

Getting in Shape Spiritually¹

developed by Bob Young

We are on a fitness craze in our society. Well, maybe not all of us, but at least some of us. While we regularly hear about the problem of obesity in our nation, we are also bombarded by advertisements for all kinds of fitness equipment (or fads) and weight reduction “miracles”. Some of us are destined to continual challenges in the matter of body size and shape because of our genetics. Nonetheless, most of us can do something to help us be in better physical shape than we currently are—diet and exercise are two of the most important.

Just as one can be concerned about physical health and being “in shape”, one can ask the same question about spiritual health and being “in shape” spiritually. What are the factors that determine our spiritual health? Two applications are possible—spiritually healthy Christians and spiritually healthy churches. Although there will be differences, as we will point out, there are also many similarities.

The spiritual shape of a Christian

Rick Warren has outlined the “shape” of a Christian with an acronym. He relates the word 'SHAPE' to Spiritual Gifts, Heart (passion), Ability, Personality, and Experiences. My own description of these varies slightly from his, but retains the acronym.

- The Christian who is “in shape” recognizes the reality of the spiritual realm, and commits to living the spiritual life fully. This is only possible within the framework of the spiritual attributes and characteristics the person has or can develop. The “in shape” Christian is committed to spirituality. I use the phrase spiritual sensitivity.
- The Christian who is “in shape” makes spiritual health a priority. This may be described as heart or passion—I like to talk about spiritual “heart health”.
- The Christian who is “in shape” does not have to compete with professional spiritual superstars or athletes. The Christian is called only to develop and follow his or her personal aptitudes and abilities. The key is progress and development. I often talk about Christians who are “apt and able.”
- The Christian who is “in shape” is purposeful, characterized by a purpose consistent with God’s purpose. I am not certain that personality is a factor in physical health, nor am I certain that personality is a factor in spiritual health. Establishing purposeful priorities is a must.
- Finally, the Christian who is “in shape” exercises. Increasing experiences may help us maintain health, but the ultimate test is getting enough exercise.

¹ Note: The genesis of some of the concepts in this article come from *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren (Zondervan, 1995). The material presented here are the result of reading and analyzing that work, with my own personal study, experiences, and reflections added.

The Shape of a Christian begins with the foundation and builds upward

In an interesting comparison, the factors that contribute to physical health and vitality have parallels in the spiritual realm. Notice what happens when one consider the elements of our spiritual "shape" in reverse order.

Shape ___ Just as the first step in physical health is becoming aware of the need, the Christian life is built on the foundation of spiritual awareness—the fact that we human beings are created by God in his image, supplied with the potential for spiritual life and resources, and dependent on God.

sHape ___ econd, as the physically “in shape” person makes a commitment, so the Christian who wishes to be “in shape” spiritually must make spiritual health a priority, even a passion of the heart. This is conviction that the only Christian life that matter is a life of whole-hearted discipleship, spiritual growth and vitality.

shApe ___ With awareness and commitment in place, one is ready to determine how to proceed. One element of this is subjective, based on who we are. Physically, this is a function of current health, likes and dislikes, and abilities. Spiritual health is likewise personalized. Spiritual health does not depend on reaching the same levels as others—spiritual health depends on one’s own capacity to live the Christian life full, consistent with the way God has fashioned us. This is where our aptitudes and abilities meet to generate spiritual health and to bring glory to God by the unique life we live.

shaPe ___ Next, awareness, commitment, and a personalized plan combine to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives. Just as some level of physical health is needed for physical activity, spiritual health is the prerequisite to spiritual activity within the purpose of God. We can fully adopt God’s purpose as our purpose as our spiritual vitality increases. Further, self-confidence improves and we see more and more clearly how God is working in our lives to fulfill his good purpose and will. This combination of consciousness, commitment, and character is the key.

shapE ___ I have found that physical exercise is a lot of more fun “when I feel like it.” Enjoying physical exercise is a combination of “I should do this”, I want to do this, I have a workable plan, I am becoming what I want to become as a result. Physical exercise is not a chore when these four foundational elements are in place. Likewise, in the spiritual realm, the same four statements make exercising ourselves to do God’s will an enjoyable, natural thing.

The spiritual shape of a local church

Questions of "shape" may also be applied to the church. Just as we have observed in the lives of individual Christians, the congregational body of Christ in every location is also a mixture of spiritual awareness, heart-felt commitments, planning based on abilities and opportunities, priorities developed in the purpose of God, and spiritual exercises. When a local church builds on these dynamics, it will find involvement in God’s work a joy.

The first chapters of Acts describe the activities of the early church with five concepts. The early church was involved in fellowship (koinonia), worship (letourgia), service (diakonia), teaching (didache), and proclamation (kerygma). These are five fundamental activities in the life of the church. Other words are used to describe specific aspects of these activities, for example, worship included prayer and the Lord’s Supper, but these five concepts are primary.

Every local church should be involved in these activities as part of the body of Christ. Every Christian should be involved in these activities. These activities which were part of the early church, and are part of the spiritual shape of both churches and individual Christians today, have been described in a series of alliterations.²

Area/Activity	Objective	Task	My Need
Proclamation [keryma]	Mission/Message	Evangelizing	Purpose
Worship [letourgia]	Magnify God	Exalting	Power
Fellowship [koinonia]	Membership in Church	Encouraging	People
Teaching [didache]	Maturity as Christian	Edifying	Principles
Service [diakonia]	Ministry	Edifying	Profession

Area/Activity	My Life	Results
Proclamation [keryma]	My witness (testimony/outreach)	Reach out
Worship [leitourgia]	My worship	Reach up
Fellowship [koinonia]	My “with-ness” in lives of others	Reach around me
Teaching [didache]	My walk (nurturing/discipleship)	Reach within me
Service [diakonia]	My work	Reach deep within others

Area/Activity	Benefit	Gives my life..
Proclamation [keryma]	Gives us a purpose that sustains us	Focus
Worship [letourgia]	Reinforces the values that guide us	Festivity
Fellowship [koinonia]	Puts in our lives people to support us	Family
Teaching [didache]	Builds a faith that nurtures us	Foundations
Service [diakonia]	Demonstrates unselfishness that enriches us	Function

Area/Activity	Gives my life...	Emotional Needs
Proclamation [keryma]	Focus	Significance
Worship [letourgia]	Festivity	Stimulation
Fellowship [koinonia]	Family	Support
Teaching [didache]	Foundations	Stability
Service [diakonia]	Function	Self-expression

² Some of these alliterative sets come from Rick Warren, but others have been developed in various sources, or by the author.

These descriptions should help us see that the Christian life is an integrated whole which is incomplete without the presence of all of these elements. The Christian who is “in shape” actively participates in all five of these activities. The life of the body, the church, integrates these activities.