

Sermon: Spiritual Formation

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Today we hear lots of talk about spiritual formation. Originally this was a term used almost exclusively for the formation of Catholic priests.

Great biblical concept, but phrase never appears in the Bible. Paul writes about being spiritual (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 2:13-15). Likewise, formation is Paul's word (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:29, Rom. 6:4—newness of life, Gal. 4:19; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:1-2).

Spiritual formation is a work of God's spirit within us, 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 5:22; dwelling in us, Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 3:16; Acts 5:32. The spirit empowers for service, 1 Cor. 12:12-28. God is at work within us, Phil. 2:13.

BUT, Paul uses the word (morph-) in passive only, indicating that spiritual formation is God's work. Spiritual formation occurs when believers place themselves at the disposal of the Spirit.

Spiritual formation is a corporate work. Spiritual formation is not fundamentally an individual effort or attainment. Many of Paul's "you's" are plural, 1 Th. 5:27; Gal. 4:19, Phil. 2:13, 1 Cor. 3:16. According to 1 Cor. 12:27 individuals find their identity in the body of Christ. Thus for Paul, spiritual formation is the reshaping of communities.

Life has beginnings, middles, and endings. Paul usually writes in the middle, but refers to the beginnings, and he expects maturation, 1 Cor. 3:1-6. Spiritual formation is like a process of growth from infancy to adulthood. It is like a vineyard that needs watering. It is like constructing a building. The entire community is involved in the construction. Edification is not a private matter, but a public matter. Paul writes in the middle of the past-present-future narrative to ensure that his communities will reach the ultimate transformation at the end, Phil. 1:1-11. The church comes into existence by the power of God, (1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 2:4) and the congregation is a work in progress, not yet conformed to the image of the Son (Phil. 3:21). God will complete the work he has begun so that we might be blameless at the day of Christ (Phil. 1:9-11, also throughout 1 Thessalonians).

These concepts offer an understanding of Paul's view of spiritual formation. The ultimate transformation involves being blameless at the coming of Christ, and Paul's petitions indicate that his readers remain a work in progress. Spiritual formation is ethical maturation in which the converts learn to love each other, because the communities were established and bound together not by ethnicity nor social class. Thus the communities function as families.

Spiritual Formation is a pastoral goal. Paul's work was not completed with the planting of churches. He is anxious, fearing that the churches will not reach their goal. Rom. 15:15-17; 2 Cor. 1:12-14; Phil. 2:15-16; 1 Thess 2:19,20). Paul declares that the success or failure of his work will be determined only at the end when he will either boast of his work or realize that his work was in vain. The goal is a church that is blameless at the coming of Christ.

Spiritual Formation is a transformation of the community. Paul envisions a cohesive, moral community that shines like lights in the world, explaining why every letter of Paul has moral

advice which describes the shared morality of the members of the community. The church community is distinguished by its distinct practices. This is not an exhaustive code of conduct, but rather the transformation of the community. This spiritual formation has both negative and positive sides. The negative is things to avoid, and enslavement to the flesh is not limited to works of the flesh. The positive is formed around the central aspect of love, Phil. 1:9-11, 1 Thess 3:11-13, 1:3, 3:2. This is love within the new family, not a generic love for mankind. Love your neighbor as yourself applies first to the family in the house church, where we protect and provide a social safety net. Spiritual formation (Rom. 12:2) involves participation in the body (12:3-8), and consider 12:9-13:7. In true spiritual formation we learn to abandon self-absorption, self-negation is a good word, and also applies to worship, so we can seek the good of others. Those who pursue self interests have not progressed toward spiritual maturity. The whole community is more important than the rights of any individual members (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1).

The ultimate model of spiritual formation is Jesus himself. Phil. 2:5, cf. Phil. 3:20-21. 2 Cor. 5:14, one died for all, therefore all died. Christ did not please himself, Rom. 15:3. Paul will follow Jesus in the process of spiritual formation, Phil. 3:2-14. In imitating Jesus, Paul will provide an example, 1 Cor. 11:1.

Our goal is the transformation of communities from self-serving to loving conduct shaped by the cross of Christ. Believers who are ultimately conformed to the image of the victorious son, little by little are being conformed to the one who taught us also how to live.