

**A GUIDE TO**  
Christian  
**SPIRITUAL**  
Formation

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How Scripture, Spirit,  
Community, and Mission  
Shape Our Souls

EVAN B. HOWARD



**Baker Academic**

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# Preface

Why write *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*? Well, the story goes something like this. About fifteen years ago, I was inspired to write an introductory textbook on Christian spirituality. I wanted to cover the field, so to speak, from beginning to end. I wanted to lay out the basic theological and historical background against which people have understood Christian spirituality for the past few decades. But I also wanted to teach readers that knowing how people actually live out their relationship with God can be useful as we nurture their growing relationship with God. And I wanted the book to have lots of charts, cartoons, and helps of every kind.

And so I wrote what was published as *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*.<sup>1</sup> Many of the people who endorsed the book described it as “comprehensive.” And comprehensive it was. Unfortunately, however, at nearly five hundred pages of small print, it was not really the most accessible book. So ultimately I was invited to rewrite the book—to make it shorter and more practical.

But the more I thought about this rewriting project, the more I knew it had to be a completely new book. First, in order to be more practical, it could not be a book about Christian spirituality—that is, a simple empirical, historical, or anthropological summary of how people actually live out their relationship with God. I needed to write a book on Christian spiritual formation, one that would equip Christians to help others mature or grow in their relationship with God. It needed to be something of a guide.

Not only this, but things had changed over the past decade. When I wrote about Christian spirituality, I was summarizing a field of study that originated in contemplative Catholic culture. The worlds of John of the Cross, Julian

of Norwich, and François Fénelon were somewhat different from the world of my evangelical upbringing, but I knew that each world had something to offer the other. I published my thoughts on evangelicalism's contribution to the field of Christian spirituality in my essay "Evangelical Spirituality," which was included in *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*.<sup>2</sup> But during all this time I was seeing my own framework challenged—and rightly so. Was community or congregation just an aside to the central aspect of personal devotional life? And what was the place of mission in all this talk about Christian spirituality? Is Christian spirituality just some privatized, religious self-improvement scheme? Consequently, I knew that if I was going to rewrite my book, I had to present Christian spiritual formation with community and mission at its center.

And then someone at church asked me to teach a simple Sunday school class on the Bible. (Thanks, Kathy Parish.) I taught a survey of the entire Bible in ten weeks, and this class solidified my sense of what I thought of as the Big Story (see chap. 2). From there my dream for this book took shape. Spirit, Scripture, community, mission, and more—all had their place and could be combined to develop a practical guide to the task of spiritual formation: the work of nurturing communities and individuals in an ever-growing relationship with God spanning every area of life.

Such was the birth of *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*.

As I wrote this book, I had in mind an audience similar to the one for whom I'd written the *Brazos Introduction*, though I aimed to make this text even more accessible. The readers I imagine are Christians who have begun to experiment and grow spiritually (people who have started to practice spiritual disciplines, read devotional classics, or the like) and now want to know more. Some of these readers will want to understand how the world of spiritual formation squares with primary Christian doctrines and with a relevant, life-giving understanding of the human person, Christian community, and the mission of God. Some may have had valuable experiences of the part but are interested in seeing a vision of the whole. Thus, an introductory guide to Christian spiritual formation is what I have written.

Rather than aiming for this book to be comprehensive, I have tried to make it clear. Rather than providing a spectrum of viewpoints, I have summarized my own impression of the biblical sense of things. I only provide representative bibliography when I cite works. And, as always, I quote people that you (or I) may disagree with; just because I cite sources does not mean I agree with them. I cite people in order to illustrate a point, and I hope the quotations (fewer in this work than in the *Brazos Introduction*) will indeed help make matters clearer.

I also want this book to be practical. While it is a textbook, covering the main topics that ought to be treated in an introduction to Christian spiritual formation, I also want it to be a helpful guide, serving to equip pastors and spiritual directors and friends to become ministers of Christian spiritual formation among individuals and communities around them. To this end, I have used a number of imaginary case studies to get us thinking about various aspects of both the elements and the work of Christian spiritual formation. Because I imagine the ministry of Christian spiritual formation as being exercised by different types of people, I have varied the chief figure of these case studies: they are businessmen, young converts, spiritual directors, pastors, and so on. I have also intentionally set them in different locations and cultures, because the church comprises people from different locations and cultures. So you may find that you relate to some of the case studies more easily than others. I encourage you to discuss these scenarios in conversation with other readers as you seek together their application.

My conviction is that once we see the features and task of formation in practice, we will be better able to understand how it works in our own lives.



One thing I have learned during my years of writing is that I enjoy both the process and the product better when others are involved. So, when I knew that I would be writing this book, I asked a team of friends to help me with ideas, resources, and reactions to the first draft of my chapters. Some went so far as to comment on the entire manuscript. This book owes a great deal to the partnership of Howard Baker, Paul Bramer, Mark Fields, Michael Flowers, Philip Harrold, Donna Hawk-Reinhard, Elaine Heath, Marti Isler, Klaus Issler, Michael Palandro, Greg Peters, Steve Porter, Kyle Strobel, Steve Summerell, Alex Tang, Jim Wilhoit, and Diane Zemke.

At times I needed to confirm that my stories and case studies were on-target. Ineda Adesanya, Charles Bello, David Nixon, Gina Kim, and John Shorack offered their knowledge and perspective in this regard. Others, including Marc Cortez, Joanne Jung, Linda Bond, Michael Glerup, Diane Chandler, and Vicki Walker, pointed me to valuable resources.

The material in this book emerged in part from dialogue with my students in a variety of institutions and training programs: the Center for Early African Christianity, CenterQuest, the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at Fuller Theological Seminary, Trinity School for Ministry, and Tyndale College and Seminary. I owe chapter 2 to Kathy Parish's request that I offer an adult education class on "the whole Bible" at All Saints Anglican church.

The team at Baker Academic has been wonderful to work with from start to finish. Bob Hosack stimulated me to dream of a book that was a fresh contribution to the understanding and practice of Christian spiritual formation. A number of marketing staff helped guide this project toward readers: Steve Ayers, Kara Day, Christina Jasko, Shelly MacNaughton, Louis McBride, Mason Slater, and Jeremy Wells. Jade Doyel and Alex Nieuwsma assisted with rights and permissions. Brandy Scritchfield, Paula Gibson, and Jane Klein have all contributed to the fine design of this volume. Finally, Tim West and Jennifer Seidel have simply worked magic: improving my communication, attending to the details I neglected, and making this text a much more coherent, readable book.

As always, my thinking and writing is informed by my interactions with two key individuals. Coky Hartman, my spiritual friend of nearly twenty years, has kept me faithful to the tasks of prayer and study all along. Without his wise oversight, I would be lost, greasing squeaky wheels. And Cheri, my wife, lives all of this with me from day to day. Christian spiritual formation has been the subject of endless meal conversations and family experiments. I am formed deeper and deeper into Christ and the gospel through her love, much richer at forty years of marriage than at five.

Finally, the idea for this book was born in conversations at an Association of Vineyard Churches mission leaders meeting a few years ago. I sat with Bob Logan and Mark Fields, and we brainstormed about the need to link formation, community, Spirit, and mission together. There was a good deal of energy around this idea, and at the end of our conversations I felt like I had a sense of where to go. Mark has supported this book at every stage of the process: reading drafts, clarifying stories, suggesting resources, sharing ideas, and more. Really, this is your book, Mark, and I hereby dedicate it to you and to the mission of God you catalyze.

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**PART ONE**  
**THE BASICS**

# 1



## Christian Spiritual Formation

### Overview

In this chapter, we will make our first acquaintance with the notion of Christian spiritual formation. After hearing a few stories about increasing interest in this practice, we will examine the general concept of spiritual formation: where it came from, what it has meant over the centuries, and what it is becoming. We will see that, particularly today, the ideas of *formation*, *community*, and *mission* are intertwined, making a tidy definition of Christian spiritual formation difficult to establish. We will then examine the key terms *formation*, *spiritual*, and *Christian* in order to bring us one step closer to a definition of Christian spiritual formation. We will compare a few common definitions, which vary in how they address key elements of Christian spiritual formation. Then we will venture to create our own definition, which will guide our basic understanding of the topic through the course of this book. Finally, with this definition in mind, we will preview the upcoming chapters.

### Spiritual Formation Matters

Christians of all stripes agree: the practice of spiritual formation matters. Without it—we are beginning to learn—church, and even the Christian faith, simply does not work.

Take Willow Creek Community Church. The assumption was that increased participation in church activities—small groups, weekend worship services, and

volunteering—increases a person’s love of God and others. “That’s what we believed at Willow Creek,” recounts researcher Greg Hawkins. Willow Creek, one of the largest churches in the United States and a leader among megachurches, had invested much in this assumption. Dozens of people administrated the parking lots each Sunday morning. Superb music was performed at gatherings. No expense was spared in making Willow Creek activities both attractive and relevant. Hawkins and the research team were hoping to discover, through their 2003 self-study, which activities produced the most spiritual growth.

What they discovered through their interviews, however, was surprising. Merely increasing participation in church activities barely moved people to love God and others. This naturally led them to explore the further question, How do people grow spiritually? Their findings regarding the needs for ongoing spiritual growth (published in *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth*) led the Willow Creek Association of churches to reshape their entire approach to ministry—no small task for a religious association involving tens of thousands of people.<sup>1</sup>

*Spiritual formation matters.*

A flame of interest in spiritual formation is spreading globally through the Vineyard, an association of charismatic evangelical churches that grew in size and popularity in the 1980s with increased interest in spiritual gifts such as healing.<sup>2</sup> As many pastors and leaders in this movement will testify, it is one thing to experience showers of God’s blessing. It is another to dig deep wells of spirituality that can quench our thirst in downpour or in drought. In the 1990s, some key leaders discovered fresh means of walking in the Spirit. By 2002, Judy Davids, a pastor and counselor, had pioneered Pastors’ Sabbath Retreats, a vehicle that provided rest and taught balanced living to many Vineyard leaders. Pastor David Nixon had founded Sustainable Faith, an organization that promotes spiritual direction training throughout the Vineyard. In 2008, pastor Steve Summerell presented some of the insights from his doctoral thesis, “Overcoming Obstacles to Spiritual Formation in the Lives of Vineyard Pastors,” to a regional conference of Vineyard leaders.<sup>3</sup> Mark Fields, director of the Vineyard’s Missions Task Force, attended that presentation and invited Summerell to lunch. Fields shared his own story of burnout and ultimately invited Summerell to join him on a trip to Nepal and present some of his material to leaders there. Thus was born the Vineyard’s global effort known as Caring for Leaders. Leaders from Russia, Indonesia, Chile, Brazil, and the Philippines, among other countries, all eagerly welcomed training in spiritual formation and were refreshed.

By then, however, Todd Hunter, once president of Vineyard USA, had become an Anglican. In his memoir, *The Accidental Anglican*, Hunter re-

counts how in 1979, at age twenty-three, he moved to West Virginia to start a Calvary Chapel church that later became a Vineyard congregation.<sup>4</sup> By 1995, Hunter had helped plant several Vineyard churches and was acting as national coordinator for the organization. By 2005, he had moved on from that position to foster creative church planting through a group called Allelon and through the Alpha Course. It was in this season of reimagining that Hunter first thought, “Someday I would be saying daily prayers with a group of Christians who were serious about the twin tracks of following Jesus: (1) spiritual formation into Christlikeness (2) for the sake of others.”<sup>5</sup> Hunter was ultimately invited into the Anglican community. Under the influence of theologians such as J. I. Packer and John Stott, he found that his interests in evangelical faith and spiritual formation had a long history in the Anglican tradition and that Anglicanism was “a huge treasure chest of tools for contemporary evangelism and spiritual formation.”<sup>6</sup> He was formally invited to help plant an Anglican congregation in California, ultimately confessing to a respected elder, “I think the Holy Spirit may be calling me to do this.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, in rather quick succession, Hunter was ordained as a priest and later as a bishop. In a companion book to his memoir, *Giving Church Another Chance*, Hunter uses the framework of a typical Anglican worship service as a way of presenting “new meaning in [traditional] spiritual practices.”<sup>8</sup> Hunter is one among a growing community of Christians exploring and reappropriating liturgical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Again, my point is this: spiritual formation matters. I hear Christians discussing it in many different circles. As we will see below, evangelical churches and institutions of higher education are making spiritual formation a subject of study, even hiring pastors of formation and redesigning training programs. Spiritual formation is on our screen, so to speak, these days.

I will go further. I believe that Western culture in general is beginning to acknowledge the need for and importance of spiritual formation. Indeed, perhaps the recent evangelical interest in spiritual formation indicates not a fad but rather a crisis. Recent surveys of young “outsiders” (people who are not a part of the Christian community) and young “leavers” (people who no longer consider themselves part of the Christian community) point to the lack of formation among Christians as a key reason for their distancing themselves from the faith. Barna Research Group president David Kinman urges Christians that “to embrace the perception that we are focused only on converts, we have to embrace a more holistic idea of what it means to be a Christ follower. This requires us to focus our attention on spiritual transformation—or spiritual formation, as some describe it. In the last two years, we have completely re-engineered the Barna organization around this

concept—that the church must become a catalyst and environment for genuine and sustainable transformation.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, in response to findings regarding the wave of young adults leaving Christianity, Kinnaman concludes: “The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it’s a *disciple-making problem*. . . . Like a Geiger counter under a mushroom cloud, the next generation is reacting to the radioactive intensity of social, technological, and religious changes. And for the most part, we are sending them into the world unprepared to withstand the fallout.”<sup>11</sup>

Christian spiritual formation matters. It matters to those who are leaving the church. It is beginning to matter to those of us within the church. And it matters that it matters. If it didn’t matter, we might really be in trouble.

### What Is Spiritual Formation?

But just what is this spiritual formation that matters so much? Actually, this is not an easy question to answer. Each of these words—*spiritual* and *formation*—has been used in different ways at different times; as a result, the phrase *spiritual formation* means slightly different things to different people.

Christians’ use of *formation* has origins in the writings of the New Testament. In Galatians 4:19, for example, Paul uses the imagery of childbirth to express his intense desire for the Galatian church’s growth, stating that he is suffering “the pains of childbirth” until “Christ is formed in you.” In Ephesians, Paul uses the imagery of a building to communicate the church’s formation in Christ. He speaks of Christ as the cornerstone of this ongoing construction (and formation) project. “In him,” Paul declares, “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:21–22). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Christian formation as a development of faith (“Let us draw near . . . with the full assurance that faith brings,” 10:22), hope (“Let us hold . . . to the hope we profess,” 10:23), and love (“Let us . . . spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” 10:24). For the author of Hebrews, our ongoing formation—which entails securing our roots and strengthening our growing connection to Christ—is brought about when we exercise the fundamental virtues of our character: faith, hope, and love. And as we see in these passages, our formation is something that the Spirit works in us through the very life of the church (e.g., “spur one another”). Similarly, 1 Peter uses the metaphors of newborn development (“grow up in your salvation” through

“spiritual milk,” 2:2) and construction (“being built into a spiritual house,” 2:5) to communicate this desire for formation into Christ.

The theme of formation, with all its rich imagery, was picked up and developed throughout the history of the Christian church. Thus Irenaeus in the second century speaks of the Creator forming us for the sake of growth.<sup>12</sup> We’re formed for the sake of formation. Augustine speaks of our growth as a purification of our minds, so that we can increasingly appreciate our relationship with God. In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, he urges his readers to “consider this process of cleansing as a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland.”<sup>13</sup>

The word *formation* acquired a particular meaning in reference to nurturing believers who made special commitments to God: the training of nuns, monks, and priests.<sup>14</sup> For example, one nun might be placed in charge of the formation of young trainees (often called *novices*) at a convent. The novice mistress’s job was to guide novices into their new life as nuns. It involved education and character training. But most importantly, her work was to facilitate the development of young novices’ living relationship to God. Without this living relationship, none of the other training made any sense. Here *spiritual formation* refers to consciously fostering a living relationship with God in the context of a religious community.

A similar process was developed for training parish priests. For example, regarding pastoral trainees in seminary, the “Decree on Priestly Formation” (*Optatam Totius*) from the Second Vatican Council (1965) urges,

Spiritual formation should be closely linked with doctrinal and pastoral training. Especially with the help of the spiritual director, such formation should help seminarians learn to live in familiar and constant companionship with the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son, in the Holy Spirit. . . . They should be taught to look for Christ in many places: in faithful meditation on God’s word, in active communion with the most holy mysteries of the Church, . . . especially the poor, the young, the sick, the sinful, and the unbelieving.<sup>15</sup>

Interest in spiritual formation spread from Roman Catholic institutions to Protestant circles in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, Asbury Seminary received a grant to found the first Department of Spiritual Formation.<sup>16</sup> Other schools followed suit. Wheaton College voted to form the Department of Formation and Ministry in 2003. Talbot School of Theology’s Institute for Spiritual Formation has been offering advanced programs in spiritual formation for years. Dallas Theological Seminary now offers a doctorate of ministry degree with an emphasis in spiritual formation. Moody Bible Institute also advertises a certificate in spiritual formation. A wide range of Protestant groups began to

experiment with academic programs and practical training centers in spiritual formation. And during this season, the meaning of spiritual formation itself was blurred. Often the term *formation* was not comprehended within an established faith culture like it had been in monastic or priestly circles; rather, it communicated a nexus of practices, relationships, events, and such initiated by a spiritual seeker. Similarly, the term *spiritual* at times indicated not, as described above, “companionship with the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son, in the Holy Spirit,” but rather the development of the depths of the human soul—*our spirit*.

A landmark publication amid developing interest in spiritual formation was Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, released in 1978.<sup>17</sup> Within a decade, Foster, along with fellow author Dallas Willard and others, had founded Renovaré, an organization dedicated to the promotion of spiritual formation. By 1990, one could identify spiritual formation movements influencing a wide range of Christian circles. But by then spiritual formation meant whatever each religious circle wanted it to mean.

The Christian Scriptures use a rich array of metaphors to describe our developing relationship to God and the gospel—for example, growing plants (Matt. 13:31–32; 1 Cor. 3:6–8), athletic training (Acts 20:24; 1 Cor. 9:24; 1 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 12:1–2), stewardship (Matt. 25:21; Luke 19:11–27), and construction (Eph. 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Paul speaks of increase, progress, growing, strengthening, and more. We could drop the phrase *spiritual formation* and start talking about the “Christian increase” movement, but I’m not sure it would catch on. *Spiritual formation* is already the established term, and it is best to live with it. So, then, how shall we define it?

### What Is Spiritual Formation Becoming?

Defining the term is complicated, because recently, concepts of spiritual formation have been merging with various other interests and terms. As a result, defining spiritual formation is like shooting at a moving target.<sup>18</sup>

Once upon a time, there was “Christian education.” The world of “Christian ed” involved learning about *learning*: social scientific studies, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy, curriculum design, and the like, all packaged within a model of faith development and often focused on children. Similarly, Christian universities and seminaries saw themselves as providing a quality education for their students by assembling the smartest teachers with the widest, deepest intellectual backgrounds who would share their insights in a context of both reasoned evaluation and practical application.

But times have changed. We are asking different questions about education. Is education about *in-formation* or *formation*? What is the role of *practice* in our assimilation of the Christian faith? How do we teach the heart as well as the mind? Many Christian educators are suggesting that spiritual formation may help us navigate these kinds of questions. Spiritual formation affirms direct experience, fosters character development, and is nurtured within a context of personal and congregational practices. So now we find that many schools are offering degrees in Christian *formation* instead of Christian *education*. Congregations are hiring pastors of formation, whose responsibilities include not merely directing the Sunday school program but also ministering within many other aspects of congregational life. The Association of Theological Schools and the Association for Biblical Higher Education now mandate development in “personal and spiritual formation” as part of a legitimate curriculum.<sup>19</sup>

Once upon a time, there were “missions.” The “missions people” and the “spirituality people” (typically) kept their distance from one another. Spirituality people learned about devotion, meditation, and prayer. Missions people learned about cross-cultural communication, ministry multiplication, and outreach strategy.

But times are changing. People are asking questions about missions. And people are asking questions about spirituality. Mission organizations, seeing many staff suffer from burnout, are beginning to think about spiritual direction, team rhythms, and other features of member care that look a lot like spiritual formation. Missiologists are exploring the lives of ancient monks and medieval friars, turning to stories that would normally be the fare of students of Christian spirituality. Similarly, students of Christian spirituality are asking, Is holiness simply a matter of private devotion? Perhaps union with God is not only a harmony with God’s Spirit in prayer but also a conformity with God’s vision for the restoration of this earth.<sup>20</sup> In this case, spiritual formation must be reinterpreted in light of such an aim. Consequently, the worlds of missions and formation begin to blend.<sup>21</sup>

Once upon a time, there was “church”: an amalgamation of worship services, preaching, pastoral care, and so on. Of course there were always a few spiritual types in our churches, subjects of both respect and concern. There were those who started small groups in an effort to foster spiritual growth among those who desired “more.” But for the most part, *church* was just what Christians did, and *spiritual formation* described the extracurricular practices and experiences of a select group of devoted individuals.

But times are changing. People are asking questions about church and about formation: What really goes on in church? Aren’t congregations communities of mutual formation? If so, then how are we living this out? What does

worship do to us? Are we formed through preaching, through the structure of the liturgy? How so? Every aspect of church life is currently being reexamined with an eye toward formation. Similarly, the notion of spiritual formation itself is being reexamined in light of a rich theology and the practice of church.<sup>22</sup>

Spiritual formation can no longer be neatly separated from community, liturgy, mission, or education. Our life with God is whole cloth, and the tidy containers the church has kept for fellowship, worship, mission, teaching, and spiritual life will simply have to be laid aside as we learn anew what it means to be the church, what it means to learn, what it means to be sent, and what it means to be devoted to Jesus.

But then the question now plagues us even more: How are we to define spiritual formation?

## Christian Spiritual Formation

While it is clear that we are in no place to formulate a precise definition of Christian spiritual formation, I think we can make some progress by exploring each of the key terms: *Christian*, *spiritual*, and *formation*. We will explore them in reverse order.

### *Formation*

What does it mean to be formed? I like the image of a potter working clay (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:1–6). A potter forms a lump of clay into a bowl, gently pushing it this way or pulling it that way as it spins on a wheel. The bowl is set aside to dry and then placed in a kiln and exposed to high heat. After the bowl cools from the firing, the potter adds a glaze to the bowl, which will further influence the character of the bowl. The bowl is placed into the kiln and fired a second time. Then the bowl is finally ready.

Or is it? Using the bowl continues to change it day after day. In time—perhaps in a long time—the bowl will break or decay. So when is it really the *bowl*? In one sense, the bowl was formed when the pushing and pulling was done. But in another sense, the bowl was being formed when the clay was maturing deep underground and continues to be formed even when it becomes old and cracked.

The fact of the matter is that everything is being formed all the time. Reality itself is in a continuous process of formation: coming to be, changing, ceasing to be.<sup>23</sup> A sunflower—seed, sprout, plant, young flower, new seeds drying and then falling, plant decaying—is being formed through each moment of the process. The sunflower is what it is in the very midst of that formation.

And so are we. We are what we are even in the midst of a constant process of formation: birth, growth, death, and beyond. Each reality has a unique *process* of formation, a process we will explore in the chapters ahead.

Formation involves the interaction of a complex of forces. It is not just a matter of a potter and some clay. Think of the bowl. The clay must be kneaded properly: no air pockets or else it will explode in the kiln. The moisture level of the clay must be just right—firm enough to hold a shape, yet not so stiff that it cannot be easily shaped. The heat of the kiln, the mixture of the glaze, the care of the potter as she places the bowl into the kiln—all play a part in its formation. Is the potter using a kick wheel or an electric wheel? Perhaps there is no wheel at all, and this is a pinch pot. Air, water, heat, potter, clay, technique, glaze, and more all influence the bowl as it's formed. And we humans are just the same. Culture, relationships, beliefs, and practices are some of the many factors that have a role in spiritual formation. I will, in this book, talk about the *contexts* and the *means* of formation. It is important to respect the contexts, because to neglect them is not to treat things as they really are; it is important to respect the means, because results differ when different means are employed.

Formation, furthermore, is always productive. It is always producing something (sunflowers, persons). Formation always has an aim by nature of the forces' interaction. As a result, in this book—a book on spiritual formation—it will be important for us to explore the *aims* of spiritual formation, to ask into what we are being formed.

Finally, particularly in human experience, formation is fostered through the influence of people. Teachers form young students. Drill sergeants form young recruits. The novice mistress forms the novices. So in this book, I will speak of the *agents* of formation. Other people, we ourselves, and especially God the Spirit act to shape us closer to Christ.

In sum, our understanding of the nature of formation itself leads us to pay attention to a few things. We notice the process of formation as it emerges in a person or group. We recognize the contexts within which formation is being encountered and the means used to facilitate it. We attend to the aims toward which it is heading. And, finally, we regard the agents of formation, including other people, ourselves, and the Spirit of God.

### *Spiritual*

And this brings us to our second term, *spiritual*. The terms *spirit* and *spiritual* are notoriously difficult to define. What, then, is Christian *spiritual* formation?

In many cases, *spirit* refers to the core of our own human personality. In this sense, it is somewhat synonymous with *heart*. David, in Psalm 51:17, declares, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; / a broken and contrite heart / you, God, will not despise.” Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:11, asks, “For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them?” To speak of our spirit is to speak of who we are in the depths of our being—who we really are. Thus a transformation of spirit is not merely a change of a few habits but a renovation of our character. We also use the word *soul* to indicate something similar (e.g., “That music touched me to my very soul”). To understand spiritual formation given this understanding of spirit, then, is to see it as a process of deep personal transformation. Renovaré ministry team member Richella Parham, in *A Spiritual Formation Primer*, writes that “in short, Christian spiritual formation is the process in which believers cooperate with God and one another so that their souls are nourished and their characters are transformed into Christlikeness.”<sup>24</sup>

But *spirit* does not only identify the depths of the human; it also refers to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 2:11, cited above, continues, “In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” And verse 12 declares, “What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God.” In these two verses, Paul moves us from considering the core of our person to considering the core of God’s person; from there, he leads us to reflect on our own participation in relationship with God’s own core through “the Spirit who is from God.” When we read further we learn about the “unspiritual” person and the “spiritual” person (vv. 14–15). The spiritual person is clearly the one who evaluates their life in light of the teaching that comes through the Spirit of God (see, e.g., Gal. 6:1 [following 5:22–23]; Col. 1:9; 3:16). When we understand spiritual formation in relation to the person of the Holy Spirit, we begin to address theologian Gordon Fee’s plea “that we more consciously allow the Spirit to have a much more major and focused role in our thinking about ‘spirituality.’”<sup>25</sup>

*Spirit* also refers to the immaterial, the supernatural, that which has to do with the divine. We contrast feeding the body and feeding the spirit. Paul urges the Corinthians to purify “body and spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1), encompassing the whole of human experience—both outer and inner aspects. Likewise, Paul declares in Romans 8:10 that although our body is dead due to sin, our spirit is alive due to righteousness.<sup>26</sup> With this understanding of spirit, we come to see spiritual formation as the aspect of our growth and maturity that deals more specifically with our relationship with God. Such was the perspective of those who trained priests, nuns, or monks. Young trainees were required to have academic formation, practical formation, and character formation. But

they were also subject to spiritual formation—namely, the intentional practices by which a trainee was likely to develop a meaningful relationship with God.

Yet how can we mature in relationship with God (and the Spirit) without it affecting not only our inner life but, indeed, every aspect of our human existence? On the one hand, spiritual formation works toward the transformation of a single, identifiable aspect of human life: the spiritual. But on the other hand, God cannot establish a transforming relationship with us without that influencing other parts of our life. Given that is the case, some are shy to use the term *spiritual* and simply use the term *Christian formation* to communicate the broad effects of growth in Christ.

So what are we to make of all these ways of approaching *spirit/Spirit* and spiritual formation?

As we will see in the course of this book, each of the perspectives through which we understand spirit is important.<sup>27</sup> I do not think we can adequately understand *spirit/Spirit* and *spiritual* unless all perspectives are welcomed into a singular and synthetic understanding of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation must address both the transformation of the human character and the depths or spiritual core of the human life, but it must also address our ongoing relationship with God through the person of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual formation, then, is about relationship with God, and—because of that very fact—it is about the transformation of every aspect of our lives, both as individuals and as communities.

Read the many passages that speak of *spirit* and *Spirit*. Read them, again and again, in the Old and New Testaments, in different translations. This alone may be the best introduction to Christian spiritual formation you will ever have. We will develop these themes surrounding *spirit/Spirit* and *spiritual* in the pages that follow.

### **Christian**

Having explored the terms *formation* and *spiritual*, we now turn to a few reflections on *Christian*. It may seem scarcely necessary to mention what we mean by *Christian* spiritual formation: it is our formation within the Christian faith, in the context of relationship with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. That's true, but there is still more to be said. For when we see what Christian spiritual formation actually is, we discover its magnificent potential.

First, Christian spiritual formation is being formed into the image of the Christian God. Christians are Christ-people. Christ is our context, our aim, our means, and (through the Spirit) our agent. We Christians set our minds on Christ. That is what I mean by Christ being our context. Our thoughts and

feelings are continually shaped by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Christ is also our aim. The purpose of Christian spiritual formation is relationship and likeness to the person of Christ, the conformity of our life as communities and individuals to the wonderful life and message of Christ. The Christian God is a trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our communities move toward the life of divine communion. The glorious excellency of our God is at the start and end of all our formation. Furthermore, we employ Christian means in our endeavor to be formed as Christians. People choose various means to be spiritually formed—for example, meditation, bodywork, or dream interpretation. Yet while these various means of formation might be helpful, spiritual formation that is specifically Christian will major on those means that are characteristic and distinctive of our faith: Scripture, prayer, church fellowship, sacraments, and the like. And, as was already mentioned above, Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is the primary agent of formation. Spiritual formation, in one important sense, simply is experiential formation in the Holy Spirit. Christian spiritual formation is formation into the Christian God.

Christian spiritual formation is also a formation within and into the Christian Story. I capitalize the word *Story* here because it is the source of all stories. Christians are the people of a Big Story. We call it the good news, the gospel, and it is good news. The Christian Story is a tale—and a history and an eschatology—of hope, of brokenness, and of amazing restoration. As you will see in chapter 2, I call it the “all things new” story. And, in fact, that is just what Christian spiritual formation is about: making “all things new.” When we undertake to realign our relationship with Jesus Christ, everything is up for grabs. Or, looking at it another way, the re-formation of any area of life just might bring us face-to-face with a spiritual transformation.

Of course, this Christian Story is housed in Scripture; consequently, Christian spiritual formation is a biblical formation. Christians may disagree on matters of interpretation and have our share of unanswered questions, but we all esteem the Bible as the sacred text of our faith. And this commitment to Scripture influences the way we are formed. We use Scripture as a means of formation when we listen to sermons or when we slowly and prayerfully read the Bible. Scripture is an aim of formation when we seek to conform our practices to a teaching we have found in the Bible (e.g., when we discover God’s heart for the poor in Scripture). “Respect for and submission to the Scriptures,” asserts author Jonathan Morrow, “is a vital presupposition for spiritual formation.”<sup>28</sup> Christian spiritual formation is formation into the Christian Story, a story found in Scripture.

Finally, *Christian* spiritual formation is formation into the Christian community. Christianity was not established when Jesus preached, or died, or even

resurrected. Jesus's followers were floundering even after the resurrected Christ appeared to them. What galvanized believers into a common life and faith was the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the birth of the Christian church. Christianity is not merely a belief system, a code of ethics, or an experience of love. Christianity is membership in a people. It is partnership with traditions and questions and saints and sinners that are centuries old and global in breadth. Even committed Christian hermits live their life of prayerful hermitage as a ministry of the body of Christ. Thus the medieval Camaldolese recluse Peter Damian writes, "When I in my solitude utter the common words of the Church I show that I am one with her and that by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit I truly dwell in her."<sup>29</sup> Damian found encouragement in this thought, though others have been less encouraged about their association with the Christian church. Nevertheless, like it or not, we cannot escape our heritage. We believers are members of the Christian church, and we are formed *by* and *into* that church.

We are also formed in local gatherings. Indeed, the Greek word *ekklesia* (church) is primarily an identification of a gathering. Christians are formed in the context of many different kinds of community. This diversity is especially significant when we consider global Christianity. Some gather in large buildings, whereas others gather in a living room or under a shade tree. Some pay careful attention to the precision of rituals. Other gatherings are very fluid, improvising their rituals as their common encounter develops. This diversity has been present from the earliest years of the earliest churches. And yet we are all baptized into one body. And yet we all drink of the same blood of Christ. As we will see in the chapters ahead, I will present Christian spiritual formation as characterized by both ritual diversity and sacramental unity. Christian spiritual formation is formation into Christian community.

Christian, spiritual, formation—this is what it is all about. We place our individual and corporate selves within the sphere of influence of the sovereign Christian God, the Christian Spirit, the Christian Story, the Christian community, and the Christian faith. In so doing, we are changed. We are changed in spirit, in the core of our personality. Our relationship with God and many other areas of our life are rearranged and formed into something new. Christian formation is the making of a new people, a new life, a new embodiment of the life of Christ in this world.

### **Toward a Definition of Christian Spiritual Formation**

We are moving closer to a working definition of Christian spiritual formation and, with that, to a sense of what this book is all about. Here are definitions

of Christian spiritual formation as crafted by several theologians and writers (including myself) over the last twenty-five years or so. Below, we will discuss the ways in which they agree and those in which they diverge.

- M. Robert Mulholland Jr.: “Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”<sup>30</sup>
- Dallas Willard: “*Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.*”<sup>31</sup>
- Paul Pettit: “Spiritual formation, then, 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.”<sup>32</sup>
- Evan B. Howard: “The intentional and semi-intentional processes by which believers (individuals and communities) become more fully conformed and united to Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling.”<sup>33</sup>
- Jeffrey P. Greenman: “Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.”<sup>34</sup>
- James Bryan Smith: “Christian spiritual formation is the process of being transformed into the image of Christ, through a relationship of intimacy with God, by the power of the Spirit, in order to live a good and beautiful life of faith, hope, love, joy, and peace—a life that will be a blessing to oneself and to others and will glorify God now and for all eternity.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Process of Change**

A few comments on these definitions will bring us even closer to the definition we will be using in this text. First, one thing the definitions above have in common is a sense that the task of spiritual formation involves a *process of change*. *Process, formation, transformation*—these words characterize our sample definitions. *Growth in relationship with Christ, maturity of our spiritual life*—this is the language of change. Thus I will choose in this text to define *formation* by speaking of maturing, a process of change.<sup>36</sup>

### **Aim**

Second, there is general agreement in these definitions that the aim of Christian spiritual formation is some kind of union with Christ. *Transformation*

*toward, becomes like, into the likeness*, and such are the phrases used to communicate this idea. I want to affirm and yet expand this idea. To start, what is not explicitly mentioned in these definitions—but ought to be—is that this likeness implies the development of *relationship* with Christ. Spiritual formation is not simply a matter of character development but also, or perhaps even more deeply, the maturing of our relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit. The union of relationship, as we will see in chapter 7, may involve but is not limited to our awareness or connection to the presence of God. Our likeness to or union with Christ is a relational participation of all we are with the fullness of the revealed God. Furthermore, as we will see in chapter 2, I understand the Christian faith as aiming not only at conforming our life to the *character* of Christ but also at conforming our life to the *gospel and purpose* of Christ.

At the same time, I want to suggest that Christian spiritual formation might not always have as its main intention change for the sake of others. Worship is for the glory of God. Maturing in the practice of praying in tongues may at times have our own edification in mind (see 1 Cor. 14). There are seasons in life when it is wisest simply to focus on our own personal development of obedience and the virtues, leaving the issues of our influence on others to the mysterious work of the Spirit. I want to acknowledge with Smith (“a life that will be a blessing *to oneself* and *to others* and will *glorify God*,” italics added) the breadth of the consequences of Christian spiritual formation.

### **Agents**

Third, I want to affirm the comment made by many that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of Christian spiritual formation. It is time to put the Spirit back in spirituality, and I will do just this in the chapters to follow. Yet, as I have mentioned above, I see the involvement of a number of human agents as being essential to the formation process: spiritual directors, small groups, even we ourselves.<sup>37</sup> I will, therefore, speak of Christian spiritual formation as being both Spirit- and human-led.

### **Object**

Fourth, I want to expand our view of the agency involved in spiritual formation as well as our view of the object of Christian spiritual formation. In the definition I gave in my earlier book, I indicated this by the phrase *individuals and communities*. I believe that community is part of the context of formation, as mentioned by Pettit and Greenman; in addition, I believe that

communities themselves are formed through a Spirit- and human-led process into an increasing depth of relationship with God and ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of the Christian God. Therefore, I address the formation of groups (families, churches, networks, and so on) as well as the formation of individuals, using the term *communities* to refer to these groups more generally.

But what is really the particular object of Christian spiritual formation? Is it our alignment with the Holy Spirit? Is it our own spirit, the interior life of prayer? Is it our relationship with God? Perhaps it is best to drop the term *spiritual* altogether and simply speak of Christian formation as a way of affirming that formation in the gospel of Christ necessarily involves all of who we are. My choice here is simply to say an unqualified yes to all of the above, with the exception that I will not drop the term *spiritual*. In keeping with the centuries-old tradition of formation, I see a special need to take intentional steps toward nurturing our relationship with God—a relationship that addresses both the depths of the human spirit and attunement with the Spirit of Christ. Yet that very effort to nurture our relationship with God is bound to affect many areas of our lives. Spiritual formation will shape educational formation, liturgical formation, our approach to health, and so on. That being the case, this text will include Spirit, spirit, and the breadth of human experience—both corporate and individual—as we explore how to develop our particularly spiritual life.

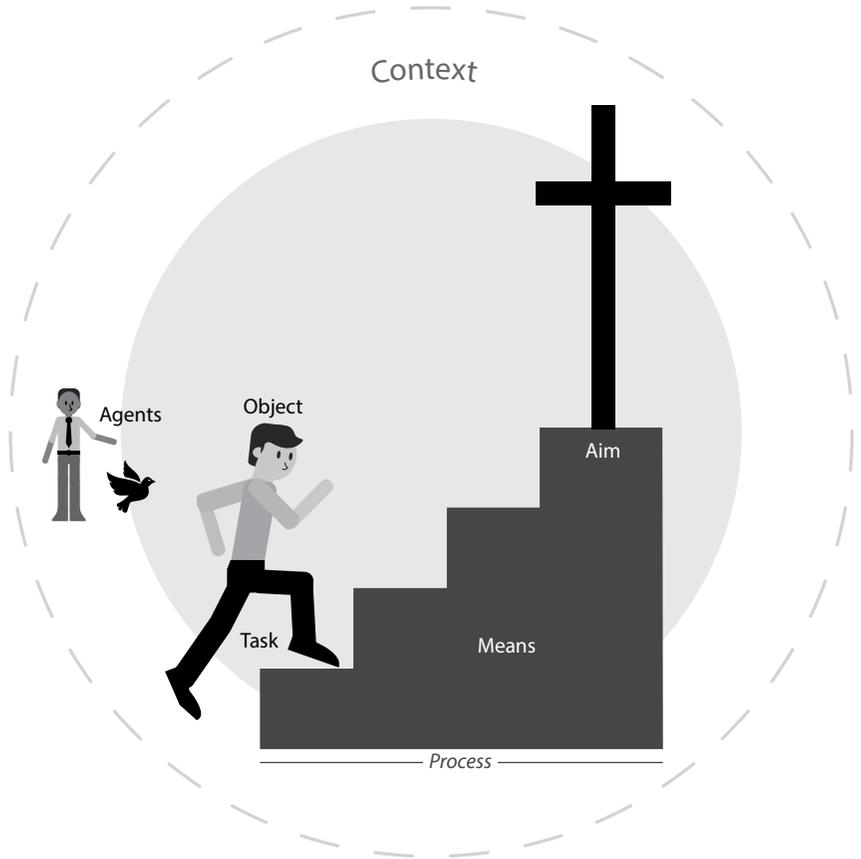
### **Contexts and Means**

Apart from mentioning community, none of the definitions included above addressed the *contexts* of Christian spiritual formation. And none included a statement about the *means* of formation. I think that this is because the contexts and means of formation vary so greatly from situation to situation that it is counterproductive to describe either in a definition of what is central and common to the phrase.

### **A Working Definition**

I am now in a place where I can offer a definition of Christian spiritual formation that will serve as a guide for this text. I see Christian spiritual formation as *a Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God.* This way of looking at Christian spiritual formation shapes the way this text approaches Christian spiritual formation.

Figure 1.1  
**Elements of Christian Spiritual Formation**



**Object:** Who/what is being formed (person, community . . .)

**Aim:** The goal or end toward which formation is directed

**Context (and Charism):** The environment within which (and the unique characteristics with which) an object is formed

**Agents:** Those who possess a degree of responsible influence for one's formation

**Process:** The way that formation develops and is realized in time

**Task:** The work of formation itself

**Means:** The various instruments through which the agents of formation (Spirit, self, others, etc. ) accomplish the aim

## Where Do We Go from Here?

In coming chapters, we will explore all of the dimensions of spiritual formation mentioned above and more. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the biblical and theological backbone to our introduction to Christian spiritual formation. Chapter 2 offers a survey of the Big Story of the Christian faith and the implications that this story brings to our understanding of Christian spiritual formation. Chapter 3 then examines the fullness of formation and how that fullness has consequences for the aims of Christian spiritual formation.

Chapter 4 introduces us to the contexts and agents of Christian spiritual formation. Here we learn about families and friends, countries and cultures. More particularly, we see how we ourselves, the Holy Spirit, and spiritual directors help us grow. Chapter 5 treats the cooperative tasks of transformation. We examine not only how Savior and Spirit work in the lives of individuals and communities but also how we experience and nurture that work. We also consider stages of growth and how transformation influences one area and then another. Chapter 6 treats the means of formation. We will learn how to recognize God's Spirit, and I will address spiritual disciplines, community, sacraments, and the trials of life.

Chapters 7 through 10 present Christian spiritual formation in the practice of life: a life of prayer, a life together, a life of personal integrity, and a life of mission. This section provides something of a guide to the actual wisdom of spiritual formation as it is lived out in various areas of the life of the church.

The last two chapters of the book guide our discussion of formation through two critical topics. Chapter 11 treats the issue of discernment, one of the most commonly discussed issues in Christian spiritual formation and a topic toward which previous chapters have been pointing. Finally, chapter 12 will sum up the entire book by looking at the possibilities of exercising the ministry of Christian spiritual formation.

## Going Deeper

1. Think back to a time in your life that you would say was spiritually formative. What happened? What was that like? Can you identify some of the elements of Christian spiritual formation in that event or season?
2. In this chapter, we glimpsed only a couple of biblical images for formation: construction and child development. Yet the Bible uses a wide range of vocabulary to communicate the theme of spiritual growth.

What are some of these other images, and what might they contribute to a full-orbed theology of Christian spiritual formation?

3. This is a book on *Christian* spiritual formation. As such, our examination of the aims, means, and so on of formation focuses on those that are distinctively Christian. But we live in a religiously plural world. Compare the Christian approach to spiritual formation to the approaches advocated by other religions or to the kinds of formation promoted by agnostics and atheists. What are the similarities and differences? What does a comparative perspective to spiritual formation tell us about the development of our own lives as Christian individuals and communities?
4. Why all the fuss with defining Christian spiritual formation? Does it really make a difference, for example, if we define *spiritual* with relationship to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit? What about some of the other issues mentioned in the discussion of the terms used? Explore various definitions of Christian spiritual formation, and imagine the significance of living out those definitions.
5. This chapter has introduced the subtle distinctions between spirit, spiritual, and Holy Spirit. One way of venturing more deeply into the topic of Christian spiritual formation is to learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit, to your spirit, and to the spiritual part of your life. Here's one simple exercise to help train your attention to this: Ask yourself each evening, Where did I notice Spirit or spirit today? You need not be overly meticulous in your meditation. Just open yourself for a moment and see what comes to mind. Try this little exercise for a few weeks. Then try doing it at a different time of day. After a month or so, ask yourself what you have learned about spiritual formation.