

Armitage Lecture on Spiritual Formation
Christian Identity, Community and the Spirit of God in Spiritual Formation
July 20, 2012

No Christian is an island unto himself or herself. Spiritual Formation, biblically speaking is an exercise in community and being responsive to Jesus for spiritual growth. There are many spiritualities in the world, but most appeal to one's own strength. The Scripture argues and Christian tradition has claimed for centuries that Christian spiritual formation is about grace and the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life, an enablement that comes from asking for it by God's grace through what Jesus Christ has done for us in forgiving us and giving us life.

So my lecture today considers how Scripture speaks of spiritual formation. It will draw on several biblical texts. It will show how spiritual formation is not a privatized exercise, but is community rooted. A privatized spiritual walk ignores or underutilizes elements God says is central to spiritual growth.

I will consider three themes: The Spirit as Spiritual Agent, Spiritual Identity, and the Road to Wisdom- An Open and Pursuing Heart. The goal of such growth is found in a God honoring, personal holiness and mission in the community and in a needy world. We have many texts to cover so let's get started by defining some terms and looking at our themes.

First comes the common term of discipleship. It points to edification programs we undergo and undertake, often with a mentor to lead us into following Jesus. To be a disciple is to be a learner, to be teachable. That is what a disciple is, a learner. This is a key virtue to have in pursuing spiritual growth. Much of what I will say will assume its presence. To spiritually grow we have to want to go there and be teachable, because we are swimming against the current often present in the world. An experienced mentor can often help and encourage us as we go there.

Spiritual Formation is a related term to discipleship. It expresses what God undertakes and undergoes for us to bring us to maturity. God forms us as we seek His Spirit to allow Him to shape us. Thus the name for God's role calls it spiritual formation.

God uses discipleship programs and spiritual disciplines to bring us to maturity, but his spiritual formation program and resources are much broader than we realize. That is what I wish to concentrate on in this address.

In summary, spiritual formation has four key elements. They are:

- (1) The Spirit as the Agent of Formation (or who we have).

- (2) There is the Identity We Have in the Spirit: Enabled to Serve.

(3) There is the prerequisite for making progress, an open responsive heart that seeks to attain wisdom by God's standards.

(4) There is the goal of spiritual formation. That involves engagement by example. Such engagement pursues holiness and engages in mission in the community and to a needy world. This is what spiritual formation looks like when it is being lived out.

Now let's look at each one of these areas and the Scriptures that point to each.

I. The Spirit as Agent

The Spirit operates like wind with each child of God having a special role in the community. This we see from John 3:1-16 in the discussion with Nicodemus, where Jesus says we must be born from above, using the idea of *pneuma* (Spirit) to discuss what results. That each child is a special edition comes from the note about each having a giftedness from the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul speaks of God doing his work from the "inside," giving us a maturity that has the ability to discern life rightly according to the mind of Christ.

But the key text here is Romans 1:16-17. There Paul says that he is not ashamed of the gospel for it is the "power of God unto salvation." Now the point to focus on is why the term power is the summary term for the gospel. Romans 1-8 tells us. In Romans 1-3 we are powerless because of sin. In Romans 4 we are justified and come into faith. In Romans 5-8, we now as God's children have the Spirit and thus the power to live as God designed us to live. Being enabled to walk with God and experience life as He designed it is at the core of the gospel. Spirit indwells us to produce righteousness. That is why we call it spiritual formation. The Spirit of God in us forms in our Spirit the ability to be responsive to God. This passage also shows that the gospel is more than justification. The good news is God gives life and that life comes through His spiritual work in us.

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus presents righteousness in terms of personal integrity, an integrity rooted in the heart. Matthew 5:21-28 is especially important here. Jesus shows that murder is not the issue, but anger; adultery is not the issue, but lust, oath taking is not the issue but truth telling. We are to love those who hate us and our righteousness is to exceed that of the pious Pharisees. Only the Spirit can take up to these places. Only a walk with God can generate that direction in life.

All of this is affirmed in the messianic gift of the Spirit, something John the Baptist pointed to in Luke 3:15-17. For him as the preparer for the Messiah, the sign of His coming was the gift of the Spirit, an idea reinforced in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-5, 8; 2:14-41; 10—11 (especially 11:15-17); and 13:23-24.

John 14—16 and Jesus' Upper Room discourse makes the same point. Jesus must go so he can send the Paraclete, the Spirit to guide us into all the truth.

Such spiritual input leads into a quality in our relationships, As John 13:35 says, "By this all humanity will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another" The roots for this promise come in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-27), where God promises to put the Law and the Spirit in our hearts. Titus 2:11-14 says the point of grace is to instruct us in godliness and lead us into authentic, discerning living as the call of God. That is what Christ died to bring.

So the key agent of spiritual formation is the Spirit, the promise of the New Covenant. This is not generated naturally but is a gift from God by faith in what he graciously provides. The gift is an enablement, empowerment to walk with God by the Spirit and experience life.

II. Spiritual Identity

Out of this empowerment is to come a spiritual identity. Perhaps no idea is so underappreciated in spiritual formation as the impact our identity should have in that development. Numerous texts help us here.

The most compelling image is the picture of sacred space, using the background of the temple. In the Old Testament, God dwells in His house and the temple is made into sacred space by His presence. That space to be filled has to have been cleansed, washed of all impurity and that which makes it unworthy of God. In the New Testament, God is portrayed as filling a vessel. That vessel is both an individual as in 1 Corinthians 6:19 and in a corporate community as in 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2:11-22 and 1 Peter 2:5. Perhaps it is no accident that unlike our more individualistic culture, the corporate image is more prominent. We are connected to each other, represent God and each other, and have a responsibility to each other. The people of God in whom God dwells individually is also the community as a whole where His presence is most seen and we are said to be set apart, holy (not common) as a result. This special character is to define how we see ourselves and how we behave.

Ephesians 2:11-22 affirms that we have peace with God together, a peace that is not just between each individual and God but also between individuals, even those of very diverse background. Our identity is to make us think of ourselves as holy vessels set apart for God's use and to honor him. We do not become holy or make ourselves holy. Rather God by His grace as made us holy. So we are a community of saints, a community set apart to be the community God has forged us into being, As such I am doubly connected, to God and to others, especially those who share the presence of God.

That identity is rooted in the enablement, the power of the provision of the Spirit we mentioned first. Look at the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-23. Here Paul prays that we understand three things God has given us: hope, riches, and power. Of the three he concentrates on power, because without enablement the accomplishment of formation is not possible. Appreciate our enablement. Appreciate the kind of power we have access to, not power in the way the world thinks of it in terms of overcoming others, but a power to

do and be what God has made us to do and be. 1 John 4:4 says it this way, "Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world, While John 17 has Jesus pray that we work together side by side so our unity exercised in multiple and diverse giftedness makes us effective as a community linked together by God. So Hebrews 10:19-25 calls us to meet together and stimulate (encourage) one another to love and good deeds.

Getting our identity right is important. We are a new creation, Raised above with him over all rule and authority (Ephesians 2:4-6; 4:17-24; Colossians 3:8-10). There is not hostile power greater than the enablement we have access to. When we faithfully represent and reflect the values of that new community we put on the "new" man, not the new nature, but the new community in Christ, resting in an identification that reflects living, truth. Ephesians 4:22-24 calls it "truthing in love," not merely having a knowledge of God but showing His presence in functional, effective relationships

This identity is seen even in how we pray the prayer the Lord taught us, the Lord's prayer. This prayer is misnamed for it is the Disciples' prayer and please note where the apostrophe is located, It resounds with a corporate identity in which we pray-- Our, Our, Our, Our. (Our Father, our daily bread, forgive our sins, lead us not into evil).

Do we see ourselves as individual islands or are we connected deeply connected to others and to God? This, like the Spirit in us, is a key dimension of our spiritual identity and formation.

III. The Road to Wisdom: An Open and Pursuing Heart

There is a certain kind of heart that is a prerequisite for spiritual formation. It is not the independent spirit we see in much of our culture. It is a heart of humility and openness to be taught, to be dependent that turns to God with a deep awareness of spiritual need. These assumptions come from Old Testament texts. Proverbs 1:7; says it most succinctly. The beginning of wisdom is not knowledge nor a PhD education. It is not found in books nor in facts. It is an orientation, a certain kind of heart. It is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now just consider how far our culture has travelled from this starting point. We secularize our lives and wall off the sacred from the common. We separate not only church and state, but we also secularize our lives. If we are religious, it is for a few hours a week in the privacy of a small community. Then we are left to our best efforts. That is not wisdom or the pursuit of spiritual development as Scripture presents it. Our need for God is endless and the space he occupies is to be endless as well. God is not a 2 hour/1 day a week God, but a 24 hour 7 day a week God. There is no area, especially in relationships, that He cannot and should not touch. Spiritual growth pursuing the fear of God respects His omnipresence. It lives in light of it. It recognizes that representing being made in His image impacts every human encounter I have. It seeks His heart and direction, allowing Him to form and shape us. Like clay that is molded by an artisan or a musical instrument played by a virtuoso, God directs and leads in a way where we have listening ears and responsive hearts. That means the Father does know best—and we seek His constant counsel. That means time with God, His Word, His people and in reflection on what He asks of us. It is the kind of dependence that makes a

difference in life. Proverbs 2:1-4 describes it as the Open, Responsive Heart, involving more than receiving instruction. It leads to doing. This kind of spirituality is pursued with an effort that rivals the way most people pursue money and wealth. Listen to the words of the Proverb and the promise that is wrapped up in it. Hear as the wisdom of God speaks,

“My child,
if you receive my words,
 and store up my commands within you,
 by making your ear attentive to wisdom,
 and by turning your heart to understanding,
 indeed,
if you call out for discernment—
 raise your voice for understanding—
if you seek it like silver,
 and search for it like hidden treasure,
then you will understand how to fear the LORD,
 and you will discover knowledge about God.”

Like a vocation and what it brings to us in terms of resources the pursuit of the fear of God and the spiritual reward it gives is a life pursuit.

It is also here that we see the role of disciplines: like worship, prayer, solitude, bible study, and fasting. They allow us to quiet the chaos around us and gather together with God, sometimes alone, sometimes with others to collect ourselves and allow God to renew our strength. It allows us to open our heart and keep in touch with the living God.

It leads into what James calls the true religion in James 1:21-27, where we look into the mirror that is the Word of God and we see as we ought, recognize where we really are, and gain insight as to where we need to go. The result is that orphans and widows are loved as we engage in the service of others God calls us to, as we also keep ourselves unstained from the world, being the distinct people of character God has formed so that the world is better for our presence.

That brings us to our forth and final theme. The goal of that formation is not locked into a world or private solitude and withdrawal, but engagement involving holiness and mission both in our believing community and to a needy world.

IV. Goal: Holiness and Mission in the Community and to a Needy World

So what are the goals of all this effort on God's part? It is to produce in us the kind of life God hoped for us when He created us in His image. Gal 5:2–6:10 teaches us that God has given the Spirit for the hope of righteousness. In this text we find the call of Galatians 5:14 to love one's neighbor as oneself, a part of what Jesus called the greatest commandment, to love God fully and do unto others what you wished they would do unto you. Later in Galatians 5:22-23, we have the fruit of the Spirit, presented in contrast to vices of the flesh. This fruit is primarily relational- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Most of the fruit deals with how we engage with others. Galatians 6:10 says we are to "do good, especially to those in the faith.

This relational, loving and serving emphasis is a reflection of what Jesus taught about leadership. In Mark 10:35-45, Jesus discusses Servant leadership. He highlights how in His own ministry he served and did not lord it over others, as most who lead in the culture sought to do. It takes the power of God's Spirit to do this, as Romans 8 teaches. Ephesians 5:7-14 calls for us to walk as children of light in holiness. Holiness and righteousness is seen in how we live our lives relationally before God and others.

The growth involved in such a walk, that does not live in the more selfish manner of much of our culture, may involve suffering as 2 Corinthians 4:7-8 indicates. Hebrews 12:1-11 tells us it also might involve discipline from God, who loves enough to lead us into the ways we must grow.

1 Peter 2:9-12 calls us believer-priests, who serve and represent God in the world and minister as alien ambassadors, strangers in a foreign land. Philippians 3:20-21 calls this a heavenly citizenship. Col. 3:1-9 calls us to wear the cloths that reflect the identity of the new man, the community God has formed that shows a new way of life, lived in the new birth that comes from the Spirit of God. Here again we see spiritual-relational virtues described as what is to be a part of our lives.

The evidence of such a life in the context of community looks to service in outreach and in meeting needs that communicates this love. This may involve engaging in the community to help it meet needs, providing disaster relief or basic subsistence care. It might involve coming along side medical care to offer emotional support. It might involve crossing ethnic lines to show God's love for all in a joint ministry or service. In all of it, what is said is that God loves you and we serve Him in that love. Such service is appropriate because ministry is not limited to pastors or reverends. We are all believer-priests.

V. Conclusion: SF

So here is what we have said. First, there is an agent in spiritual formation that is necessary for real spiritual development and transformation to take place. That agent is the Spirit of God. Second, there is a dynamic to spiritual formation. It is growth in the context of community. Third there is a means to spiritual growth. It is an open heart toward wisdom and the direction and instruction from God. Fourth, there is a goal in all of this. It is holiness in the context of mission and service that evidences God's love and care.

Such formation supports the gospel. It is the reason for Jesus' death, and the nature of God's grace. Titus 2:11-14 says that Jesus died not only to forgive sin but to redeem a people zealous for good works. That is why the grace of God instructs us to flee ungodliness.

Spiritual formation seeks to let God make us to be like Him. We are to be like His Son, sent to engage the world through a life and death of service and dependence on God. In making us His children, He makes it clear that His Son is not alone in pursuing the task. In and through His Spirit God makes us like Him. This is the other Great Commission from God. In the process God leads us into righteousness and into the world to point the way back to Him for others who need Him (Matthew 5:13-16).

So we see the Spirit lead us community with a seeking heart into holiness and mission. These are the central elements of Spiritual Formation according to Scripture and the will of God.