

What is spiritual formation?

by chad karger

A few thoughts regarding the matter...

Saint Paul instructs believers in the letter to the Philippians to work out what God is working in them. Once God through Jesus Christ has saved a person from death through sin, and begins to carry out his purposes in that person's life by His Holy Spirit, spiritual formation is underway.

Christ-centered spiritual formation defined

Christ-centered spiritual formation, then, corresponds to the Christian doctrines of justification and sanctification. A person's spirit undergoes a spiritual reformation once and for all through Jesus Christ (justification). Because of that reformation, the whole of a person's life is being reshaped (formed) so as to be a vessel by which God carries out his glorious purposes, His Kingdom Come. *In the broadest sense, spiritual formation is the building of God's eternal Kingdom and realization of his perfect plans one heart at a time. As a discipline, spiritual formation is the facilitation of the above ends in an intimate, deliberate, and honest setting.*

Christ-centered Spiritual formation described

Spiritual formation, as I see it, must be bracketed with a few axioms lest it ooze into all sorts of heresies and culturally-hip errors. To begin, *Scripture must inform and frame the whole of a person's reformation.* Scripture sparks a redemptive imagination that displaces us from the center of our world and restores God's throne in our lives. John the Baptist told his disciples that he must decrease and that Jesus must increase. That is a vivid word picture of the inner dynamic that occurs in spiritual formation. And, I would add, this is what sets the formal practice of spiritual formation apart from so much of Christian therapy, not to mention secular. Sin, as in the Scripture, must be taken with absolute seriousness. We are sinners. We are self-absorb idolaters. We can't afford to fudge here.

With a Scriptural frame, Christ firmly installed in the center, *formation must unfold in the context of the Body of Christ.* In fact, I would say that spiritual formation isn't an option in the life of the church; conversely, community isn't an option in the life of a believer. Sanctification must be part of the terrain in the community of believers. The mechanism of church growth that is so prevalent in churches today is spiritually mal-formative, distorting the Truth so that people don't experience the life-changing power of the Gospel. For this reason, the therapist's office has a line out the door. A spiritually formative church has the Gospel echoing in its walls, coming from the pulpit each and every week. Then, within the micro-textures of the community, the detail impact of this Truth is being worked out with fear and trembling. The Body of Christ creates conditions for redemption to unfold (Henri Nouwen).

The last "big piece" of this puzzle, in my thinking, entails *beliefs.* The detailed impact that begins to echo in a community and in a person's heart will begin to shake loose deeply held, personal beliefs that have been shaped by a million other things instead of the Gospel. Specifically, I believe three major, albeit simple, Truths reveal corresponding areas of sin in our life. *First, God is near.* We are awash and are finding more ways to be buried beneath a mountain of distractions everyday. We wrongfully believe (like Adam and Eve) that God has abandoned His post. *Two, God is strong.* God's presence in our life is powerful and reveals how weak and frail we are. Since we avoid anything that reminds us of our weaknesses, we never fully embrace the strength of God. *Third, God is my satisfaction.* The desires given to me by God are finally satisfied by God. Marketing geniuses appeal to my superficial desires, enflaming them with car ads, pop psychology, or another beautiful book cover. And since I hate suffering and weakness, I follow their lead, desperately wanting to make this present age my homecoming. God's portion is the first confession of my authentic worship. Found anywhere else, my portion is the beginning of an obsessive, addictive, and visionless search.

Real change, in other words, comes about as we begin to challenge long-held beliefs that are lies.

At the risk of systematizing a very organic and particular process, I hope that this provides you with a better understanding of what BetterDays believes about spiritual formation in the Christian tradition. Better days are realized in God's Kingdom Come; His will be done on earth as it is in heaven... one heart at a time.