technology

Although technology may appear to be something new, technology is so much bigger than computers, cell phones, and television. Technology has affected humanity throughout the ages. The definition of *technology* has shifted throughout the centuries from art, skill, and craft to tools or machines, reducing technology to instruments to accomplish tasks (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 20). The Bible is considered a form of technology (the written text), meaning technology has shaped Christianity (Campbell & Garner, 2016). David Hopper believes, "Technological application influences not only creation but also the human community, shaping the rhythms of everyday life" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 20). Today’s Christians cannot afford not to understand current technology, including forward-thinking models of where digital technology is heading. This section will further discuss the following three areas in the digital space: online church, online education, and social media.

Online Church Communities

The epidemic that began in 2020 changed the way people conducted everyday business. Schools closed, businesses closed, and churches could no longer assemble. Many churches before the lockdown had a digital presence, but many did not. While resources can be why churches adopt or do not adopt a digital presence, “sometimes there is a tension with institutions that are based on tradition” (Pardes, 2021). Yung Han Kim believes cyber worship "will result in a certain wearing away of the historical institutional churches and worship" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 82). However, Lowe (2018) is a voice of reason in saying, "There are benefits to be gained from both virtual and physical communities" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 82).

Churches that offer digital tithing, have YouTube channels, maintain well-designed websites, and have an active social media presence allow their members to stay connected and reach people who might not even be a part of their immediate community. This is an important point because Christians are a part of the larger Church, and digital technology has allowed more connections outside of face-to-face meetings. Similar to how Paul reached the churches he discipled by writing letters when he was not with them, pastors today can reach their church members when they are not in each other’s presence. Additionally, Jesus utilized oral and written traditions to reach a broad audience. Churches need to understand that ignoring new technology in the name of tradition is not an option (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 24). Younger generations are accustomed to "on-demand" media. If churches dig in their heels and do not find ways to utilize technology, they risk not being able to maintain a connection with younger generations. A church without young people is a dying church.

The closure of churches impacted Sunday services and other church-related activities such as Bible studies, small groups, and student ministries. Isolation was, and still is, the enemy of spiritual formation because "we don’t grow spiritually when we are isolated" (Liberty University, 2017). Virtual small groups and Bible studies allow people to stay connected and may lead to deeper connections because online "can be easier to find others who share commonality of experiences and belief and to discuss these in an open forum" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 83). People may feel more comfortable sharing their struggles or questions in the comfort of their homes while on a Zoom call with several people. Virtual small groups should not replace all face-to-face meetings. Campbell and Garner (2016) state that online communities serve as a supplement, not a substitute, when they say, "The network nature of community online allows members to bridge their online and offline spiritual activities to build a cohesive spiritual network of commitments and practices" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 67). The online church presence also impacts families as parents, teens, and children navigate differences in preference for digital versus face-to-face. Parents can learn, just as churches have, not to dig in their heels in the name of tradition but to be available to seek healthy ways for their family to grow together spiritually and for each individual within the family unit to grow spiritually.

Online Education

As discussed in the prior section, not only were churches forced to close during the pandemic, schools were forced to close. Many schools had to pivot to virtual classrooms quickly, and just like with churches, those who already had established virtual programs made the switch much easier. Virtual classrooms provide great options for education, including spiritual development. While many opponents of online education vocalize their belief that the absence of physical presence inhibits growth, Lowe (2018) states, "We are well aware that online community is not always a positive contributor to growth and formation, but communities in physical spaces don’t always contribute to the growth of the individual either" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 79). Further, Elizabeth Patterson argues, "We cannot assume that formation is happening automatically simply because a classroom does exist" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 85).

Online education affords families opportunities to choose their learning environment. For instance, many parents are unhappy with their local school choices. Online education allows them to enroll their children in online Christian education, providing an environment where children can learn from a biblical worldview. Online education also allows adults who wish to pursue further education to do so while maintaining their jobs or raising families because of the flexibility in scheduling that is not always possible with in-person higher education. Additionally, many people choose less formal online education opportunities, such as online Bible study courses, to contribute to their spiritual growth where options may not be available in their local area. Christians cannot ignore the opportunities available through online education because "online-offline distinction has blurred as the internet has become embedded in everyday realities" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 77).

Social Media

One of the biggest struggles facing families today as it relates to technology is the rise of social media. Barna’s research concludes "that the primary purpose or function of social media is connection" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 94). Modern technology has fragmented society because people can work, live, and travel wherever they choose, and this choice often leads to separation from familial connections. People utilize online communities such as those offered through social media to fill God-designed yearning for connection.

While access to social media comes with certain risks, one must understand its technological ambiguity, "What is most important here is the social context of technology, considering how its development, application, and consequences determine its moral value" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 33). Christian families find themselves in a conundrum of whether they should or should not allow their children to utilize social media when social media now plays a significant role in how schools, organizations (including churches), and marketing companies communicate with children and teens. Part of the role of the parent is to guide children in their spiritual growth, helping them learn how to make wise choices. Campbell and Garner (2016) summarize how one should approach technology by saying, "Faithful living involves thinking about optimistic, pessimistic, and ambiguous responses to technology and how one might respond appropriately and wisely to the environment we find ourselves in" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 35).

Algorithms and technological controls allow a person to have both freedom to choose and a controlled environment simultaneously. What a person talks about within ear’s reach of one’s cellphone or an Alexa device and what one searches online changes what one sees on their social media feed. This mechanism, built to help marketing companies find customers for corporations, can serve as a great tool to monitor the progress of individual spiritual growth. If what one sees on Instagram and TikTok is more secular in nature, perhaps one is not talking about or searching for things of faith or religion on their phones and computers. If one becomes whom they hang around with physically, this also will prove true in digital spaces.

Christians must continue to utilize and develop technology that, as image bearers of God, will be formers of the culture (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 23). Using technology to help people has been used to justify the case for technology (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 27). What better way to help people come to know the Lord and spiritually grow than to harness current available technology and technology still to come?

Part 8

**Application and Implications of an Ecological Model of Spiritual Formation**

 This paper has thus far served to highlight the importance of family ecology on spiritual formation through an ecological model. Lowe (2018) states, "Using a framework of biology helps us understand that an ecosystem approach represents a complex system of interactive, dynamic, and bidirectional influences that typically foster growth and development" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 121). As discussed previously, the garden ecosystem helps one understand the relationship between God and his creation. Therefore, in order to understand spiritual growth, one must first "recognize the necessity of our spiritual connection to Christ and our spiritual interconnections to one another" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 134). Lowe (2018) more directly states, "To understand an ecosystem perspective is to essentially understand networks" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 105).

 Everyone lives within and contributes to this world because people operate relationally in both individual and community contexts (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 82). As one navigates life, one must look to function within their cultural context in an appropriate and wise manner. The digital space brings up a host of ethical considerations for how people operate relationally. Silverstone et al. (1992) studied how families chose to domesticate technology into their family life and found that families are guided by their moral and value boundaries (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 102). This is important to note because it speaks to the intrinsic necessity for moral and value boundaries to be shaped by the family within the family first. In defining his ecology of human development, Urie Bronfenbrenner uses the family as a prime example of a "microsystem." Within the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner describes the "mesosystem," the relationship between home and school; the "exosystem," the effects on a child between the home environment and the parent's work or school; the "macrosystem," the culture in which a person grows, and the "chronosystem," the process of formation that occurs in transition and life changes (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, pp. 108–109). This ecological approach illustrates the impact the childhood years have on a person's life as they progress throughout various life stages and interact with Christ and others.

Like all humans, children and teens desire to connect relationally, and new technology allows them to connect in ways their parents may or may not have connected with their peers. Although studies have shown that "highly connected teens would much rather gather in person," social media and smartphones allow for connection when physical presence is not possible (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 115). Therefore, Christian families cannot simply shrink back from the varying forms of today's available technology but should actively engage in the spiritual growth of the individuals within their family unit so that the right choices might be made when partaking of technology (training up a child as directed in Proverbs 22:6). One cannot be myopic in their faith by limiting their contact with the goings on of the world "because human beings are relational and made in the image and likeness of God" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 82).

The Compounding Effect of Technology on the Future

 To highlight the example of technology, one looks to the Pauline Epistles. Had Paul not ventured into the technology of text in letter form, which then was morphed into media text in book form through the Bible, people today would not have the ability to read the words Paul claimed contributed to the spiritual growth of the recipients of his letters (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 112). The words Paul wrote to those early churches are not spoken to us today through man but through the Holy Spirit. If letters written close to two thousand years ago can still speak to us today, the Holy Spirit can use new forms of technology to speak to people as well. Additionally, Christians "can purposely shape technology for their goals and present media in light of their beliefs" and must also "critically reflect on how the nature of media technology may impact their communities" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 100). Paul, in his letter to the church at Colosse, said, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). "Every opportunity" is not bound by limits or constraints for the encouragement of not only the saints but to also take the message of the Gospel and to help those who believe in their spiritual formation. Dr. Lowe (n.d.) modeled such encouragement via the technology of video in his final presentation to this class (Liberty University, n.d.).

**Conclusion**

 In the big picture, an ecological system is made up of many parts interacting with one another and contributing to the whole. This ecological system includes the family. Healthy families centered on Christ help produce healthy communities by implementing best faith practices such as Bible reading, prayer, and fellowship with the body of Christ, which are tools utilized in the spiritual formation process. While technology has advanced throughout the generations, networked theology is not a new concept. It is not so much the means as to how people gather or share the Gospel message but rather the heart and the motives behind each individual's technology usage. Humanity and the Holy Spirit are present in both physical and virtual environments, so it is imperative that Christian families are represented as well. Although spiritual formation in a fast-paced world may be overlooked due to a variety of reasons, the targeted outcome of spiritual formation remains the same: complete conformity to the image of Christ. The opposite of spiritual formation results in declining spiritual growth and a more secular and self-centered world. How one lives individually and collectively impacts the culture in which one lives for better or for worse, and God desires the best for his creation.

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