

BIBLICAL TRANSFORMATION, MEANS OF GRACE, SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES, AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION— TRUE SPIRITUALITY

Stay Sharp In the Allegheny District

Waterdam Church, Canonsburg, PA

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March 9-10, 2026



True Spirituality

- ▶ The Holy Spirit "...also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service" (Article 6, EFCA Statement of Faith).
- ▶ The Bible tells us that Holy Spirit is at work in each and every believer transforming us into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). His work is powerful, personal, and mysterious.
- ▶ At Theology Refresher 2026, we want to think deeply together about true spirituality, separating fact from fiction, practicing discernment about contemporary ideas and practices, and searching out biblical teaching about genuine transformation.

True Spirituality or Spiritual Formation raises the following questions:

- ▶ What is true spirituality?
- ▶ What is the personal, practical work of the Holy Spirit in believers?
- ▶ How should we evaluate contemporary teachings on "spiritual formation?"
- ▶ What do Christians mean by "the means of grace?"
- ▶ What is piety and pietism and what is its history?
- ▶ How do we grow as followers of Jesus Christ?

INTRODUCTION



- ▶ Anonymous, [My Conversation with God: I had no idea what God would do when I asked him to use me.](#) (March 2007).
- ▶ John Piper, [The Morning I Heard the Voice of God](#) (March 21, 2007).

John Coe, “Spiritual Theology: A Theological-Experiential Methodology for Bridging the Sanctification Gap,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 2/1 (2009), 4-43 (4-5):

- ▶ There exists a serious gap in the mind of many believers between what they know to be the *goal* of sanctification and growth and where they know they *actually are* in their life. The goal or spiritual ideal is somewhat clear to many, at least as an ideal: to be conformed to Christ, to love God with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves, to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, to pray without ceasing, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. . . . However, the frustration begins right there: in the awareness of an immense distance between where we should, could or ought to be spiritually and where we in fact are—a huge chasm that some have termed the “sanctification gap.”

- ▶ One of the most pressing questions for many believers as well as for the church in general is how to close this gap, that is, *how to understand the real-life processes of transformation* in order to grow with a growth that is from God (Col. 2:19). The older we get, the more we may grow weary of our spiritual struggles, of even faking spiritual growth or lying to ourselves that what we are doing is really working. . . . Many well-intentioned believers sit in churches week after week, having been equipped only to become “mature beginners,” knowing from the Word what they could become yet having an underlying suspicion that they are not as mature as they should be. As a result, they wonder in their deep whether they will ever go on to full maturity.

David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Multnomah, 2010).

Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Zondervan, 2014).

Ordinary means of grace. Extraordinary means of sanctification.
(common grace, means of grace, prevenient grace, efficacious grace, irresistible grace, sustaining grace, persevering grace, means of grace)

THE FOURTH LAUSANNE CONGRESS (Incheon, South Korea, September 22–28, 2024): [The Seoul Statement: V. Discipleship: Our Calling to Holiness and Mission](#)

- ▶ In his mercy, God has worked through the Lausanne Movement over the past half century to catalyse evangelism to unreached peoples and communities around the world and to inculcate a sense of social concern in the face of injustice, oppression, and discrimination. These dual emphases have often been held together within the concept of “integral mission,” but integral mission has not always fully integrated the command of our Lord to be disciples and his commission to make disciples. As a result, despite our claim to be followers of our crucified Lord, we have often failed to live in keeping with the holy pattern of life he gave to us and to teach others to do the same. The result has been a steady stream of reports of financial mismanagement, of sexual misconduct and abuse, of abuse of power among leaders, of efforts to cover-up these failures while ignoring the pain of those who have suffered because of them, and of spiritual anemia and immaturity in evangelical churches around the world. We grieve these failings; we lament our sin; we humbly repent and confess our profound need for the ongoing grace of the gospel to produce in us the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). We therefore commit ourselves to the following affirmations.

Lausanne Occasional Paper, 75, [The Formation of Disciples for Mission and the Formation of Disciples as Mission](#)

- ▶ The *need* for this paper arises from two widely perceived problems. The first may be seen in relation to the end or outcome of mission: the low level of spiritual maturity, the lack of Christian formation, and evidence of anemic discipleship within the global evangelical movement.^[1] The second is that, while ‘successful’ mission can be and often is carried out by people who lack a vital relationship with God, the spiritual and moral failure of Christian leaders ultimately blunts the witness of the church in the world and causes other Christians to stumble.
- ▶ Thus, the *thesis* of this paper is that the goal of mission set out in Scripture is to make disciples of Jesus and that this goal can only be accomplished by those who live as disciples of Jesus. *To be a disciple is to be formed in the pattern or way of life that conforms to the good news of Christ’s incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.* This means that mission is properly aimed toward the formation of disciples who love God with all that they are and love others as themselves. This can only be accomplished by those who live as disciples, formed by God in Christ by the Holy Spirit into this holy way of life. The local church is both the end and means of mission pursued in this way.

Matthew Bingham, [How Exactly Do I Meditate?: Protestant and Catholic Visions in Tension](#) (September 17, 2025).

- ▶ Abstract: Historically, Protestants have prized the biblical practice of meditation as one of God's chief means of grace. Unlike Roman Catholics, however, the Reformers, Puritans, and their spiritual descendants have rarely offered detailed instructions for exactly how to meditate. The two approaches represent differing convictions about Scripture and tradition, and differing understandings of meditation itself. The Protestant practice, which is less directive than the Catholic approach, esteems the primacy of Scripture, treats meditation as a path for the whole Christian pilgrimage, and far better serves real communion with God.

- ▶ Unlike the secular concept of meditation that has become incredibly popular in recent years, meditation in the biblical sense has nothing to do with breathing techniques, bodily postures, and clearing the mind. Rather, when we speak of Christian meditation — the sort practiced by biblical saints and commended in the Psalter — we mean a focused reflection on God and the things of God. Meditation is a deliberate, sanctified contemplation of who God is, what he has done, and what he promises to do in the future. We see it modeled by Mary in Luke’s Gospel when, after hearing the shepherds’ report of God’s promises concerning the baby Jesus, she “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). The Bible consistently portrays this activity as both a duty and a delight. In Psalm 63, for example, David satisfies the deepest longings of his soul through a self-conscious reflection on the faithfulness and goodness of God:
 - ▶ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night. (Psalm 63:5–6)
 - ▶ Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, meditation is the key means through which we appropriate and benefit from God’s truth. It is the vital conduit through which the knowledge of God flows from head to heart.

- ▶ A bedrock principle for Reformation-minded Christians is that God has given us in his word all we could ever need to live the Christian life. As one wonderful hymn puts it, “What more can He say than to you He hath said?” Though we sometimes want more — more detail, more explanation, more specificity — our lives are controlled and guided by the promise that God’s word is enough. By it and through it, he will lead us through all the trials and difficulties we will encounter in this life. If meditation is the God-ordained means through which we apply that word to the particulars of our life — or, as the Puritan Richard Greenham (1535–1594) put it, how we “mak[e] that which we have read to be our own” — then how could the practice ever admit of an elaborate, fully spelled-out method?
- ▶ The Puritans didn’t prescribe steps for meditation for the same reason one can’t prescribe specific steps for falling more deeply in love with one’s spouse: It’s simply not the sort of activity that admits such instruction. You can talk about it, celebrate its beauties, warn of its challenges, and give general guidelines, but, ultimately, you cannot tell another person exactly how to do it because a relational dynamic unfolds gradually across a lifetime and is shaped at every turn by the particularities of the individuals involved. Listen to how a group of Puritan ministers encourages us to take up the promises of God and meditate upon them:

- ▶ If thou wouldest have thy understanding enlightened with the knowledge of God, thy affections inflamed with the love of God, thy heart established with the promises of God, thy solitariness cheared up with the company of God, thy afflictions mitigated with the comforts of God; and if thou wouldest have thy thoughts, words, and works regulated by the command of God, pray and consider, pray and meditate.
- ▶ That is not a prescription of a technique or a method for achieving a certain kind of spiritual experience. Rather, it is a description of our entire Christian pilgrimage, a description of the lived-out reality of a person united to Christ, dependent on the Spirit and striving to glorify God in everything. Meditation, then, represents the slow, steady, highly personal assimilation of God's truth through which we are daily shaped and conformed into the image of Christ. Such an activity is not easily codified and condensed into steps and rules, and that reality is God-given and for our good.

Kyle Strobel, [The Importance of a Developmental Spirituality](#) (January 19, 2026).

- ▶ A developmental spirituality is a vision of the Christian life that recognizes that Christian growth is always on a spectrum of maturation. This means that we cannot talk about the Christian life in black-and-white realities or talk in reductionistic “on or off” categories. Just as parenting a child to become an adult does not happen in a day, we have to talk about the Christian life as something that develops.
- ▶ What this means, therefore, is that we cannot simply name imperatives, give spiritual disciplines, or assert ideals of Christian faithfulness. We actually have to narrate a lived-life with God.
- ▶ Pastorally, when we either give people grace without developmental guidance, or present people ideal realities or imperatives without developmental guidance, what often happens is either a lax spirituality or despairing. So we find people bouncing from one program to another, or one ideal to another, until one day they wake up realizing that none of this is working.

Kyle Strobel, [A New Direction for Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Care](#) (January 26, 2026).

- ▶ Without a proper and robust understanding of the church, we end up outsourcing our shepherding to other places, people, and communions, thus losing the call of the leadership to both shepherd souls and to build up the body for the work of ministry.
- ▶ A developmental spirituality looks at the nature of maturation in Christ by the Spirit that we often call sanctification. But in accounts of sanctification, we often lose sight of a distinctively biblical account of holiness and what holiness entails. When this happens, we lose the ability to shepherd souls and often turn to self-help in its place.
- ▶ For a while now I've been focused on this neglect because I think the future of the spiritual formation discussion rests on how we answer it. If we fail to answer this well, then the current iteration of the spiritual formation conversation will be little more than a blip on the radar of church history. If spiritual formation has any hope of shepherding folks to Christ long-term it has to be churchly, and this requires that we have a biblically-governed developmental spirituality to understand the work of the Lord to mature souls. Without this, we will trade wisdom for pragmatics, looking for spiritual disciplines to grow us, once again committing the error of Colossians 2 and Galatians 3.

Michael Horton, [Disciplines Don't Save. Christ Does.](#) (January/February 2026).

- ▶ A disciple is first and foremost a recipient of good news. Following the example of Jesus is an important part of discipleship in the Gospels, but it is not the gospel.
- ▶ Yet many today are equating discipleship with the gospel. John Mark Comer focuses his recent book, *Practicing the Way*, on discipleship. Comer reports that many people told him they had never heard about discipleship before in their evangelical churches.
- ▶ For 19th-century evangelist Charles G. Finney and other revivalists, in fact, following Christ's example edged out Christ's saving work in their preaching. Evangelicalism is an activist version of Christianity, which has its pros and cons, as Jesus' words to Martha and Mary suggest.

- ▶ One evangelical theologian who focuses on Christian activism is Scot McKnight. I appreciate his emphasis on Jesus himself being the gospel. But I think McKnight's reactions against a genuine problem of evangelical reductionism (found in such resources as the "plan of salvation" tracts) lead him to another oversimplification.
- ▶ Comer, too, emphasizes the active nature of Christian practice, but he lacks McKnight's nuance. Comer acts as if no one had thought about discipleship and the kingdom of God until he came along.
- ▶ As I see it, the problem with Comer's emphasis is equating discipleship with the gospel. In *Practicing the Way*, Comer says, "And through apprenticeship to Jesus, we can enter into this kingdom and into the inner life of God himself." But even if we were to adopt this approach—doing all the things Jesus said—that is not salvific. Jesus taught that a person enters the kingdom through the new birth, which is an entirely supernatural gift of grace (John 3:1–8).

- ▶ But there is nothing really about grace in Comer's *Practicing the Way*. In fact, there is a lot about Jesus as example, but the main point is "What would Jesus do?" Part of what is done seems to be a "rule of life." Comer's emphasis on a rule of life may echo the Benedictine Rule, but it is a decidedly modern monasticism, both in its view of salvation and in its individualism. His "nine core practices" can be done without any particular accountability to a local church. Like many who emphasize Christ's example over his achievement, Comer seems to think that God's work is something he accomplishes merely through us rather than for us.
- ▶ But Jesus is not just a preeminent rabbi. He is also the Father's incarnate Son, who descended in flesh to redeem us from condemnation and death. Jesus is the gospel.
- ▶ So while the message of Christian formation according to Jesus' example is entirely appropriate for Christian growth, it is instead made into the gospel itself. It isn't.
- ▶ The "What would Jesus do?" (or WWJD) gospel is not a gospel at all. It is the law—the good law. We have it not only prescribed in the Ten Commandments but also fulfilled in Christ. The Good News is not "Give your life to Jesus" or "Surrender all"—actions we take—but the truth that the incarnate Son gave his life and surrendered all for you. Apart from this Good News, the example of Jesus leads us either to despair or to self-righteousness.

John Stonestreet and Glenn Sunshine, [Why Gen Z “Nones” Are Reconsidering Religion: Zoomers aren’t religious, but their ideology is leading them to seek something.](#) (March 5, 2026).

- ▶ According to Wilcenski, when the Gen Zers turning to religion offer reasons why, they
- ▶ *sound more like escapes from modern chaos than declarations of faith.... [T]heir newfound religiosity is less about belief than about orienting life around something ultimate—something greater than the self.*
- ▶ That, of course, also leaves them vulnerable to religious falsehoods. Remember, Wilcenski not only researched conversions to Christianity but also to conservative forms of Judaism and Islam. The desire to escape “liquid modernity” says nothing about the genuineness of any faith that follows. The same motivation can explain the growing number of young men who are embracing political extremism, from Antifa to white nationalism.

▶ 2025 Christian Book of the Year

- John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.* (2024).

▶ Christian Bestsellers, October 2025

- #4 (5) John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way : Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.* (2024).
- #9 (7) Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling* (2004).
- #14 (12) John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World* (2019).

John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 5:426:

- ▶ To keep the heart . . . is nothing else but this constant care and diligence of such a renewed man, to preserve his soul in that holy frame to which grace hath reduced it [i.e., led it back to], and daily strives to hold it. . . . [T]o keep the heart is carefully to preserve it from sin, which disorders it; and maintain that spiritual and gracious frame, which fits it for a life of communion with God.

J. M. Houston, “Spirituality,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel J. Treier (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

- ▶ **Conclusion.** Despite these renewal movements plus contemporary evangelical interest in spiritual direction and disciplines, there remains a dearth of genuine spiritual leadership in the evangelical world. Catholics could look to Mother Teresa, and the Orthodox to the unnamed martyrs of modern Russia, but evangelical Protestants are largely secularized by their politics, their obsessions with growth, and their interests in administration and parachurch activities. Loss of the practice of prayer, ignorance of rich traditions of spirituality, and the need to develop a cultural framework for the practice of devotion are pressing challenges.



D. A. Carson, [When is Spirituality Spiritual?: Reflections on Some Problems of Definition](#), *JETS* 37/3 (September 1994): “The current interest in spirituality is both salutary and frightening.”

- ▶ I believe that is an accurate assessment of today’s emphasis on spiritual formation as well. My response is to remind us that not all spiritual formation is spiritual. Or not all spiritual formation is unnecessarily unspiritual or unbiblical (several negatives), but neither is it all in the main of how evangelicals have understood the means of grace God ordains for growth in godliness and conformity into the likeness of Christ. Even though some aspects may be outliers, that does not necessarily mean they are outside the Christian faith, but neither does it mean they fit within what is the normal means of how spiritual formation has been understood for millennia.



- ▶ D. A. Carson reminds us, even though we affirm a single, once-for-all, non-repeatable Spirit-baptism at conversion, we must not deny a hunger and thirst, an eager longing to be being filled with the Spirit. Concluding there is a second (or more) Spirit baptism subsequent to conversion is biblically wrong, and so it is biblically incorrect to be satisfied and not seek by God's grace to be being filled with the Spirit.



Here is this in Carson's own words (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 209-210:

- ▶ “Although I find no biblical support for a second-blessing theology, I do find support for a second-, third-, fourth-, or fifth-blessing theology. Although I find no charisma biblically established as the criterion of a second endowment of the Spirit, I do find that there are degrees of unction, blessing, service, and holy joy, along with some more currently celebrated gifts, associated with those whose hearts have been specially touched by the sovereign God. Although I think it extremely dangerous to pursue a second blessing attested by tongues, I think it no less dangerous not to pant after God at all, and to be satisfied with a merely creedal Christianity that is kosher but complacent, orthodox but ossified, sound but soundly asleep.”



Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Until Christ is Formed In You” (November 3, 2023).

- ▶ Contemporary culture in the West caters to “designer” spiritualities, providing fuel for the motor of experiential-expressivist individualism. We may recall John Weiss’s comment that “America is an opportunity to make a Religion out of the sacredness of the individual.”³ Christian spiritual formation helps attune students, faculty, and staff to identify and call out and, if necessary, repent of these formative cultural influences, for the question is not whether one is being formed, but by *what, for what purpose, and in what way* one is being formed. The Bible recognizes a plethora of spiritual counterfeits – ways in which one’s spirit is oriented to and shaped by things that do not deserve our devotion, for they de-god God and dehumanize human beings: false gods; idols; sinful habits; worldliness.
- ▶ In response to the plurality of spiritualities currently on offer, we believe spirituality without Christian doctrine is directionless; doctrine without Christian spirituality is lifeless.



- ▶ Spiritual formation ebbs and flows. Interest in this is good! God is doing something!
- ▶ In the 1990s it was Richard Foster and Dallas Willard. Then in the 2000s+ it went in the direction of the emergent church. Now it is people like John Mark Comer, who is a devotee of Willard and trendy for the present-day.
- ▶ I find it is individual with little to no corporate emphasis, viz., the church.
- ▶ I find that it is a response to the busyness of life, so that it becomes a way to manage my life better, or the most recent life-hack.
- ▶ I find that it tends to tribalize into the elect-of-the elite, who follow the way, and the elect who stumble along. In an attempt to avoid legalism, it somehow tends to become another form of legalism.



- ▶ With many today, it seems to be driven by a sense of busyness and living 24-7 and social media and no work and life balance that is consuming and something inside is dying or that something is missing in their spiritual lives, or their experience comes short or is stunted, and they are seeking something more personal, and the Word of God, the ordinary means of grace and the spiritual disciplines for spiritual transformation, are insufficient.
- ▶ How shall we engage? How shall we respond? How shall we guide?



- ▶ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (HarperCollins, 1978).
- ▶ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Paternoster Press, 1979).
- ▶ James M. Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality: From the Wesleys to John Stott* (SPCK, 1991).
- ▶ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991).
- ▶ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Moody, 1996).
- ▶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God* (HarperCollins, 1998).
- ▶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* HarperOne, 1999).
- ▶ Richard J. Foster and Emilie Griffin, ed., *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Harper San Francisco, 2000).
- ▶ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (NavPress, 2002).
- ▶ Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, ed., *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*, rev. ed. (HarperOne, 2005).
- ▶ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperOne, 2006).
- ▶ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Kregel, 2008).
- ▶ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).
- ▶ Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Stobel, ed., *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life* (T&T Clark, 2014).
- ▶ Adele Ahlberg, Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*, rev. ed. (IVP, 2015).
- ▶ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through Spiritual Disciplines* (Crossway, 2016)
- ▶ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (IVP Formatio, 2016).
- ▶ Justin Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose For an Age of Distracton* (IVP, 2019; revised 2023).
- ▶ Kenneth D. Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, 2nd Ed. (Zondervan, 2020).
- ▶ Kyle Stobel and John Coe, *Where Prayer Becomes Real: How Honesty with God Transforms Your Soul* (Baker Books, 2021).
- ▶ Tyler Staton, *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools: An Invitation to the Wonder and Mystery of Prayer* (Thomas Nelson, 2022).
- ▶ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*, 2nd Ed (Baker Academic, 2022).
- ▶ Justin Whitmel Earley, *Habits of the Household: Practicing the Story of God in Everyday Family Rhythms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).
- ▶ Alex Sosler, *A Short Guide to Spiritual Formation: Finding Life in Truth, Goodness, Beauty, and Community* (Baker Academic, 2024).
- ▶ Matthew C. Bingham, *A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation* (Crossway, 2025).
- ▶ Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Body Teaches the Soul: Ten Essential Habits to Form a Healthy and Holy Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2025).



- ▶ Lausanne Occasional Paper, [The Formation of Disciples for Mission and the Formation of Disciples as Mission](#)
- ▶ Trevin Wax, [3 Waves That Have Shaped Evangelical Churches \(and a 4th on the Way\)](#) (June 4, 2024).
- ▶ Brad East, [My Students Are Reading John Mark Comer, and Now I Know Why](#) (February 14, 2024).
- ▶ The Trinity Forum: Online Conversation | [Practicing the Way with John Mark Comer](#) (May 3, 2024).
- ▶ Erik Coonce, [What's Wrong with a "Rule of Life"?](#) (September 3, 2024).
- ▶ Tim Challies, [John Mark Comer and Practicing The Way](#) (September 25, 2024).
- ▶ Kyle Strobel, [A Rule of Life: Problems, possibilities, and the danger of writing in spiritual formation](#) (October 28, 2024).
- ▶ Tony Payne and Phillip Jensen, [Spiritual formation or transformation?: How can we really change?](#) (November 12, 2024). Payne and Jensen respond to a question which was asked about their podcast on [The resurgence of spiritual discipline: A new take on a very old story](#) (September 3, 2024).
- ▶ Wyatt Graham, [Should We Practice the Way with John Mark Comer?](#) (November 20, 2024).
- ▶ Wyatt Graham, [How John Mark Comer's View of God Shapes His Spiritual Formation](#) (November 20, 2024).
- ▶ Noah Senthil, ['Practicing the Way' in the Church: Analyzing the Comer Option](#) (February 6, 2025).
- ▶ Samuel D. James, [The Ruthless Elimination of Paragraphs](#) (February 11, 2025).
- ▶ J. A. Medders, [What Would I Say to a Young Christian Reading John Mark Comer?](#) (February 11, 2025).
- ▶ Wyatt Graham, [A Half-Right Theology? Examining John Mark Comer's View of God: Review: 'God Has a Name' by John Mark Comer](#) (February 18, 2025).
- ▶ Daniel Schreiner, [Engaging with "Practicing the Way": Nine Thoughts on John Mark Comer's Best Seller](#) (March 12, 2025).
- ▶ Wyatt Graham, [Don't Apply the Bible to Your Life. Do This Instead.: The Bible calls us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. This is a better framework for thinking about the Bible than "applying" its principles to our lives.](#) (April 2, 2025).
- ▶ Kevin DeYoung, [Is This the Way? A Review of Practicing the Way by John Mark Comer](#) (May 21, 2025).
- ▶ Kyle Strobel, [Comer and Willard: Comparing Foundations for Spiritual Formation](#) (June 2, 2025).
- ▶ Kyle Strobel, [Why Spiritual Formation Sometimes Sounds Trite](#) (July 7, 2025).
- ▶ James R. Wood, [Heart and head united: A defense of the Reformed tradition's spiritual formation](#) (July 17, 2025).
- ▶ Jonathan Woodyard, [A Critical Review of John Mark Comer's Practicing the Way](#) (August 14, 2025).
- ▶ Michael Horton, [What Is the Gospel, Really? Responding to John Mark Comer and Scot McKnight](#) (August 26, 2025).
- ▶ Matthew Bingham, [The Problem with Comer's Cafeteria Approach to Spirituality](#) (October 20, 2025).
- ▶ Kyle Strobel, [Spiritual Formation, Dallas Willard, and the Call of Integration](#) (November 3, 2025)



[Spiritual Formation for the Family](#) (Mere Orthodoxy ebook)

- ▶ If you are looking for a how-to guide for marriage, parenting, and family, this isn't it. Underneath all of the tips, tricks, and techniques for conflict resolution, sleep training, education and whatever else are the bedrock realities that make families not just work well, run efficiently, or accomplish any particular goal, but create deep and lasting meaning.
- ▶ Spiritual formation, after all, is after heart and soul-level transformation, not surface level optimization. It's not that technique is bad; it's that without an eternity-oriented perspective regarding our families, all of our optimization will only get us to the wrong place faster. If we want our family to be formed in the image of Christ, an image patterned on the relationship between God and his people, then we need to do the deeper work of reorienting our entire imagination of what it means to be a family.
- ▶ This collection of essays is meant to help with that. It covers topics such dependence, dignity, fidelity, education, masculinity, wisdom, and even the market conditions that allow families to flourish. Thinking well about these things is critical to the health of our families.

SCRIPTURE



Luke 10:26-27

- ▶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."



Romans 6:17-18, 22

- ▶ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. . . . But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.



Romans 8:28-30

- ▶ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.



Romans 12:1-2

- ▶ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

- ▶ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.



Galatians 4:18-19

- ▶ It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!



Philippians 3:20-21

- ▶ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.



Colossians 1:28-29

- ▶ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.



1 Timothy 4:7-11

- ▶ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.



Colossians 3:1-17:

- ▶ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you . . . Put on then, as God's chosen ones . . .



2 Peter 1:3-5a

- ▶ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to . . .



2 Peter 3:18

- ▶ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.



Acts 2:42

- ▶ And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.



Here is the perpetual questioning of God and his Word (*principium theologiae*, i.e., the principles of theology).

- ▶ He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1)
- ▶ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"(Gen. 3:3)
- ▶ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. (Gen. 3:4)

Here is the reminder that what is critical is being grounded in and returning to God's Word.

- ▶ He said to them, "*Have you not read* what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: (Matt. 12:3)
- ▶ Or *have you not read* in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? (Matt. 12:5)
- ▶ He answered, "*Have you not read* that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (Matt. 19:4)
- ▶ And as for the resurrection of the dead, *have you not read* what was said to you by God: (Matt. 22:31)
- ▶ *Have you not read* this Scripture: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; (Mk. 12:26)
- ▶ And as for the dead being raised, *have you not read* in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? (Mk. 12:26)
- ▶ And Jesus answered them, "*Have you not read* what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: (Lk. 6:3)

Article 6: The Holy Spirit

- ▶ We believe that the Holy Spirit, in all that He does, glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. He convicts the world of its guilt. *He regenerates sinners, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.*



Article 7: The Church

- ▶ *We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.*



Article 8: Christian Living

- ▶ *We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another, compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed. With God's Word, the Spirit's power, and fervent prayer in Christ's name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil. In obedience to Christ's commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.*



Article 9: Christ's Return

- ▶ We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.*



- ▶ In brief response to your question, the EFCA does not have a formal and official definition of “spiritual formation,” nor does it promote one prescribed method of “spiritual formation.” That is a local church matter, so I would encourage you to ask the pastor and elders this same question.
- ▶ What is encouraged in the EFCA is disciplinemaking from Jesus’ command to go and make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). This includes evangelism and discipleship, which consists of information (the Bible), transformation (by the Holy Spirit), and formation (into the image of Christ).
- ▶ Though not explicitly addressed, there is much that could be learned on this matter from sections from our Statement of Faith. Consider the following:



- ▶ Based on our SOF, this means we affirm the following principles of discipleship, discipling, spiritual transformation (cf. Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21).
 - God the Holy Spirit regenerates sinners. This is a divine work in human lives. The implication of His work in our lives is that He indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service. He changes, forms and transforms lives.
 - All those who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone become a part of the true church. Believing the gospel changes a life, it makes a dead person alive and places that person in the true church. Those who are part of the true church become a part of a local church since the gospel that changes a life is made manifest in the gathering of believers in a local church. This means discipleship and discipling has a Christological foundation and church-based focus in that discipleship and spiritual growth occurs in community.



- God's justifying grace must not be separated from his sanctifying power and purpose. Those who have been truly saved will manifest God's sanctifying power and purpose in their lives. There will be transformation of life to be conformed into the image of God's Son. This will be evident in love for God and love for others.
- Another evidence of this transformation in the life of the disciple and what one longs for in discipling is that we live with the reality of the end-time return of Christ which has a fundamental bearing on how we live today. This means that for disciples with an eye to Christ's return there is a commitment to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.
- ▶ As Paul summarizes, "Him [Jesus] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:28-29). Elsewhere Paul describes "mature in Christ" to mean "Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19)! That ought to be the goal and prayer of all Christians for themselves and for others.



THE BIBLE'S STORY

Redemptive History



- ▶ **Order of salvation (*ordo salutis*):** “the acts of God and the response of the individual in salvation. God calls us, produces regeneration in us, so that we respond with repentance, faith, and obedience. . . The *ordo salutis* is not concerned with a temporal sequence of events, but with a logical order.”
- ▶ **History of Salvation (*historia salutis*):** “the historical events, in space and time, through which God rescues his people.”
- ▶ **Transformation in Salvation (*transformatio salutis*):** the experiential reality of being in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit, who not only applies the finished work of Christ in our lives, by faith, but he also conforms us into the likeness of the Son.



- ▶ A common way of understanding the Bible's story is through the major movements of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption and new creation/consummation (glorification is the term used when emphasizing the final act of God in the salvation of those in union with Christ, i.e., believers). As a big-picture overview, tracing the Bible's story through these four major movements is helpful. However, it appears that, for many, the notion of redemption is too narrowly understood. It serves as a redemptive historical transition from death to life when one is justified, but there is little thought given to the life of believers between redemption and new creation.



Here is a way to expand the Bible's story by adding one important movement between redemption and new creation, which I include in full. God in His Word reveals the story of .

..

- ▶ **Creation:** Gen 1:26-28, 31 (“very good”)
- ▶ **Fall:** Gen 2:16-17; Gen 3:1-13; cf. Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21
- ▶ **Redemption** (positional sanctification): Gen 3:15; Rom 3:24; Rom 6:23; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 15:56-57; Col 3:14
- ▶ **Transformation** (progressive sanctification): Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:20-21; cf. Phil 2:12-13; Rev 22:12-16
- ▶ **New Creation/Consummation** (final sanctification): Rev 21-22; esp. 21:5; cf. Phil 3:20-21



REDEMPTION AND TRANSFORMATION



- ▶ *Foreknowledge*: a divine attribute that refers to God's knowledge of the future from the beginning, which is an aspect of God's omniscience. This includes the knowledge of all things as Creator (1 Sam. 3:2; Ps. 139; 1 Jn. 3:2; Heb. 4:13) and matters related to salvation (Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2).



- ▶ *Predestination*: Foreordination is God's sovereign, eternal, unchangeable, and good determination of everything that comes to pass. Predestination focuses on salvation and refers to God's determination regarding people's eternal destinies (Dt. 7:6-8; 10:14-15; Rom. 9:15-16; Eph. 1:4-5). God's rule and reign as Creator and Redeemer can be referred to as purposeful providence, the latter focusing on election of the believer (Acts 13:48). As Redeemer, the focus is on salvation and Christology (Acts 2:23; 4:28; 1 Cor. 2:7; 1 Pet. 1:20), in that it is in Christ (Eph. 1:11) and through Christ (Eph. 1:5), with the goal our conformity into the likeness of the Son (Rom. 8:29). In this, God is sovereign (Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:29-30) and human beings are responsible (Dt. 30:19; 1 Kgs. 18:21; Acts 2:21), a view referred to as compatibilism, namely both truths are taught and true (cf. Gen. 15:19-20; Lev. 20:7-8; 1 Kgs. 8:46ff; Isa. 10:5ff; Jn. 6:37-40; Acts 18:9-10; Phil. 2:12-13; Acts 4:23-31).

- ▶ *Calling*: all are called (external call), though few are chosen (internal call) (Matt. 22:14). The single, external call comes in the gospel, but the internal or effective call is a work of God drawing people to himself (Jn. 6:44). Calling (Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9; 2 Tim. 1:9) is God's means of bringing people to salvation (Rom. 8:30; 9:23-24; 2 Thess. 2:13-14). This is a unseen yet certain work of the Holy Spirit who unites individuals to Christ according to God's gracious purpose in salvation (Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:15; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 9:15; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3). There is a free offer of the gospel to all (Isa. 55:1; Rev. 22:17).



- ▶ *Regeneration*: the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit by which unbelievers are given a new nature, the heart of stone is removed and replaced with a heart of flesh (Jer. 31:31-33; Ezek. 36:25-27; Jn. 3:3-8; 6:63), through the gospel of Jesus Christ (Jms. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). It consists of the removal of the old sinful, spiritual dead nature (Eph. 2:1), a spiritual circumcision (Rom. 2:29), and the imparting of a new nature, that is spiritually alive to God (Eph. 2:4-5). Writes one, this is “a radical and complete transformation wrought in the soul (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) by God the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:24; Titus 3:5), by virtue of which we become ‘new men’ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), no longer conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), but in knowledge and holiness of the truth created after the image of God (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10.” This truth emphasizes a decisiveness, a transformation from death to life (Rom. 6:3-11; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 3:9-11), and that this



- ▶ *Faith and Repentance* (conversion): Turning from sin to Christ (Acts 20:21), with the turning from sin being repentance, a sorrow for sin and a commitment to turn from it, and a turning to Christ in faith. Conversion is the term used for these two realities. Though this may be seen to be a human response, it is prompted by regeneration, the response of the gospel (Rom. 10:17), and stirred by grace (Acts 18:27). It could be said conversation, exercising faith and repentance, is the sign or evidence, though not the condition, of our justification. It is both an event, in which we are born again or born from above (Jn. 3:3, 5), when we who are spiritually dead are made spiritually alive, and also a process, in that it consists of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives (cf. Ps. 51:10-12; Lk, 17:3-4; 22:32; Rom. 13:14; Eph. 4:22-24; Rev. 2:4-5, 16; 3:19).



- ▶ *Justification*: this is an act of God based on the work of Christ in which he declares a sinner not guilty, imputing/crediting the perfect righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), thus declaring (not infusing) the sinner righteous. This is a forensic term, denoting a judicial act of administering the law, which has been broken and for which we are accountable and guilty (Rom. 3:21-26; Gal. 3-4; 2 Cor. 5:14-21; Eph. 2:1-18; Phil. 3:4-11). This is not because they are actually made righteous, but because of the righteousness of Christ, an alien righteousness. Sins are removed and forgiven, which is expiation (Heb. 9:26), and God's wrath is removed through propitiation (Rom. 3:25-26), through Christ's substitutionary death (Rom. 3:25; 5:9). Christ's righteousness is imputed (Rom. 5:18-19), based on Christ's perfect obedience on our behalf. It is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Rom. 3:25-26) and faith is the instrumental means by which we are justified (Rom. 3:25, 28, 30). Believers are *simul iustus et peccator*, at one and the same time righteous in Christ but sinners in themselves (Rom. 3:10-12; 4:1-8; 5:18-19; Gal. 2:16).

- ▶ *Adoption*: Before being adopted spiritually (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:5), we were slaves to sin (Rom. 6:16-22) doing Satan's will (Gal. 4:3; 1 Jn. 3:10), enemies of God (Rom. 5:10), and children of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3). God's eternal love is the source of adoption (Eph. 1:3-6), the basis of adoption is Christ's death as a redemption that frees us from sin's bondage (Gal. 3:13; 4:4-5), and we receive adoption by faith in Christ (Jn. 1:12; Gal. 3:26), through the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives enabling us to cry Abba! Father! (Rom. 8:14-16; Gal. 4:4-7). We are God's children (Jn. 1:12), we have a family of brothers and sisters (Gal. 3:26-28), we are fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17), and we have a future inheritance (cf. Col. 3:24).



- ▶ *Sanctification*: God sets us apart from sin to himself, which is positional or a status conferred, and producing holiness in believers, which is progressive or a process pursued, which will culminate in glorification at Christ's return. Sanctification is past (definitive), when we trusted in Christ and were converted and experienced union with Christ (Rom. 6:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11) and are called saints, present (progressive), as the Spirit works in us enabling us to grow in holiness (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Thess. 4:3; Heb. 12:14), and future (final), which is the Spirit's work of conforming us into the image of the Son in glorified holiness at his return (Eph. 5:27; 1 Jn. 3:2). Each Person of the Trinity is active in our sanctification, and although God is the author of our sanctification, we are active participants (Phil. 2:12-13; Col. 1:28-29).



- ▶ *Union with Christ*: This focuses on the Holy Spirit's work of joining all believers to Christ so that all his saving benefits become ours (Eph. 4:30). Through union with Christ, believers are identified/united with Christ in his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension (Rom. 6:1-11; Eph. 2:6), and God communicates all his blessings of salvation: regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, resurrection, and glorification. Christ dwells in those with whom he is united and the, in turn, dwell in him (Jn. 15:1-5; Gal. 2:20). Writes one, "Union with Christ is a phrase used to summarize several different relationships between believers and Christ, through which Christians receive every benefit of salvation. These relationships include the fact that we are in Christ, Christ is in us, we are like Christ, and we are with Christ."



Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021). Lars Kierspel, *Charts on the Life, Letters, and Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 167:



Participation with Christ

CHART 87

TERM		REFERENCES
1.	suffer with Christ	συμπάσχω Rom. 8:17; see Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24
2.	crucified with Christ	συσταυρόω Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; see 5:24; 6:14
3.	died with Christ	• ἀπεθάνομεν σὺν Χριστῷ • συναποθνήσκω Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:20; see 2 Cor. 4:10a; Phil. 3:10 2 Tim. 2:11 (see Mark 14:31)
4.	conformed to his death	• σύμφυτος • συμμορφίζομαι Rom. 6:5a Phil. 3:10 (see 3:21; Rom. 8:21)
5.	buried with him	συνετάφημεν αὐτῷ Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12
6.	raised with Christ	• σύμφυτος • συνεγείρω • σὺν Ἰησοῦ ἐγερεῖ Rom. 6:5b; see 6:4 Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12; 3:1 2 Cor. 4:14
7.	made alive with Christ	συνεζωοποίησεν τῷ Χριστῷ Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13; see 2 Cor. 4:10b
8.	live with him	• ζήσομεν σὺν αὐτῷ • συζήσομεν αὐτῷ 2 Cor. 13:4 Rom. 6:8; 2 Tim. 2:11
9.	heirs with Christ	συγκληρονόμοι Χριστοῦ Rom. 8:17
10.	glorified with him	συνδοξασθῶμεν Rom. 8:17; see Phil. 3:21
11.	seated with him	συνεκάθισεν Eph. 2:6
12.	reign with him	συμβασιλεύσομεν 2 Tim. 2:12



A FEW QUESTIONS



The Heidelberg Catechism (1563). One of the idols of this age is expressive individualism (the autonomous self). The first two questions and answers of the catechism strike at the heart of this idol and reflect Jesus' call to be His disciples, that the only way to life in Christ is death to self. As Christians, we are not our own.

- ▶ *Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?*
- ▶ A. That I am not my own but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the Devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.
- ▶ *Q. What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?*
- ▶ A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free

- ▶ Why is taking one's cross to death always offensive? In what ways do we either struggle with or refuse to deny ourselves? How do we seek to save our lives, and in what ways then have we lost it? What are the issues with being a living sacrifice? Are we ashamed? What does it mean to follow Jesus now at this moment in your life and in the place where you are?
- ▶ David Wells writes, "Worldliness is that system of values, in any given age, which has as its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and his truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange. It thus gives great plausibility to what is morally wrong and, for that reason, makes what is wrong seem normal." How has this happened in our culture? What about in the church? What about your life?
- ▶ To what degree are you defined by the world? By the Word? How would you know? How can you develop your life more fully by the Word?
- ▶ What are the idols in your life? Can you identify them? Are you willing to confess them, that is acknowledge them, even to another, and repent of them?
- ▶ What is your understanding of spiritual formation? Would you prefer the expression Christian formation? If so, why?

MEANS OF GRACE



Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015).

- ▶ **Means of Grace** In respect to ecclesiology, activities by which God's blessings are communicated to his people. Many Protestant churches consider preaching and the sacraments to be means of grace. Preaching communicates the gospel by which Salvation comes, and baptism and the Lord's Supper bestow what they signify: forgiveness, identification with Christ, his presence, spiritual nourishment, church membership, and more. Other churches do not restrict the means of grace to these three activities. Still others avoid the language *means of grace* to avoid association with Catholic theology's position that grace is infused into the faithful through the seven sacraments.



Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

- ▶ **means of grace**—channels by which God conveys blessing and strength to believers. These traditionally include the preaching of the Word, observance of the ordinances (sacraments), and prayer. Some churches eschew the term *means of grace* to avoid confusion with Roman Catholicism's view that God gives infused grace through Rome's seven sacraments.



P. E. Hughes, “Grace, Means of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. by Daniel Treier (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

- ▶ The means of grace, or media through which grace may be received, are various. The primary means is Holy Scripture, from which our whole knowledge of the Christian faith derives and the chief purpose of which is to communicate the saving gospel of Jesus Christ (John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:15).
- ▶ Preaching—the proclamation of the dynamic truth of the gospel—is, as Christ himself and his apostles show, of utmost importance (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16; 10:11-15; 1 Cor. 1:17-18, 23). Similarly, personal witness and evangelism are means for bringing grace to others.



- ▶ If the aforementioned things are essentially the means of saving grace, there are also means of continuing or strengthening grace. The exposition of Holy Scripture for the edification of Christian believers . . . personal study of the Bible . . . prayer . . . fellowship . . . participation in the sacrament of the breaking of bread, which Christ commanded followers to observe (Acts 2:42).
- ▶ The means of grace should be rightly received, with faith and gratitude, otherwise, they become means of condemnation. . . . It is erroneous to imagine that this sacrament—or any other means of grace—operates automatically, as though mere reception were a guarantee.



Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

- ▶ All the blessings we experience in this life are ultimately undeserved—they are all of grace. In fact, for Peter, the entire Christian life is lived by grace (1 Peter 5:12).
- ▶ But are there any special means God uses to give additional grace to us? Specifically, within the fellowship the church are there certain means—that is, certain activities, ceremonies, or functions—that God uses to give more grace to us?
- ▶ He mentions personal prayer, worship, and Bible study and personal faith are those means through which God works to bring grace to individual Christians.
- ▶ “the means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to Christians.”



Article 7: The Church

- ▶ Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.



Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 108:

- ▶ **ex opere operato:** *by the work performed*; with reference to the sacraments, the assumption of medieval scholasticism and Roman Catholicism that the correct and churchly performance of the rite conveys grace to the recipient, unless the recipient places a spiritual impediment (*obex*) in the way of grace. Sacraments themselves, therefore have a *virtus operativa*, or operative power. This view of sacraments is denied by both Lutherans and Reformed, who maintain that faith must be present in the recipient if the sacraments are to function as means of grace; the mere performance of the rite will not convey grace.



MEANS OF GRACE AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES



- ▶ Generally the term “means of grace” refers to those corporate disciplines in which we engage which reflect the marks of a true church, per the Reformers/Reformation: (1) faithful preaching of the Word, (2) regular celebration of the ordinances, and (3) church discipline, which means there is an order by which one is to live, and a line that can be crossed that must be addressed because it is not being followed. Granted, the third mark may be subsumed under the second, but it does reflect the discipline of a disciple “for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). And there are some things not done that compromise godliness that must be addressed.
- ▶ This, however, does not exhaust the life of a Christian individually. There are many more imperatives in the Bible, grounded in the indicative, than just the “means of grace.” Many of these are referred to as “spiritual disciplines.” Yes, there are some that carry greater weight, say for example the ordinances (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), than others, because they “communicate” the gospel through the eye in the most significant way, just as the normal preaching of the Word communicates the gospel through the ear. But just because there are some that may carry greater weight (means of grace) does not mean the others (spiritual disciplines) may become optional.



- ▶ As soon as one begins to hedge by saying, well, because it is not commanded, I do not have to do it reflects a spiritual sickness. This is called licentiousness. How little do I have to do and still be ok? That reflects spiritual immaturity at best. And the way then to address that is not through guilt or legalism but through love and grace. The one who loves God keeps his commandments (Jn. 14:21). When one is at a point of hedging, “what is essential or necessary to do,” it is a mark of a lack of spiritual health. At that point, it is time to “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5).



SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES



- ▶ Matthew Henry (1662-1714): “when we are out of the way of duty, we are in the way of temptation.”
- ▶ Jerry Bridges (1929-2016): “Spiritual disciplines are provided for our good, not for our bondage. They are privileges to be used, not duties to be performed.”

Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

- ▶ **spiritual disciplines**—scriptural practices that promote believers' spiritual maturity. God desires us to cultivate habits of devotion, time-honored activities of Bible reading and meditation (Ps 1:2), prayer (Phil 4:6), worship (Eph 5:18-20), witnessing (Matt 28:19-20), and fellowship (Heb 10:24-25). Spiritual growth requires self-control (Gal 5:23) and discipline (1 Tim 4:7). The spiritual disciplines are taught or modeled in God's Word; therefore, reading, hearing, meditating on, memorizing, and studying the Word are primary. Prayer too is vital for our spiritual growth. We offer prayers of praise, thanks, confession, intercession, and petition with commitment and concentration. Although believers engage in some spiritual disciplines alone, God uses the church to help us grow. The disciplines are means, not ends, and point to God's glory.



Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (HarperCollins, 1978).

► Inward Disciplines

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Study



▶ Outward Disciplines

- Simplicity
- Solitude
- Submission
- Service



▶ Corporate Disciplines

- Confession
- Worship
- Guidance
- Celebration



Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* HarperOne, 1999).

▶ Disciplines of Abstinence (self-denial)

- Solitude
- Silence
- Fasting
- Frugality/Simplicity
- Chastity
- Secrecy
- Sacrifice



► Disciplines of Engagement

- Study
- Worship
- Celebration
- Service
- Prayer
- Fellowship
- Confession
- Submission



Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991).

- ▶ Bible Intake
- ▶ Prayer
- ▶ Worship
- ▶ Evangelism
- ▶ Serving
- ▶ Stewardship (of time and money)
- ▶ Fasting
- ▶ Silence and Solitude
- ▶ Journaling
- ▶ Learning




- ▶ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Moody, 1996).
 1. Why go to church?
 2. Why seek baptism in the church?
 3. Why join a church?
 4. Why listen to preaching in the church?
 5. Why worship with the church?
 6. Why witness with the church?



7. Why serve in the church?
8. Why give to the church?
9. Why attend the ordinances of the church?
10. Why fellowship with the church?
11. Why pray with the church?
12. Why learn in the church?
13. Why research the church?



John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.* (Waterbrook, 2024). (Description on Amazon)

- ▶ We are constantly being formed by the world around us. To be formed by Jesus will require us to become his apprentice.
- ▶ To live by what the first Christian disciples called a Rule of Life—a set of practices and relational rhythms that slow us down and open up space in our daily lives for God to do what *only* God can do—transforms the deepest parts of us to become like him.
- ▶ This introduction to spiritual formation is full of John Mark Comer’s trademark mix of theological substance and cultural insight as well as practical wisdom on developing your own Rule of Life.
- ▶ These ancient practices have much to offer us. By learning to rearrange our days, we can follow the Way of Jesus. We can be with him. Become like him. And do as he did. 

A guide for following Jesus in the modern era

- ▶ The first followers of Jesus developed a Rule of Life, or habits and practices based on the life of Jesus himself. As they learned to live like their teacher, they became people who made space for God to do his most transformative work in their lives.
- ▶ *Practicing the Way* is a vision for the future, shaped by the wisdom of the past. It's an introduction to spiritual formation accessible to both beginners and lifelong followers of Jesus and a companion to the [Practicing the Way Course](#). It offers theological substance, astute cultural insight, and practical wisdom for [creating a Rule of Life](#) in the modern age.



Developing a Personal Rule of Life: What is a rule of life?

- ▶ A rule of life is a schedule and set of practices and relational rhythms that help us create space in our busy world for us to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did—to live “to the full” (John 10v10) in his kingdom, and in alignment with our deepest passions and priorities. While the word “rule” may strike you as a strict or binding constraint, the Latin word we translate “rule” was originally the word for a trellis in a vineyard. In the same way a vine needs a trellis to lift it off the ground so it can bear the maximum amount of fruit, and keep free of predators and diseases, we need a rule as a kind of support structure to organize our life around “abiding in the vine,” (John 15v1–8) as Jesus imagined. It’s been said that we achieve inner peace when our schedule is aligned with our values. A rule of life is simply a tool to that end. Rather than a rigid, legalistic to-do list, it’s a life-giving structure for freedom, growth, and joy.



The nine practices of "Practicing the Way" are the following which become a framework for a "rule of life" for spiritual formation or apprenticing with Jesus.

- ▶ **Sabbath:** Setting aside a day of rest to cease from work and focus on God.
- ▶ **Prayer:** Communicating with God through speaking and listening.
- ▶ **Fasting:** Abstaining from food or other things to focus on spiritual dependence.
- ▶ **Solitude:** Being alone with God, often incorporating silence.
- ▶ **Scripture:** Engaging with and reflecting on the Bible.
- ▶ **Community:** Living in intentional relationship with other believers.
- ▶ **Generosity:** Giving of one's time, money, and resources to others.
- ▶ **Hospitality:** Welcoming and caring for others, especially strangers.
- ▶ **Simplicity:** Living with less, which can help counter consumerism and create space for God.



Robert Plummer, “Are the Spiritual Disciplines of ‘Silence and Solitude’ Really Biblical,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 2/1 (Spring 2009), pp. 101-112. Here is his conclusion (p. 110):

- ▶ It seems to me that silence and solitude should not be thought of as spiritual disciplines in and of themselves. They are conditions that aid in the practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and biblical meditation. The danger of thinking of silence and solitude as disciplines in themselves could lead to a focus on the absence of noise or absence of other persons to the neglect of the actual biblical purpose for that absence. There is no doubt that silence and solitude aid the spiritual discipline of prayer and Bible meditation, but, in my opinion, they should not be thought of as actual disciplines in themselves.

- ▶ In Anglicanism, the Daily Office, part of the Book of Common Prayer (1662), is a traditional Christian practice of praying at set times throughout the day, primarily using structured services like Morning and Evening Prayer. It involves a pattern of (1) Psalms (read through in a month), (2) Scripture readings (following a lectionary, Old and New Testaments and the Gospels), and (3) prayers (the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, along with personal intercessions and thanksgivings) that helps individuals and communities sanctify their day by connecting with God.”



In Christian liturgy, Matins is a morning prayer service, while Vespers is an evening prayer service.

- ▶ **Morning Prayer:** A service based on ancient forms like Matins, revised to be simpler for daily use.
- ▶ **Noonday Prayer:** A shorter service for prayer around midday.
- ▶ **Evening Prayer:** A service that combines elements of ancient Vespers and Compline.
- ▶ **Compline:** A brief service of quiet reflection and prayer before bed, the final of the Daily Offices.



SPIRITUAL FORMATION



Got Questions, [What is the spiritual formation movement?](#)

- ▶ The spiritual formation movement is very popular today. It is, however, in many ways a move away from the truth of God's Word to a mystical form of Christianity, and it has infiltrated, to some degree, nearly all evangelical denominations. This idea of spiritual formation is based on the premise that if we do certain practices, we can be more like Jesus. Proponents of spiritual formation erroneously teach that anyone can practice these mystical rituals and find God within themselves.
- ▶ Too often, adherents of the current spiritual formation movement believe the spiritual disciplines transform the seeker by his or her entering an altered realm of consciousness. The spiritual formation movement is characterized by such things as contemplative prayer, contemplative spirituality, and Christian mysticism.



- ▶ True biblical spiritual formation, or spiritual transformation, begins with the understanding that we are sinners living apart from God. Our faculties have been corrupted by sin so that we cannot please God. True spiritual transformation occurs as we yield ourselves to God so that He may transform us by the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. At least half of every New Testament epistle is geared toward how to live a life well pleasing to God—by obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit in all things. Scripture does not only call us the redeemed, saved, saints, sheep, soldiers, and servants, but teaches us that only through the power of the Spirit we can live up to what the names mean.



Richard E. Averbeck, "Spirit, Community, and Mission: A Biblical Theology for Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 1/1 (2008), 27:

- ▶ Abstract. This article offers an overview of three main themes in biblical theology that form the basis for sound Christian spiritual formation. These three themes have foundations in the Old Testament and run through into the New Testament for the Christian life. First there is the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit, occupying, empowering, and reshaping us and our lives from the inside out. Second, the Holy Spirit works to build us into local communities of faith in which he dwells and in which we have fellowship with one another. Third, the Holy Spirit makes us into prophets and prophetic communities that stand out in the world showing for t God's glory and attracting others to him. This biblical theology motivates the following definition of 'spiritual formation': the ministry through which we seek to stimulate and support the ongoing spiritually transforming work of the Holy Spirti in and through the personal lives, relationships, and ministries of genuine believers so that we all progressively become more conformed ot the image of Christ according to the will of God the Father (Romans 8:26-30).

Glen G. Scorgie, “Overview of Christian Spirituality,” in Glen G. Scorgie, ed., *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011):

- ▶ Christian spirituality is the domain of lived Christian experience. It is about living *all of life*—not just some esoteric portion of it—before God, through Christ, in the transforming and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. And precisely because this lived experience of the Christ is the existential heart of the faith, its careful examination and nurture are vitally important.
- ▶ In summary, authentic Christian spirituality (or the Christian life, which is the same thing) is a Spirit-enabled relationship with the triune God that results in openness to others, healing progress toward Christlikeness, and willing participation in God’s purposes in the world. The longings of the human spirit are most fully satisfied in Jesus Christ, as we encounter him through his Holy Spirit. From a Christ-centered perspective, the first dynamic is about Christ *with* us. The second concerns Christ *in* us, and the third is about Christ working *through* us. By his Spirit, then, Christ is inviting people to come to him, submit to his transforming influence, and then follow him into the world. The pattern is always the same. True spirituality involves continuous cycles of encounter, change, and action.

John H. Coe, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in Glen G. Scorgie, ed., *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) (cf. John Coe, "Spiritual Theology: A Theological-Experiential Methodology for Bridging the Sanctification Gap," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 2/1 (2009), 4-43.)

- ▶ It is not fundamentally from human intuition or self-discovery that we learn of true spirituality, but (1) in the light of God's revelation in Scripture, which provides an authoritative interpretation of the spiritual life ("in your light we see light," Ps. 36:9), and (2) on account of the Spirit opening within believers the "mind of Christ" by which we receive his revelation (1 Cor. 2:16).
- ▶ The goal of all Christian teaching and study of the Scriptures and the spiritual life (and all that we do) is a cluster of ultimate ends that extend well beyond study: that believers will love God and neighbor (1 Tim. 1:5), be complete or mature in Christ (Col. 1:28-29), be trained in righteousness (1 Tim. 4:7-8), and glorify God in all things (1 Cor. 10:31). However, there has always been a temptation to divorce doctrine, teaching, and study from transformation.

Mark McIntosh [writes](#) about the danger of a theology that becomes divorced from spirituality:

- ▶ “Put as bluntly as possible, theology without spirituality becomes ever more methodologically refined but unable to know or speak of the very mysteries at the heart of Christianity, and spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individualistic consumerism...In other words, when a culture has grown used to the divorce between theology and spirituality, between doctrine and prayer, then the mutually critical function of the two breaks down. Neither is in sufficient dialogue with the other to keep it honest. And after a long period of such separation it becomes increasingly difficult to see what is missing in so much of the pale pretenders that pass fairly often for theology and spirituality today.”

- ▶ Spiritual theology is that part of theology that brings together (1) a study of the truths of Scripture with (2) a study of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the experience of human beings (3) in dependence on the illuminating work of the indwelling Christ, in order to (a) define the *nature* of this supernatural life in Christ, (b) explain the *process* of growth by which persons advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its full perfection in the next life, and (c) formulate *directives* for spiritual growth and development. . . . spiritual theology takes the fruit of biblical and doctrinal studies and brings it all to bear on our grasp of the manner in which the Spirit works in human lives.

Paul Pettit, “Introduction,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Paul Pettit (Kregel Publications, 2008), 24.

- ▶ Spiritual formation . . . is the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer’s life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ—accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community.



Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Until Christ Is Formed In You (November 4, 2023), “Spiritual formation: definition and biblical basis”:

- ▶ The definition of Christian spiritual formation is relatively uncontroversial, pertaining to “a person’s lived experience in the transforming presence of God.”⁷ Spiritual formation “is holistic in nature, involving the mind, spirit, and body and concerns both the individual and the community of the redeemed.”⁸ It is the multifaceted process by which the Holy Spirit forms Christ in believers (Gal 4:19), the process by which disciples learn Christ (Eph. 4:20), becoming persons who, in union with Christ, are progressively conformed to his image in all that they say, think, and do.⁹ Spiritual formation involves the whole person: right beliefs (orthodoxy), right practices (orthopraxis), and right attitudes (orthokardia).¹⁰
- ▶ The Holy Spirit is the “efficient cause” (John Owen) or primary engine of Christian spiritual formation, for he is the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11). The term “formation” is related to the NT terms for “form” and “to form” : μορφή and μορφω. Spiritual formation pertains to the Spirit’s forming, conforming, and transforming disciples into the image of their master: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Rom 8:29); “we ... are being transformed into his [Christ’s] likeness with ever increasing glory” (2 Cor. 3:18); “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2).



- ▶ Spiritual formation is a present process with an eschatological end: “we know that when he [Christ] appears we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). All of life is therefore oriented to our proper vocation as human persons: imaging Christ, the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4).
- ▶ In sum, while the human spirit refers to “whatever is happening within the person,” the NT insists that true spirituality consistently relates to the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life in communicating the life-form of Christ.



[Richard Foster on Spiritual Formation: Ten Counsels](#) (Updated May 2025).

- ▶ The tendency today is to think of spiritual formation exclusively in terms of practices of one kind or another. We get all excited about *lectio divina*, for example. But then we think that this is *the way* . . . the only way to be formed spiritually . . . and we begin to think that anyone not doing *lectio* is not experiencing spiritual formation.
- ▶ Such an attitude will only produce legalism and bondage, and it utterly defeats spiritual formation.
- ▶ The Christian idea of spiritual formation is, very simply, the *formation* and *conformation* and *transformation* of the human personality—body, mind, and spirit—into the likeness of Jesus Christ.



1. *Do not* define spiritual formation in terms of various practices.
2. *Do not* focus on curriculum-based solutions.
3. *Do not* aim at outward action.
4. *Do* root spiritual formation in the Great Commission.
5. *Do* think internationally.
6. *Do* think in terms of the Church universal.
7. *Do* give sustained attention to a balanced vision.
8. *Do* draw wisdom and insight from The Great Tradition.
9. *Do* take the long view.
10. *Do* develop the highest possible Christology.



Stephan Dan Laing, “Spiritual Formation and Discipleship,” in *A Handbook of Theology*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David S. Dockery, and Nathan A. Finn (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023), 473:

- ▶ Christian spiritual formation is the gradual and holistic shaping of a believer by the triune God into the fullness of the image of Christ through the Holy Spirit’s facilitation of union with Christ and, through him, union with the Father (John 14:20-23). This sanctified and sanctifying union results in spiritual growth that flows out in works of loving mission, effected through spiritual disciplines that believers practice both privately and corporately. Spiritual formation is not the same as Christian spirituality, which is more of a generic umbrella term. Formation implies that there is a subject to be formed, a formative agent (or agents), a program of formation, and a formational goal toward which one strives.



- ▶ “Spiritual formation is an integral part of sanctification, located and grounded in this doctrine. It is a vital aspect of soteriology that facilitates a believer’s transformation into Christlikeness. Many would consider sanctification chiefly the work of the Holy Spirit, but in truth, it is the work of the triune God. This trinitarian activity becomes apparent when spiritual formation is viewed through a systematic theological lens.” P. 476



Here is my adaption of Laing's sense of "spiritual formation":

- ▶ Creation: *formation*
- ▶ Fall: *deformation*
- ▶ Incarnation: *re-formation*
- ▶ Regeneration: *re-creation*
- ▶ Sanctification: *conformation*
- ▶ Conformation's process: *transformation*
- ▶ Conformation complete: *glorification*



- ▶ “When believers offer themselves to God through the spiritual disciplines stirred up by the Holy Spirit, who moves their mind and will in a Godward direction, then God gradually transforms them at every level. The disciplines gradually “re-form” thoughts, desires, and habits, which “con-form” us to Christ’s mind and a life directed toward and in alignment with God. Disciplines must be offered out of unconditional obedience, and as they are offered consistently and perseveringly—in spite of struggle—they become a means of grace and transformation.
- ▶ “The disciplines have the effect of gradually breaking the hold of sin in human life. By practicing disciplines of active engagement (e.g., fellowship, prayer, worship, service, stewardship, hospitality, manual labor, Bible study), as well as of renunciation or private practice (e.g., fasting, chastity, solitude, silence, simplicity, meditation, discernment), believers are systematically and gradually trained to act, react, or respond to life situations in godly ways.” P. 483



Matthew Bingham, *A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2025), 35:

- ▶ **Spiritual formation** is the conscious process by which we seek to heighten and satisfy our Spirit-given thirst for God (Ps. 42:1-2) through divinely appointed means and with a view toward ‘work[ing] out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling’ (Phil. 2:12) and becoming ‘mature in Christ’ (Col. 1:28).
- ▶ This larger, all-encompassing process, however, is better termed *sanctification* . . . When we talk about *spiritual formation* and *keeping the heart* in this volume, we are indicating that part of Christian growth in which we are active, aware, conscious participants working and striving toward growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).



Foundational to Reformed spiritual formation is what Bingham calls the “Reformation Triangle”:

- ▶ “the nexus of Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer (191) . . . by allowing the three [parts of the triangle] to inform each other, we come to understand our growth in grace in terms of conversational communion with the one who made us; he addresses us through his word; we think meditatively on what he’s said; we respond back to him in prayer” (194).



Kyle Strobel, [Spiritual Care—Without Losing Our Theological Soul](#) (August 13, 2025).

- ▶ There is a question bouncing around social media explicitly and implicitly, and it goes something like this: Can you believe in spiritual formation and remain theologically orthodox? Or, with a different focus: Is spiritual formation really evangelical? This is a great question, but it points to an issue we have to unearth to understand the problem.
- ▶ Too often people try to articulate something called “spiritual formation” that is somehow segregated from their theology. *Christianly*, this is non-sensical.



- ▶ We don't separate our theology from our practice in the Christian faith, and when we do so, we need to name that failure rather than reject the conversation. But as someone who has a deep investment in this conversation, I must admit that too many have developed a vision of spiritual formation tossed by the waves of present impulses that isn't deeply moored to a distinctively Christian (let alone a Protestant) vision of life with God.
- ▶ *I often define our own historical vision for evangelical spirituality as: a Word-centered, Spirit-empowered, whole-life spirituality that is distinctively Protestant in its theology and whose form is churchly. This is the focus of my own work. But, admittedly, that is not often what's on offer under the banner of "spiritual formation." (emphasis mine)*



- ▶ There are several points I could raise here, like our failure to know our own theological and spiritual traditions, the divorce between academic theology and churchly theology, and so on, but the problem runs deeper than these issues I think. I grew up in an evangelicalism that often demeaned theology, replacing it with worldly systems and logics to try to advance the kingdom using worldly forms (and did so explicitly). Even though this is not the whole story of evangelicalism, and I know many who have a very different experience, this is still one of the realities we must face.
- ▶ The early spiritual formation conversation was set in contrast to these systems, seeking to prophetically speak against them. Willard, for instance, offered a vision of the kingdom that was antithetical to the pragmatism on offer around him. His encouragement to folks was to go back to early evangelicalism and study the spirituality and theology that animated the movement, and, importantly, to *memorize Scripture*. Unfortunately, Willard is more often quoted than imitated in this regard.



- ▶ But the spiritual formation discussion restarted by folks like Willard and Foster occurred in a day when pragmatism seemed to be working and where the church was exploding. Yet they were warning that if we wielded these pragmatics, we would one day reap what we sow (and what else is evangelicalism doing today than that?). But we are in a different context. Now, in the age dominated by self-help, life-hacks, and identity-construction, we do not see practices like spiritual disciplines as self-denial but as instruments to cultivate ourselves. Unmoored from our deep beliefs, spiritual formation inevitably becomes a generic, worldly spirituality of self-attainment.
- ▶ Instead, our own evangelical tradition is filled with examples of theologically rich, gospel-centered, churchly vision of the life of faith. We don't turn to something called "spiritual formation" apart from our theology, but we must ask our theology: *What is the vision of life that this animates?* How does our understanding of justification by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone fund a life of maturation? How does our vision of the atonement, grace, and "the growth that is from God" (Col. 2:19) help give an account of spiritual practices?
- ▶ The evangelical tradition was always a whole-life spirituality that recognized the experiential and affective dynamics of life in the presence of God. It turns out that we don't have to choose between good theology and deep spirituality because the reality is that we can't have one without the other. The tragedy is that we continue to try.



- ▶ Our responsibility as evangelicals is not to just repeat our own tradition, of course. But as *sola scriptura* Protestants, we are called to articulate and live a robustly Word-centered, Spirit-empowered, whole-life spirituality. To be faithful, this spirituality will always be richly theological, as we see in folks most recently like J. I. Packer, but more broadly found in our own spiritual tradition.
- ▶ *So what is our call now?* Our call is to cultivate a richly-theological, gospel-centered, and church-oriented vision of the Christian life. To protect from being tossed by the waves of this present age, we should do so moored to our own theological tradition, not because it is somehow inerrant, but because, as C.S. Lewis would remind us, our blind spots are not theirs. We should not simply repeat our tradition but, guided by the Word of God, we should do the kind of work they did.



John Mark Comer, [Spiritual Formation Is Becoming Like Jesus](#) (January 16, 2025).

- ▶ Spiritual formation is simply the way the human spirit, or self, is formed into a definitive shape—and ultimately how each of us is formed to be like Jesus. In doing so, we become our deepest, truest self—the self that God had in mind when he willed us into existence before time began.
- ▶ Put another way, spiritual formation is the process of being formed into people of love in Christ. Let's parse this out—starting by defining what this *process* entails.
- ▶ Formation into the image of Jesus is a long, slow process, not a one-time event. There's no lightning bolt from heaven. Spiritual growth is much like bodily growth—very gradual. It takes place over a lifetime at an incremental, at times imperceptible rate. Yes, we experience periods of dramatic change like birth or a teenage growth spurt, but those key inflection points are the exceptions, not the rule.



VARIOUS TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION



Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 1998).


- ▶ *Imitatio*: The Divine Paradigm
- ▶ The Contemplative Tradition: Discovering the Prayer-Filled Life
- ▶ The Holiness Tradition: Discovering the Virtuous Live
- ▶ The Charismatic Tradition: Discovering the Spirit-Empowered Life
- ▶ The Social Justice Tradition: Discovering the Compassionate Life
- ▶ The Evangelical Tradition: Discovering the Word-Centered Life
- ▶ The Incarnational Tradition: Discovering the Sacramental Life



LECTIO DIVINA



Keith Beasley-Topliffe, ed., *The Upper Room Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2003), 167-168:

- ▶ ***Lectio Divina***. Literally “divine reading,” a particular way of encountering God in scripture that stands in contrast to the approach to scripture of disciplines of study, exegesis, hermeneutics, and theological reflection. Rather than the text being an object of the mind seeking understanding, in *lectio divina* the text is an **icon** of God that acts upon the heart. 

- ▶ *Lectio* – Hearing the Sacred Word
- ▶ *Meditatio* – Pondering the Personal Word
- ▶ *Oratio* – Intimate Dialogue with God
- ▶ *Contemplatio* – Heavenly Rest
- ▶ *Incarnatio* – A Calling Forward



What is Lectio Divina?

- ▶ *Lectio* – Reading the Bible passage slowly several times. The passage itself is not as important as savoring each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the “still, small voice” of a word or phrase that speaks to the practitioner.
- ▶ *Meditatio* – Reflecting on the passage and thinking about how it applies to one’s life. The practitioner pays special attention to feelings that arise and ways that God is speaking.
- ▶ *Oratio* – Responding to the passage by praying and opening the heart to God. This is seen as the beginning of a conversation with God. Some practitioners of *lectio divina* keep a journal to record their prayers to God and God’s messages to them.
- ▶ *Contemplatio* – Contemplating on all that was learned. This step involves sitting in silence, resting in God’s presence, and experiencing union with Christ.
- ▶ Some versions of the instructions for *lectio divina* also include a fifth step: *Actio*, or action. Having received God’s love, the practitioner is to go about serving others in love.



- ▶ Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray.
 - ▶ Place yourself in a quiet environment. Calm your anxieties and thoughts, and acknowledge God's presence.
 - ▶ Offer a prayer to the Holy Spirit for inspiration and guidance: Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten my heart and mind to listen to your Word.
1. *Lectio*: Read the text slowly and prayerfully, constantly listening for that word that God has prepared for you. You may want to re-read the same text multiple times to help quiet yourself interiorly and focus on God's voice. Listen and receive the Word that God speaks to you.
 2. *Meditatio*: When a word or phrase strikes you, stop and rest with it. Repeat the word or phrase to yourself. Allow it to speak to you in a personal way by pondering the word in your heart, reflecting on what it means to you. Memorize it and repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your thoughts, hopes, memories, and desires.
 3. *Oratio*: Prayer is your response to God's word. It begins your dialogue with God that comes from your heart. Formulate a prayer, as a response to God. What do you want to say to the Lord in response to the Word spoken to you? Enter into this loving conversation with God.
 4. *Contemplatio*: Rest in God's presence and receive His transforming embrace. Sit still with God, realizing that in this deep and profound relationship, words are not necessary. Be content and at peace with a wordless, quiet rest in God, which brings joy to the heart. Remember that contemplation is not your action or doing, rather it is allowing God to act in you.



RICHARD LOVELACE, *DYNAMICS OF SPIRITUAL LIFE:*

An Evangelical Theology of Renewal (Downers
Grove: InterVarsity, 1979)



Preconditions of Renewal

- ❖ Awareness of the holiness of God – His justice, His love
- ❖ Awareness of the depth of sin – in your own life, in your community

Primary Elements of Renewal: Depth Presentation of the Gospel

- ❖ Justification – you are accepted . . . in Christ
- ❖ Sanctification – you are free from bondage to sin . . . in Christ
- ❖ The Indwelling Spirit – you are not alone . . . in Christ
- ❖ Authority in spiritual conflict – you have authority . . . in Christ

Secondary Elements of Renewal: Outworking of the Gospel in the Church's Life

- ❖ Mission: following Christ into the world, presenting the gospel – in proclamation, in social demonstration
- ❖ Prayer: expressing dependence on the power of his Spirit – individually, corporately
- ❖ Community: being in union with his body – in microcommunities, in macrocommunities

- ❖ Disenculturation: being freed from cultural binds – destructive, protective
- ❖ Theological Integration: having the mind of Christ – toward revealed truth, toward your culture

ENCULTURATION AND DISENCULTURATION



Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979).

- ▶ First is what he calls *destructive enculturation*, which is a spiritual community that has been saturated in the values and social norms of the godless world around them.
- ▶ The second is what he calls *protective enculturation*, which is the building of restrictive measures to keep the world out.
- ▶ As a strategy for authentic and vital spiritual renewal, neither work. Strict religiosity does nothing to restrict the indulgence of the flesh (see Col 2:23) and worldliness only allures us with the promises of acceptance, pleasure, and meaning, without ever actually granting it.

- ▶ *Protective enculturation* produces what Lovelace calls a “cultural rust” and *destructive enculturation* disintegrates any meaningful distinction between the world and God’s people. Both are spiritual catastrophes. And both are, more or less, worldly.
- ▶ Enculturation (both destructive and protective) is a failure of understanding and appropriating the fullness of what we have and who we are in Christ. Lovelace, then, shows that a strategy of “*disenculturation*” is needed. He says, “many of our people are severely enculturated because their relationship to Christ is so insecure that they are not free to cut loose from cultural support.”

Hunter Beaumont, [Deconstruct Your Culture, Not Your Faith](#) (April 26, 2021)

- ▶ Many of my friends and congregants who go on a deconstruction journey aren't trying to lose their faith. They don't want to end up in a Jesus-free place. They just want to make sense out of the faith they grew up in and let go of stuff that's stale or stifling. They actually want a stronger faith, not no faith—more of Jesus, not less.
- ▶ If that describes you, here's food for thought: Deconstruction is not what you're actually looking for. Disenculturation is.

- ▶ Disenculturation is the process used by missionaries to differentiate the gospel from culture. Having moved from one culture to another, missionaries can see that the gospel is like a kernel protected by an outer husk (culture). Their job is to ensure that the gospel kernel is free to enter new cultures without being captive to its old husk. This goes all the way back to the book of Acts, when the early church had to differentiate the gospel from Judaism as it entered Gentile culture.
- ▶ In the same way, you might need to differentiate the gospel from evangelical subculture. I've been through this process! I did not grow up in evangelicalism, but I became a Christian inside an evangelical high school. I fell in love with the gospel it taught me, but I could also see that this evangelical world had a lot of culture that wasn't part of the gospel. Learning to disenculturate the gospel from evangelicalism has not only saved my faith. It's helped me love the gospel more.

David Prince, [Spiritual Discipline of Unlearning](#) (February 12th, 2026).

- ▶ When we talk about Christian growth, we almost always frame it in terms of *learning*: learning doctrine, learning Scripture, learning theology, learning how to live faithfully in the world. And all of that is good and necessary. The Christian life is a life of constant learning. We are taught by the Word, shaped by truth, and formed by sound teaching.
- ▶ But there is another side of growth that is far less discussed and often far more painful.
- ▶ Much of our growth in Christ does not come from learning something new. It comes from *unlearning* things we already believe, assume, or practice.
- ▶ If learning is addition, unlearning is subtraction. And subtraction is usually harder.

SANCTIFICATION GAP



- ▶ Ephesians 2:8-10: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”
- ▶ “For by grace you have been saved through faith . . . not a result of works.”
- ▶ “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

- ▶ “For by grace you have been saved through faith . . . not a result of works.” Romans 3:21-26
- ▶ “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” James 2:14-26
- ▶ Titus 1:16: “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”

- ▶ Justification and sanctification are not one and the same. They are connected, but they must not be confused. When these two truths are not carefully distinguished, it results in serious, potentially damning errors. This has happened throughout the history of the church.
- ▶ Francis Turretin, *Institute of Elenctic Theology*, concludes sanctification is understood “passively,” inasmuch as the transforming work “is wrought by God in us,” and also “actively,” inasmuch as sanctification “ought to be done by us, God performing this work in us and by us” (XVII.i.3).

Furthermore, Turretin helpfully and insightfully explains how justification and sanctification differ (XVII.i.10):

1. They differ with regard to their *object*. **Justification** is concerned with guilt; **sanctification** with pollution.
2. They differ as to their *form*. **Justification** is a judicial and forensic act whereby our sins are forgiven and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. **Sanctification** is a moral act whereby righteousness is infused to the believer, and our internal renovation is affected.
3. They differ as to the *recipient subject*. In **justification**, man is given a new objective status based on God's acquittal. In **sanctification**, we are subjectively renewed by God.
4. They differ as to *degrees*. **Justification** is given in this life fully, without any possible increase. **Sanctification** is begun in this life but only made perfect in the next. The declaration of justification is once for all. The inward work of sanctification takes place by degrees.
5. They differ as to the *order*. God only **sanctifies** those who are already reconciled and **justified** by faith.

PIETISM



**In Germany,
Pietism came
as a response
to “dead
orthodoxy.”**

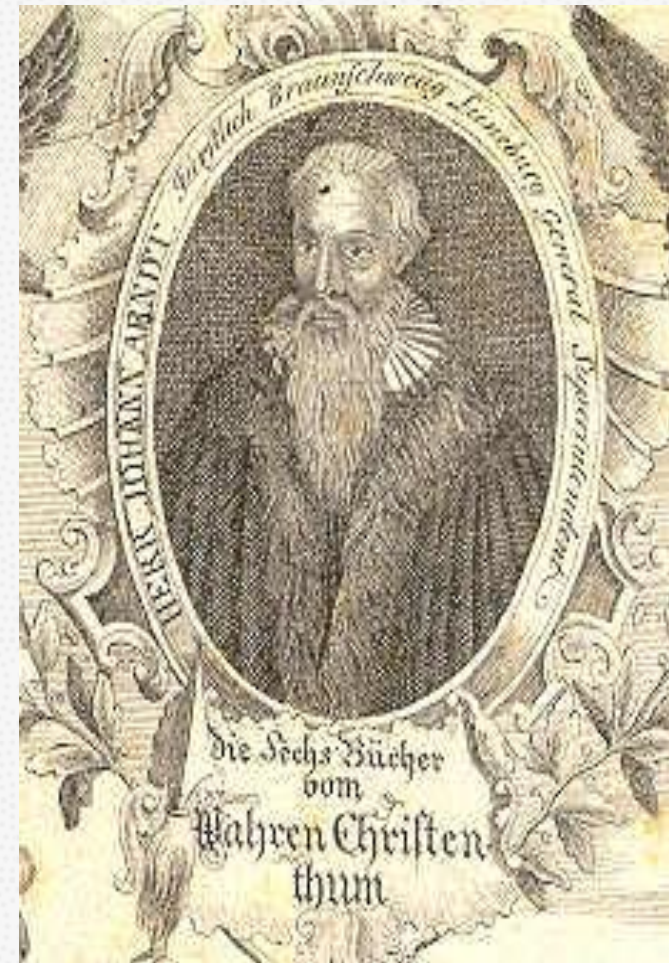
Book of Concord, 1580



True Christianity in German

**An influential author of was
pastor Johann Arndt (1555-1621)
who wrote *True Christianity*.**

**His Pietism emphasized
Regeneration– the necessity to Be
Born Again.**





- ▶ While at his next post in Brunswick, Arndt issued the first volume of his book *True Christianity* [1606], calling for genuine discipleship. Noting that jealousy, self-seeking, greed, and covetousness were rampant among professed Christians, he observed, “The modern life of persons outwardly professing Christianity is not with [Christ] and therefore it is against him, that is, not Christian but unchristian. For now most men are at discord with Christ, and hardly are there any of one soul, one will, one mind, and one spirit with Christ; and none but such as these ever can be Christ’s or be called rightly by his name, and accounted for Christians.” This brought down the wrath of colleagues who wanted a faith to ease their guilt without the inconvenience of giving up sin.
- ▶ Because of Arndt’s emphasis on practical Christianity and the inner, emotional component necessary to belief, he is considered the first Pietist. John Wesley especially appreciated his writings.

Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705), The father of Pietism, Promoted Reform Through:



- *collegia pietatis* (college of piety), a group of devout believers who would meet privately for prayer and Bible study.
- *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (little church within the church; conventicle).

Moravians at Herrnhut, led by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), practiced pietism that sent missionaries to:



- West Indies
- South America
- South Africa
- North America
- **Denmark**
- **Sweden**
- **Norway**

Mark A. Noll, “Pietism” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017):

- ▶ A recurring tendency within Christian history to emphasize more the practicalities of Christian life and less the formal structures of theology or church order. Its historians discern four general traits in this tendency:
- ▶ (1) its experiential character—pietists are people of the heart for whom Christian living is the fundamental concern;
- ▶ (2) its biblical focus—pietists are, to paraphrase John Wesley, “people of one book” who take standards and goals from the pages of Scripture;
- ▶ (3) its perfectionistic bent—pietists are serious about holy living and expend every effort to follow God’s law, spread the gospel, and provide aid for the needy;
- ▶ (4) its reforming interest—pietists usually oppose what they regard as coldness and sterility in established church forms and practices.

- ▶ In more specifically Christian terms pietism represents a significant effort to reform the Protestant heritage. Some of the fears of its earliest opponents have been partially justified. At its worst the pietistic tendency can lead to inordinate subjectivism and emotionalism; it can discourage careful scholarship; it can fragment the church through enthusiastic separation; it can establish new codes of almost legalistic morality; and it can underrate the value of Christian traditions.
- ▶ On the other hand, pietism was—and continues to be—a source of powerful renewal in the church. At its best it points to the indispensability of Scripture for the Christian life; it encourages lay people in the work of Christian ministry; it stimulates concern for missions; it advances religious freedom and cooperation among believers; and it urges individuals not to rest until finding intimate fellowship with God himself.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, trans. H. Bolt, J. Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 3.567–68.

- ▶ Like so many other efforts at reforming life in Protestant churches, Pietism and Methodism were right in their opposition to dead orthodoxy. Originally their intention was only to arouse a sleeping Christianity; they wished not to bring about a change in the confession of the Reformation but only to apply it in life. Yet, out of an understandable reaction, they frequently went too far in this endeavor and swung to another extreme. They, too, gradually shifted the center of gravity from the objective to the subjective work of salvation. In this connection it makes essentially no difference whether one makes salvation dependent on faith and obedience or on faith and experience. In both cases humanity itself steps into the foreground. Even though Pietism and Methodism did not deny the acquisition of salvation by Christ, they did not use this doctrine or relate it in any organic way to the application of salvation. It was, so to speak, dead capital. The official activity of the exalted Christ, the Lord from heaven, was overshadowed by the experiences of the subject.

- ▶ In Pietism, instead of being directed toward Christ, people were directed toward themselves. They had to travel a long road, meet all sorts of demands and conditions, and test themselves by numerous marks of genuineness before they might believe, appropriate Christ, and be assured of their salvation. Methodism indeed tried to bring all this—conversion, faith, assurance—together in one indivisible moment, but it systematized this method, in a most abbreviated way, in the same manner as Pietism. In both there is a failure to appreciate the activity of the Holy Spirit, the preparation of grace, and the connection between creation and re-creation. That is also the reason why in neither of them does the conversion experience lead to a truly developed Christian life. Whether in Pietistic fashion it withdraws from the world or in Methodist style acts aggressively in the world, it is always something separate, something that stands dualistically alongside the natural life, and therefore does not have an organic impact on the family, society, and the state, on science and art. With or without the Salvation Army uniform, Christians are a special sort of people who live not in but outside the world. The Reformation antithesis between sin and grace has more or less made way for the Catholic antithesis between the natural and the supernatural. Puritanism has been exchanged for asceticism. The essence of sanctification now consists in abstaining from ordinary things.

Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), “The Sanctification Gap,” 229-237:

- ▶ There seemed to be a sanctification gap among Evangelicals, a peculiar conspiracy somehow to mislay the Protestant tradition of spiritual growth and to concentrate instead on frantic witnessing activity, sermons on John 3:16 and theological arguments over eschatology subtleties. Other sectors in the church argued over issues of real substance, but with such rancor and exaggeration that one wished that some attention had first been given to sanctification.
- ▶ The historical development of Protestant Evangelicalism has predisposed it to lose sight of the central importance of sanctification.
the English Puritans, concerned that the Reformation had been only a “half-Reformation,” introduced into Protestantism a tremendous stress on initial conversion. Their object was to counter dead orthodoxy, mere “notional: or historical faith, but the doctrine of regeneration. . . . they loaded into conversion experience so much of the developed content of Christian growth that in effect they required believers to become practicing mystics before they could be counted Christians.

- ▶ It is not surprising that although Jonathan Edwards continued the Puritan teaching on conversion during the revivals of the 1730s and 40s, most of Christendom was skeptical by the end of the eighteenth century. [hyper-Calvinism]
- ▶ The nineteenth-century heirs of the revival tradition modified the Puritan system by allowing easier standards of initial conversion. . . . [Finney-an-Arminianism] The nineteenth-century revival leaders were like mechanics examining an engine in which the power train has somehow been attached to the carburetor; the whole of sanctification had been inserted into conversion. . . . they disconnected sanctification from conversion and made it easy for men to enter the kingdom on the basis of simple faith and initial repentance. Having unloaded conversion, however they failed to reinsert sanctification in its proper place in the development of the Christian life and left the engine with no power train at all. The divorce from Puritanism was effected, and the sanctification gap was born.
- ▶ The major argument many Protestant liberals have against “supernatural conversion experiences” is the distinctly natural lives led by many “born again” congregations.

- ▶ What can be done about the sanctification gap? The first thing is simply to see that it is there . . . unless there is a deepening in the heart of their faith, new methods and new masks are not going to help much. . . . A second step must be the forging of a valid biblical model of spiritual life for Christians in the late twentieth century. To forge such a model we must, of course, restudy the Scriptures. . . I am convinced that our efforts must be directed along the lines of the Reformed doctrine of progressive sanctification—n-stage rather than 2- or 3 stage growth. . . . A third step involves reclaiming by contemporary Evangelicals of the explosive heritage of spiritual renewal which lies behind them in the eras of revival. . . . modern Evangelicalism is in danger of becoming a tame lecture circuit, a kind of sanctified show business. . . . Since the work of the Holy Spirit in lives is intimately related to mission, it is unlikely that we can close the sanctification gap until we approach our mission in this dangerous age with the same fear and trembling, the same prayer to be endued with power from on high, that characterized the first apostles.

WORLDVISION, WORLDVIEW, WORLD- AND-LIFE VIEW



- ▶ **Worldvision:** This is nature and nurture, and it is limited by our own personal perspective. Everyone has a worldvision, and it is not inherently bad. It is a place to start, but it is not a place to end. For too many, it is an abode. A worldvision is both everywhere and nowhere. And as James Eglinton notes, a “worldvision becomes problematic when it is made a permanent abode rather than a starting point.” Added to this, as noted by William Edwards, “worldviews are difficult to develop, and worldvisions are difficult to let go.” A Christian worldview depends on God’s revelation, the gospel!
- ▶ **Worldview:** Truth stated in propositional statements. James Sires, *The Universe Next Door*, defines it in this way (p. 20): “A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”

- ▶ **World-and-Life View:** Truth stated in propositional statements and its impact on life, with life considered one of the experientially lived statements which reveal the veracity of what is propositionally affirmed. A person will not always live what they profess, but they will always live what they believe.
- ▶ **Social Imaginary:** A social imaginary is “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc.” Thus, it is a worldview based on how we imagine what life is to be like or a story or a narrative. One’s beliefs and way of life have as much to do, if not more, with one’s social imaginary than with propositional truths. In addition, the social imaginary is constructed within an immanent frame, which is a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural order (rather than supernatural).

A COUPLE OF EXAMPLES



DALLAS WILLARD

Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is
Done



- ▶ Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. 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.
- ▶ The progression of spiritual formation is outlined in various passages of the New Testament. It is most fully spelled out in II Peter 1: "Now since you have become partakers of the divine nature," the writer says, "applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love." (vv. 4-7)



- ▶ If you examine these and related passages you will see that they include a passive element and an active element. And making the distinction between passive and active, and seeing how they come together, poses--especially for the evangelical understanding--the greatest difficulty in the area of spiritual formation.
- ▶ We know, as Jesus says, "Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) And I think everyone here will agree with that. It is the initiative of God and the presence of God without which all of our efforts are in vain--whether it is in justification or sanctification or in the realm of the exercise of power, all our efforts will be in vain if God does not act. But we had better believe that the back side of that verse reads: "If you do nothing it will be without me." And this is the part we have the hardest time hearing.



- ▶ *We have a problem today in Evangelical circles. We're not only saved by grace, we're paralyzed by it. I'm Southern Baptist, and we often preach to you for an hour, telling you you can do nothing to be saved, and then sing to you for forty-five minutes trying to get you to do something to be saved. That's confusing!* And, as we look at these verses (many similar ones could be chosen), I hope we can see within them the union of passivity and activity because spiritual formation is something that requires us to take wise steps in accomplishing it. The "old man" will not be put off, and the "new man" put on, unless I do something--and, indeed, unless I do the right things. And so the need as we approach the topic of spiritual formation, is to understand as well as we can what is our part and what is God's part, and take care of our part that God may be able to work with us in bringing us to be the kinds of people that we need to be and he wants us to be. (If the idea that we must do something to "enable" God to do something bothers you, you have just hit a major barrier on the pathway of spiritual formation.)



- ▶ *Now, spiritual formation talk has emerged within evangelical circles because of a pervasive felt need--felt on the part of many people within the laity as well as within the clergy--for "something more" than the group and individual activities that have been recognized and encouraged in conservative religious circles in recent decades. Especially, as Fundamentalism fell away and our contemporary (post-WW II) version of Evangelicalism emerged, we had a period of great success, and still enjoy that in many, many quarters; but because of the particular dynamics of that period, we came to think that, in the language of some Protestants, "the Word of God is the only sacrament." And what that meant practically was that the sole means of spiritual growth was being taught and "preached at"--that we're saved and transformed by hearing the truths of the scriptures; we're redeemed by the truths which the conservative and evangelical segments of the church rightly stood for. We're saved by believing them, we're sanctified by believing them, and all issues of spiritual growth are dealt with simply by taking the word in through reading it, through hearing it, through exhortation and ministry from the scriptures. Or so we thought. But I think that what we found, beginning some years ago, was that this "method" really does not do everything that is needed or that we thought it would do. And during the period since WW II, especially, we came to accept the marginalization of discipleship to Jesus. We came to see it as something of an option that we might choose to exercise should we wish. But if we would just like to believe the truth and receive the ministry of the word, and get on with our life without discipleship, that's okay too. And as a result we have now come to the place where we can be a Christian forever without becoming a disciple.*



Kyle Strobel, [Spiritual Formation, Dallas Willard, and the Call of Integration](#) (November 3, 2025).

- ▶ When you think of someone, for instance, like Dallas Willard, he was not interested in something called “the spiritual formation discussion.” Mostly, that was because he helped to start it, and so there wasn’t much of a discussion before he started writing (although there are several important figurers who were doing work in this area prior to Willard who tend to be ignored).
- ▶ What Willard was doing was stepping into a stream of the evangelical tradition that attends theologically and philosophically to questions about human flourishing. This led him into conversations about virtue, psychology, salvation, etc.
- ▶ *You see, no one owns the spiritual formation conversation, because spiritual formation is not something we can cordon off from these other questions. You cannot reason well about spiritual formation without engaging in interdisciplinary discussions of personhood, growth, and how the spiritual and “natural” life differ.*

I think we need to focus on three key features of spiritual formation:

1. ***A distinctively churchly and Protestant vision of spiritual formation.***

- This means that we cannot simply attend to individual spiritual formation, but we have to consider how spiritual formation is situated within an understanding of the gospel.

2. ***A theologically-rich account of spiritual formation, focusing on what we have lost from the Christian tradition.***

- A theologically rich account of spiritual formation should situate spiritual growth within a Protestant vision of salvation broadly and sanctification specifically. This means we have to sit with, as noted above, the nature of the gospel, but also the biblical and theological contours of holiness.

3. ***A vision of soul care that is governed and guided by who we are in Christ and the present work of Christ in and through his Spirit.***

- This requires us to consider what it means that the “Spirit works with power” in our “inner being,” so that Christ can “dwell in our hearts by faith.” (Eph. 3:16-17). This also means that we have to attend to how natural formation differs from its supernatural counterpart.

JOHN MARK COMER



- ▶ It is important to note at least four things: (1) what is the attraction to Comer and what he has written and why; (2) what is good about it; (3) what is questionable about it; (4) what is not helpful or wrong about it. And we need to do this without sounding adversarial or that I am the sole Magisterium to declare whether it is good or bad. My sense is that we address these four matters as with brothers and sisters in the EFCA, and that we then use the approach of Paul.
- ▶ I think of the approach of Priscilla and Aquila after hearing Apollos, who “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). I also think of Paul in response to the over-realized Corinthians in relation to spiritual gifts, which is certainly related to “spiritual formation,” earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).



- ▶ The normal Christian life is not working, the normal means of grace, i.e., the Spirit-enabled spiritual disciplines which lead to Spirit-empowered transformation, God has given for spiritual growth, are insufficient. Something new or different is tried/attempted, it made a difference in his life, and now he absolutizes and universalizes it, meaning it becomes a command, and it is for everyone. This is why it is critical to ask what it is that led to “practicing the way,” such that the command “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7, NASB) through the means of grace God has revealed/given were insufficient. For some reason it did not work in his life, so there was something else he sought. And then he concludes others are in the same state and he calls (commands?) others to follow the same path.



- ▶ Too often when someone finds help or encouragement to an area in which one has struggled personally, the tendency is to absolutize their own personal experience, making it dogma, and then universalize it, requiring it of all others. It tends to foster an arrogance, sort of a Gnostic, secret knowledge which they now know and have experienced, and they must share it with others. It also tends to foster a two-tier Christianity, those who follow the way, the person's way, not the Way (Jn. 14:6), and those poor saints who do not.



- ▶ *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World* (2019).
- ▶ *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies That Sabotage* (2021).
- ▶ *God Has a Name: What You Believe About God Will Shape Who You* (2024).
- ▶ *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.* (2024).



- ▶ John Mark Comer
- ▶ Practicing the Way



Trinity Forum Conversations Episode 98 Season 8: [Practicing the Way with John Mark Comer](#) (January 7, 2025).

As for how I came to this work, I certainly did not grow up in this stream of the Church. I did grow up in the Church. I'm actually the son of a pastor. You know, they say we come to—whatever you want to call it—formation or the inner journey or whatever—through one of two sources: desire or pain. But for most of us, it's pain. And it certainly was in my life. And without going into all the details, I grew up in, what at the time would have been called evangelicalism. And that word used to mean something. It's fractured now. I have no idea what it means anymore.



But I grew up in kind of the hallmark concept of that idea, kind of a West Coast [evangelicalism]. Born in 1980, grew up in the church, 80s, 90s. Was actually in one of the first megachurches in America [which] was where my dad became a Christian out of the Jesus movement and ended up as a pastor on staff. So I grew up in that, and I'm really grateful for it. I'm really grateful for the foundation it put in my life and the high view of Scripture. Lots of secular psychologists have made the point that it's just much better for children's mental health to grow up— if there's a spectrum between conservative and progressive, you want to grow up closer to the conservative side, a healthy version of that, just at a mental health level.



And I'm just really grateful for, in particular— you know, I grew up in Silicon Valley, spent 20 years in urban Portland, and now I live in LA. So I've lived my whole life in what I think the writer of Revelation would call Babylon. In a very secular— and LA actually calls itself Babylon. I like to quip, you know, conservatives from different parts of the country rail against the Left Coast and such. And half of their criticisms are entirely true. But this city actually self-identifies as Babylon, the biblical archetype of society and rebellion against God. So that's just what I've grown up in. And I'm really grateful for the foundation that it laid in me and the strong moral compass, you know?



But at the same time, I'm a product of it in so many ways. *And I came to the end of what the evangelical model of discipleship had to offer. And in my case, I was still miles away from anything approximating the fruit of the Spirit, the sermon on the Mount, the inner disposition and outward lifestyle of Jesus. And there wasn't anything, you know, scandalous. I wasn't out doing something that would make it onto a blog. It was just the pedestrian ungodliness of being a critical husband and an uptight dad and stuff like that. And I really came to the end of myself. And, you know, part of that is burnout, which I've written much about, but it was much deeper than just overwork and I have an iPhone and I'm in too demanding of a job. It was way deeper than that. It went to unhealed and untransformed parts of my deepest self.*



Comer was talking about who and what is a disciple. Notice how his understanding of the evangelical version of disciple was insufficient. Was it the evangelical approach that was deficient, or was it Comer's understanding of the evangelical approach that was deficient?

- ▶ And then, you know, we get into the difference between that and *the evangelical model of discipleship*. And I think that's where we run into some of the problem that you're naming of the wide swath of untransformed Christians. And listen, all of us are in progress. I don't mean that in a judgment way. But yes, I found a few studies that, for all the talk about America being so post-Christian, you know, like 67 percent of America still identifies as Christian. I can't fathom that living in LA or Portland, where if you meet another Christian, it's like meeting a unicorn on the street, you know. I'm from one of those places where people hear you're from one of those cities and like, "oh, do you know—?" And they name another Christian thinking, oh, you must know each other. It's a giant city. But there's truth in that. And I can't fathom that. But I know that is true nationally. But then a number of— this is really tricky to measure, and so who knows about the accuracy—but let's say it's even ballpark. A number of independent surveys put the number of people that are actually following Jesus in any meaningful way—and that's not like the next Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day or Francis Chan; that's just like what John Stott called a basic Christian—at around 4 percent. And that gap between the 67 and let's just call it 4, I think that's where much of the ache is right now.



Comer was responding to a question about legalism. Once again, he speaks about the deficiencies of evangelicalism. Maybe. But is that alone where the problem lies. Probably not.

- ▶ He spent much of his time— and some of this is time stamped. He's coming in the late 90s where, you know, we don't have the influence that key figures like N.T. Wright and now the Bible Project and some other really good scholars have kind of really helped to heal, I think, *a gross misunderstanding of the gospel in evangelicalism*. And so, you know, Willard begins with the gospel, and then he begins with this vision of a transformed life in the kingdom of God. And he's just constantly talking about life in the kingdom of God. . . So you have to have a moment of intention where you decide in your heart, I will do whatever it takes to become this kind of a person. *Unfortunately, that's where almost all of evangelicalism stops, in particular where church services tend to stop.*



Theological Traditions/Influences

- ▶ Arminian
- ▶ free will defense (FWD) proponent (with some similarities to open theism, which he denies)
- ▶ Functional Kenoticism
- ▶ Mystic
- ▶ Charismatic
- ▶ Broadly Evangelical
- ▶ Renovaré (founded by Richard Foster in 1988)



Other Doctrinal Issues

- ▶ God: denies God's exhaustive foreknowledge, emphasizes human free will which limits God, can be moved, intentions change, relationally changeable (akin to Greg Boyd, though he denies he is an open theist);
- ▶ God: denies the sovereignty of God (as expounded by Augustine and Calvin)
- ▶ Spirit-Christology: this is a form of functional kenoticism in that Jesus performed miracles not by or through the person of God the Son incarnate—fully God and fully man, one person in two natures—but solely by the power of the Holy Spirit, with the implication we can do and live the same.
- ▶ Atonement: denies penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), meaning he at least questions (denies?) the wrath of God.
- ▶ Regeneration: focuses on being with Jesus, imitating Jesus, yet he does not emphasize sin or regeneration (is he semi-pelagianism?)
- ▶ Annihilationism: although I have not read or heard this, his understanding of God, sin, and the atonement, along with the influence of Greg Boyd in his teaching, who affirms annihilationism), it is an appropriate question to raise.
- ▶ Egalitarian: the beliefs from where he formerly served as a pastor (Bridgetown Church) are as follows: “We believe both women and men can and should lead, preach, pastor, and minister within the church. . . . We believe women and men can and should serve in pastoral leadership in the local church . . . including the role of elder.”
- ▶ Eclectic: smorgasbord approach to doctrine/theology



Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like him. Do as he did.
(2024).

- ▶ To be with Jesus: mysticism, *lectio Divina*
- ▶ To become like Jesus: spiritual formation
- ▶ To do as Jesus did: rule of life



Why? What prompts this?

- ▶ Busyness
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Something missing
- ▶ Stuck/stagnant
- ▶ Spiritual dryness/acedia
- ▶ Head and no heart (effective but not affective theology)
- ▶ Horizontal and/or vertical
- ▶ Disciplines and moral guidance
- ▶ Renewal (Asbury)
- ▶ Transparency




Strengths

- ▶ Diagnosis of cultural malaise with a recognition of a spiritual prognosis (though a questionable/flawed prescription)
- ▶ Being with Jesus (union with Christ)
- ▶ Intentionality
- ▶ Catechesis is happening, so counter-catechesis is the w/Way



Questions/Challenges/Weaknesses

- ▶ The premise of the book is that Jesus did not come to convert or regenerate, to make new life possible through the new covenant, but to call people to a way of life (what he refers to as the Way (pp. 24-25), which misses how the term is used in the NT for Christianity and the Christian faith). Comer writes, “transformation is possible if we are willing to arrange our lives around the practices, rhythms, and truths that Jesus himself did, which will open our lives to God’s power to change” (xvi). 

- ▶ “Apprenticing Jesus is the solution to the problem of the so-called human condition. . there is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve.” (p. xv)
- ▶ “Apprenticing Jesus” is not the same as Jesus’ call to be his disciple, to come and follow him to the cross (Matt. 10:38-39; Lk. 9:23-24). There is a non-technical use of the term disciple (cf. Jn. 6:60-66), it is also a technical term and with that mean an apprentice is not a disciple.
- ▶ Sin is addressed (pp. 90-92), but it is deemphasized. According to the Bible, apart from regeneration, we are unable to follow Jesus.
- ▶ Doing is emphasized over believing, with the Way being from imitating to becoming rather than becoming (regeneration, which grounds the indicative) to imitating (the imperative, grounded in the indicative).



- ▶ Jesus did not come to convert but to call people to be an apprentice:
 - “Contrary to what many assume, Jesus did not invite people to convert to Christianity. He didn’t even call people to become Christians (keep reading. . .); he invited people to apprentice under him into a whole new way of living to be transformed” (xvi).
 - “Jesus is not looking for converts to Christianity; he’s looking for apprentices in the kingdom of God” (p. 17).
 - “Jesus’s invitation—as I have repeated ad nauseam—was *not* to convert to a new religion called Christianity but to apprentice under him into life in the kingdom of God” (p. 208).



- ▶ A cosmic gospel that deemphasizes the necessity and impact of the gospel on the individual: “The gospel is that Jesus is the ultimate power in the universe and that life with him is now available to all. Through his birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Spirit, Jesus has saved, is saving, and will save all creation. And through apprenticeship to Jesus, we can enter into this kingdom and into the inner life of God himself” (pp. 135-136).
- ▶ This is a different emphasis than the atoning work of Christ for sinners, which sinners appropriate by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, which is the ground of regeneration, moving from death to life, which begins the transformation process into the image or likeness of the Son (positional sanctification or sanctification begun, to progressive sanctification or sanctification pursued, to glorification or sanctification complete).



- ▶ “What would Jesus do if he were me?” (p. 123). This is not quite “what would Jesus do?” (WWJD), but that statement/sentiment is personalized. There is a sense in which it is fitting to ask that question, and yet the right foundation from which to begin is what has Jesus done (WHJD)! There is a Spirit-Christology (cf. pp. 124-127), which is a form of functional kenoticism. If Jesus lived this way in complete dependency on the Holy Spirit, and he did not “flex” his God-muscle or use the God-card, then we indwelt and empowered by the same Holy Spirit can do the same thing.



- ▶ Jesus' ministry as Healer is emphasized over against his ministry as Substitute (pp. 92-94). Apprentices are called to "surrenderer" and "confess," though not repent (pp. 95-96, 210-213). God provides healing to sick, not a substitute to the condemned. He cites AA as the best example of confession he has seen (p. 95).



- ▶ Rules connect him to the ancient church. And yet, he writes, his Rule does not mean “rules for life” (p. 160). Rather quoting another, the Rule “is a set of practices, relationships, and commitments” not “a list of rules” (p. 161). The Rule is not a law: “A law is handed down from an external source, and it has very little flexibility.” Rather, a rule “is self-generated from your internal desires, it has a ton of flexibility, it’s relationally based (not morally based), and it’s designed to index you toward your vision of the good life” (p. 172). This is quite different, for example, from St. Benedict of Nursia (c. AD 480-550) and what he wrote, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (c. 530).



- ▶ God's Word is important as is studying Scripture. But Comer concludes the normal means of grace have a poor track record of transformation in the lives of Christians (p. 87). We need more. He writes. "Anything can become a spiritual discipline if we offer it to God as a channel of grace" (p. 179). He then follows with several examples of what he means by "channels of grace": walking your dog, visiting an elderly neighbor, driving in a slow lane, concluding, "you can offer any of these activities to God in hope that he will fill those spaces with his transforming presence" (p. 180). Readers are encouraged to "explore new pathways to God" (pp. 184-185). We certainly do all to the glory of God, whether eating or drinking or walking a dog or But we would not refer to all those activities as "channels of grace."



Matthew Bingham, [The Problem with Comer's Cafeteria Approach to Spirituality](#) (October 20, 2025).

- ▶ John Mark Comer's book [Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become like Him. Do as He Did](#) has been declared the ECPA 2025 Christian Book of the Year. It's no surprise that many [evangelicals](#) are [discussing](#) its vision for [spiritual formation](#). Do we need more engagement with Comer's work?
- ▶ First, the widespread interest in and unease about his approach tell me something deeper is going on. Many Christians I've spoken to express discomfort with Comer's approach, but they can't always articulate why. That tension warrants further reflection.
- ▶ Second, the differences between Comer's approach and a Reformed Christian perspective on spiritual formation are worth exploring. Comer's book is influencing many evangelicals. And evangelicalism arose from the Reformed tradition during the revivals of the 18th century. Unfortunately, [my own book](#) on spiritual formation in the Reformed tradition was too far along in production to engage with Comer's work directly.

- ▶ Comer's method in *Practicing the Way* is theologically promiscuous. He mingles sources from wildly different theological traditions—many mutually incompatible—without acknowledging the tension. While occasionally Comer cites thinkers in the Reformed tradition, like Tim Keller, Rosaria Butterfield, and Tim Chester, he more frequently turns to Roman Catholics (Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, Henri Nouwen), Eastern Orthodox writers (Kallistos Ware, Kallistos Katafygiotis), Quaker mystics (Thomas Kelly), and even a non-Christian spiritualist (Kahlil Gibran).
- ▶ He presents these highly heterogeneous teachers collectively as “masters of the Way of Jesus” (47). The implication is that all these different “spiritual masters” (43) are heading down the same path and toward similar conclusions. That's simply not the case.
- ▶ For example, at one point he quotes a Catholic writer who mentions the “Blessed Sacrament,” a term that Comer explains as referring to “what Protestants call ‘the Lord's Supper’” (42). Yet a differing view on the sacraments was at the heart of disagreements during the Reformation. Then, on the same page, Comer quotes Kelly on the topic. Yet the Quakers are notoriously one of the only groups in the Christian tradition to eschew the outward observance of the Lord's Supper altogether. Comer never suggests there could be any serious conflict among his assembled “spiritual masters of the Way” (43).



EXTREMES TO AVOID AND KEYS TO FINISHING WELL



- ▶ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, “Twelve Recurring Issues and Extremes,” pp. 534-538: “These unbalanced extremes are always unbiblical, and they force an either-or on a number of areas that are better viewed as both-and.”
 1. Religious Orders versus Laity
 2. Human Responsibility versus Divine Sovereignty
 3. Legalism versus License
 4. Corporate versus Personal
 5. Creation-Denying versus Creation-Affirming
 6. Self-Denying versus Self-Affirming

7. Technique Orientation versus Spontaneous Orientation
8. Christocentric Contemplation versus Theocentric Contemplation
9. Doing versus Being
10. Active versus Passive
11. Kataphatic (*via positiva*) versus Apophatic (*via negativa*)
12. Objective Truth versus Subjective Experience

- ▶ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, “Seven Keys to Finishing Well,” p. 478: “What does it take to finish well? How can we run in such a way that we can say with Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7; Acts 20:4; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27)? A number of observers have considered the characteristics of people who “run with endurance the race that is set before [them]” (Hebrews 12:1). I have arrived at a set of seven such characteristics:

1. Intimacy with Christ
2. Fidelity in the spiritual disciplines
3. A biblical perspective on the circumstances of life
4. A spirit of teachability, responsiveness, humility, and obedience
5. A clear sense of personal purpose and calling
6. Healthy relationships with resourceful people
7. Ongoing ministry investment in the lives of others

- ▶ “These characteristics move from the inside to the outside. The first two concern our vertical relationship with God (being), the next three concern our personal thinking and orientation (knowing), and the last two concern our horizontal relationships with others (doing).”

