A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation

Sample Assignments

Evan B. Howard



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Note: I am assuming that instructors will add their own grading rubrics, due dates, word counts, and the like as needed for each assignment.

# Chapter 1: Christian Spiritual Formation

## Formation Autobiography

One of the goals of this class is to facilitate students’ ability to reflect on their past and current experiences of Christian spiritual formation. In this assignment I want you to provide a brief formation autobiography. Describe when your formation in Christ began. Identify the traditions, communities, and/or individuals that nourished (or harmed) your formation in relationship with God. What practices (either individual or corporate) have been especially valuable to you? Have there been distinct seasons or “ups and downs” in your formation history? Where do you see yourself today? See if you can identify all of the elements of Christian spiritual formation mentioned in chapter 1 of *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*. If you cannot, or if one element seems to play a stronger role than another (for example, if you see your cultural background has influenced your formation much more than any other particular agent), spend some time reflecting on that fact. This formation autobiography will be very important to me as it will become the basis upon which I can discern how you are growing in your own formation throughout the term (for example, as you record your reports on your other practice assignments).

# Chapter 3: The Fullness and Aims of Christian Spiritual Formation

## 1. My Relationship with God: A Worksheet

This worksheet is a tool to help you get a comprehensive overview of your relationship with God as it has developed, especially in its most recent “season.” This sheet will also give you new perspective on the directions in which you see your relationship with God moving in the near future. Please read the whole worksheet first and then respond to each exercise honestly and prayerfully. You need not do each exercise, but it will be helpful for you to do as many as you can. Take note where you have much to say, where you draw a blank, or where the exercise simply does not resonate. It may be helpful, after completing the worksheet, to process the experience of reviewing your relationship with God with a trusted friend or spiritual director. My hope is that the completing of this worksheet itself will be an enlightening encounter with God. You will use the insights from this worksheet further as you explore formation in this course.

### Exercise 1: History of My Relationship with God

On a separate piece of paper draw a graph describing the history of your relationship with God from its beginning to the present. Show the highs and lows of this relationship. Identify (and date if appropriate) key peaks, valleys, plateaus, transitions, and developments. Then sit and prayerfully look at this chart. What has characterized your most recent “season” with the Lord? How does this season differ from previous seasons? Where does your relationship with the Lord appear to be moving now?

### Exercise 2: Pictorial Summary of My Relationship with God

On a blank sheet of unlined paper, draw a picture representing your relationship with God. This picture can be abstract or realistic, black-and-white or color, Rembrandt or stick figure. The quality of product is unimportant; the sincerity of expression is important. Allow yourself to deeply feel the movement of your relationship with God as it has been taking shape in the present period. Allow that sense, that feel, to be expressed naturally on paper (if you want to use another visual expressive medium—sculpture, dance, or the like—go for it). If you want, feel free to name your artwork or to adorn it with a “life verse” from Scripture that has been meaningful to you recently.

### Exercise 3: A Journal of My Recent Season with God

Go back in your mind to the most recent season of your relationship with God. Look at this period in your mind as if you were photographing it with a camera. Do not evaluate it; simply picture it. As you reflect upon this period of your relationship with God, write down on a piece of paper responses to the following questions. You need not answer them all; just address those which seem applicable to your life. Answer them in any order that seems most appropriate to you.

• What *experiences* of God characterized this season of your relationship? Were there any particular times that you sensed intense closeness or distance? Was this time dry, rich, mixed? How did you respond emotionally to God’s work in your life? Could you identify this as a time of passion, love, joy, peace, anxiety, grief, anger, or another feeling? Was there a kind of “mood” that characterized the period? Did your awareness of God itself change in this period?

• How has your *understanding* of God developed in this season? Have there been any particular personal Bible studies, classes, sermons, seminars, books, tapes, or the like that have had a significant influence on your understanding of God? How do you see God now: as a father, a helper, a judge, etc.? Where do you see your comprehension of the mystery of God taking you in the future?

• How might you characterize your relationship to the groups and subgroups that compose your church or *religious community*? Do you feel more or less a part of your religious community? Why? Do you feel your associations with various religious groupings or movements shifting? Are they growing more or less solid? Why? Summarize your feelings and reflections about your religious community.

• What *activity* has characterized this season? What have you been involved in? Have any new activities developed from your relationship with God in this season—activities of devotion, service, quest, or other similar acts? Have there been any particular sins of which you have become aware during this season or which have demanded hearty repentance and attention? How might you characterize your ongoing activities at work or at home?

• What *relationships* (if not covered above) have played an important role in this period? These need not be pleasant or satisfying relationships, simply important ones. Were there any new relationships introduced, any relationships broken? Where do you see your relationships moving now? Where does your relationship with God bear on these developments?

• How might you characterize your *physical life* in this period? Was health or illness a significant factor in this season of your relationship with God? Do any particular events come to mind with regard to diet, athletics, sex, and the like?

• Was this a time when you had a strong experience with respect to any *creative* aspect of life? What did you find yourself creating during this season? Were there any crafts, projects, art forms, or outings that brought you into yourself, into relationship with God, or that expressed relationship with God? How has the creative side of life expressed or reflected your relationship with God during this season?

• Were there any *events* that took place during this period that were particularly striking or dramatic or meaningful? Was there a single event that drastically changed the course of your life experience (for example, a tragic accident or winning the lottery)? If so, how has this event affected your relationship with God?

Note: You may be tempted to give lengthy commentary on the movements of your life in this period, especially if the act of reflection has given you new insight. Jot these insights elsewhere and save extended commentary for the next question. The comments and insights are very important and will be discussed. But for this exercise, just “photograph” the season.

### Exercise 4: Evaluation

Now you may feel free to comment on or analyze the relationship you have previously described. How did this period of your life get on? Are you pleased with your relationship with God? Unhappy? Where was God most present during this season? Least present? Why? How do you feel you stand with God now? Where was God’s invitation to you most keenly felt? How did you respond to this invitation? Try not to be too self-critical in this evaluation. Just be honest. A comparison with some virtues, gently but firmly applied, might help.

• Consider the following virtues: a prayerful life, a Spirit-filled life, a Word-centered life, a holy life, a compassionate life, and a life of ministry. In which of these virtues do you find yourself the strongest? The weakest? Can you explain?

• Consider again: a clear, constant awareness of God; a profound experience of God; a deep understanding of God and his ways; and an obedient response to God. In which of these virtues do you find yourself strongest? Weakest? Can you explain?

### Exercise 5: Summary

When you have finished, reflect once again upon the whole of your recent season without looking at its individual components. Is there a word, a phrase, or a picture that would sum up the whole of your relationship with God during this time? Where do you see yourself in relationship with God right now? Include your insights into this final reflection as you summarize your present understanding of your relationship with God.

## 2. The “Two Locker Rooms” Exercise

As you will notice in this course, *desire* is an important component of Christian formation. What we desire—and how we desire—sets the stage for the ways that we interpret, and even notice*,* the presence and action of God in our midst. In particular, we evaluate the decisions and the experiences of life better when we are wholeheartedly given over in a desire for God’s will to be manifest on earth through us. One exercise that facilitates our wholehearted commitment to the way of Christ is Ignatius of Loyola’s meditation on the “Two Standards.” In it we review the plans and concerns of Christ and the enemies of Christ. It is a good meditation, but it is based on a late medieval understanding of military practice. Over the years, I have found it less than helpful for many who cannot put themselves in the setting of medieval warfare. So I have recast this meditation in the context of modern locker rooms. Most of us are familiar with sports contexts and can imagine what it might be like to be a fly on the wall as two teams prepare for the big game. So listen to this audio file (<https://soundcloud.com/ebhoward/twolockerrooms>) as I lead you through this meditation. Spend a moment in prayer at the close of the meditation. Then write down something of your own experience of the exercise. What happened? What did you notice? How were your own desires affected? Where did you have difficulties and why? How might repetition of an exercise like this influence you or others in your sphere of influence?

# Chapter 4: The Contexts and Agents of Christian Spiritual Formation

## Three Days of Monastic Rhythm

We all have our ups and downs. In fact, I will go one step further: we all *ought* to have our ups and downs. Rhythm is a part of life (see Eccles. 3:1–8). Rhythm has also been an important element of the formation of Christians over the centuries. There is a story of Saint Antony of Egypt that goes like this:

Once when Antony was living in the desert his soul was troubled by boredom and irritation. He said to God, “Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?” After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Antony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, “Do this and you will be cured.”

Many Christian expressions through history—particularly Christian monasteries and convents—have developed some rhythmic relationship between the elements of prayer, work, study, and ministry (though some activities might be hard to categorize strictly with one label or another). The amount of time put to each will vary from group to group, but there is often some effort, for the most part, to structure time and to structure it with a rhythm in mind. This is a part of the endeavor to order our lives around Christ.

In one sense this is the easiest assignment of all. Depending on your life habits, you may not have to add anything to your workload except writing the report and preparing a bit. On the other hand, living a monastic rhythm might be the hardest assignment of this class. The point of this assignment is simply to arrange your day, pay attention, and notice what you experience. What you will have to do for this assignment is:

*• Select*. Choose to do this assignment and schedule your “rhythm days.”

*• Prepare*. Plan for those days. In order to fulfill this assignment you will need to include (and schedule)

—at least four times of private or public prayer each day (no time restrictions, within reason);

—some time of Bible reading, *lectio divina*, or formal study (schoolwork permitted);

—some time of manual labor each day;

—some expression of care or community at least once within the three days;

—at least five meals eaten in silence.

*• Participate*. After you have scheduled and prepared for your rhythm days (do you have the tools for your manual labor ready?), then—when the time comes—you just do it. And you watch to see what happens. What is it like to eat in silence? What is it like to keep a schedule? (You might want to have someone ring a bell to call you in to prayer at the appropriate times.) Yes, you can fake this assignment, but I am asking you to give it sincere effort (and I can often tell when someone’s faking it).

*• Report*. Report on what happened. Tell me what you chose and why. Tell me what you did and how it felt. Relate all of this to the class material.

# Chapter 5: The Process of Transformation and the Task of Formation

## Celebrating the Formational Seasons of Life

One of the aims of this course is to equip students to engage in activities and exercises related to Christian spiritual disciplines. Obviously there is not enough time in this class to let you explore seasons in terms of the *annual* rhythms of earth or church. But you canexplore daily and weekly rhythms. First, decide how you will join with church and earth to observe the seasons of the soul. Choose a set of practices, moods, and so on that appropriately link the three distinct stages of church rhythm (repentance, resurrection, ordinary) with your own faith and faith community. Continue this practice for a full seven days (including Sunday, but you may want to start on a Tuesday or a Friday in order to experience this progression uniquely regarding how each day’s mood influences the rest). Then, when you are finished, write a brief summary of your experience addressing each of the following:

• Briefly describe what you chose to do. (For example, “I decided to celebrate weekly rhythms by making Friday a fast day [no meat, sugar, or internet] and a time where I reflect [reading the Ten Commandments and reviewing my week, confessing to God and my best friend], and by making a special point of taking Communion on Sunday and going out to lunch afterward. Monday through Thursday, I gave five minutes at the end of each evening thinking about the ordinary things of the day in light of both repentance and resurrection.”)

• Tell me what happened in the experience. (For example, “I started the week with a reading of the Commandments, but I found myself thinking of suffering in general, the pain in the world. I didn’t know what to do on Saturday, and that kind of brought me to thinking about how our world does not know what to do with its pain. Then it felt really neat to go to church, take Communion, and realize that Christ does bring renewal to it all. It gave me new hope for the stuff I had to face that week.”) Pay attention to your context, the content, and the consequences of the exercise. See if you can notice if or where you perceived any indication of the presence or activity of God in the midst of your rhythm.

• Finally, provide a short, integrative reflection on your experience. This is meant to be an exercise in formation and season. How were you (or could you be) formed through this kind of celebration of seasons? Draw from at least one of your resources for the week. Conclude with any ideas, thoughts, lessons, or questions you have gained from this exercise regarding the meaning of rhythm and season in Christian formation.

# Chapter 6: The Means of Christian Spiritual Formation

## The Art of Putting Things Right: A Brief Guide to (Making) Confession

Do you want to live a life that is completely free and fully open to God, yourself, and others? I think that this kind of a life is possible. And I am beginning to think that the practice of confession just may be one key to making it possible.

These days we do not talk much about confession, and we talk even less about “making” confession. Some wish to avoid an antiquated obsession with sin. Others rest in the forgiving work of Christ on the cross and feel little need to make a big deal about confession. There are also other, perhaps more sinister, reasons we avoid confession. Much too often we choose to live parts of our lives in secret, subtly hiding bits of ourselves from others and from God. The consequence? We lose the chance to freely be ourselves—the mix of bad and good that we really are—openly before God and others. We fail to live in truth, for truth is not merely a philosophical category but a way of being present (similar to what we might call “sincerity”). What a tragedy!

Confession, not only to God but also to others, has been practiced since the New Testament. Sin, and the confession of sin, was not merely about “me and Jesus” but about the Christian community. The apostle Paul urges the Corinthian church to deal strictly with a man persisting in immoral behavior, for “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (1 Cor. 5:6). “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed,” writes the apostle James (James 5:16). In Scripture, putting things right involves sorrow or contrition before God, reconciliation with the Christian community (which is harmed even by our minor sins), and repentance within ourselves demonstrating an intention toward change.

The practice of confession varied through the centuries. In the first centuries of the church, people would come to the front of the church and make open declaration of their grievous sins or those that affected the congregation. Many Christian sanctuaries were arranged such that those who were repenting for serious sin would be located in a certain part of the sanctuary. In monastic circles, nuns and monks would carefully recount or “manifest” not only their sins but their thoughts and feelings so that through the process of spiritual direction the Christian could wisely determine a strategy for positive change. The Celtic Christians developed penitential manuals for the use of priests and such. These manuals would suggest actions that might best facilitate successful repentance on the part of people coming to them confessing various kinds of sins. Roman Catholic tradition stressed the sacramental function of confession as a preparation for Communion, making things right with God. Protestant Reformers such as Luther and Cranmer strongly emphasized the forgiveness offered through Christ but also encouraged the practice of regular confession as a means of the grace of Christ making us new week by week. Seasons of confession, both public and private, have been important elements of major revivals in the history of the church. Perhaps this practice is due for a revival today.

But how do we begin? We begin by being honest. We mention when we are hurt, even though we “shouldn’t” be hurt. This is a confession. It is a frank admission of who we are, weak as we may be. In the course of casual conversation we simply reveal ourselves honestly, even though it may not look “right” to other Christians. This is confession. Some groups talk about “spiritual breathing,” a habit of *breathing out* the sinful thought or action to God whenever we notice it, and *breathing in* the filling of the Holy Spirit as a means of replacing the bad with the good. This is confession. We muster the courage to say “I’m sorry” to another when it is needed. The best confession is not really a “practice” but the natural outflow of a sincere Christian faith lived honestly before God, self, and others.

And yet I think there is also a place for a semiformal discipline of confession—again, not merely to God but also to one another. And so here I will outline one way of “making confession.”

First, we pause and listen. Where are things “not right”? It may be some vice that caught us once again. It may be a nagging worry that reveals our lack of trust. It may be some breach of honor between ourselves and another. Some people choose to reflect on the whole of their lives, making a list of these “not rights” so they can formally confess before God and another and finally get it over with. Other confessions arise out of a momentary and powerful conviction. Some have a few Scripture verses to guide their reflection. Others use their rule of life or some other document. There are many ways to do this. However the circumstances, the initial step is simply to wait, to listen, and then to agree with the Spirit. Part of that agreement may be to write something down on paper: “Yes, I thought this, I felt this, I did this, I failed to do this.”

Next, we visit someone else. We make an appointment with a trusted friend, a spiritual director, a pastor, a priest, or a confessor. Then we simply “get it out.” We admit our conviction. We read our list. We acknowledge our weakness, our negligence, our own deliberate rebellion. You may also talk about why something may have happened or what can be done to avoid things in the future. You may inquire about the need for further confession or restitution if, in this meeting, you conclude that others could be sufficiently affected. Mostly though, you just confess what needs to be confessed, you pray together, and you receive forgiveness from God and another person. And it is important that you sincerely *receive* that forgiveness. That is part of the freedom thing.

Finally, you leave with a new mind-set. You leave intending to change. You may have thought about strategies (“Next time I walk to work, I will avoid walking by that donut store”). Then again, you may just leave knowing that God loves you even though you keep messing up. Regardless, both you and God know that you intend on changing. And that is enough. You are free to be yourself because you have been yourself openly before God and at least one other human being.

Even just one confession visit can be life changing. But I can affirm from my experience that a habit, an ongoing *practice* of confession with a spiritual director or some other accountability partner, can be a powerful force. My commitment to reveal myself regularly to another prevents me from any subtle corners of hiding. And I am free, totally free, to be my crazy, fallen self as I live my life day in and day out. Perhaps you have something to confess?

Your assignment is simply to “make confession” once. You must follow each step of the process.

• *Examination*. You can think about a lifetime, a recent season of life, a week, or perhaps even a day (though it has to be significant enough to make a worthy confession). Make sure to identify which you choose in your report. The most important thing is that this is a meaningful experiment in worship for you—giving greater reverence to God by getting things right with God, self, and others.

• *Confession appointment*. You will need to choose a “confessor,” make an appointment in advance, and then show up for this meeting and make your confession. You must communicate in the meeting what was discovered in the examination stage. Simply admit, as per the outline above. See where this conversation leads, but the important thing is simply to have the conversation.

• *Forgiveness and repentance*. Either as a direct result of the meeting or some time after, consider your own sense of forgiveness and repentance. What kind of a sense of being accepted by God is present? What sense of an intention toward change or even a plan to change do you have?

Afterward, write a report about your experience. You don’t need to tell me your deepest, darkest sins. What you do need to tell me, however, is your experience of the *practice*. Describe what you did and how you experienced the exercise. (For example: “I thought this was going to be really lame, but then part way through I remembered something kind of small. And then when I got to thinking about it, I realized that this small thing was actually characteristic of some really big lack-of-trust problem I have with God.”) Tell me about your meeting. (For example: “I met with a trusted friend, and she did not know what to do and felt a little awkward. But we just did the thing and . . .”) Tell me about what happened afterward. (For example: “All I left with was a prayer that I knew I needed to believe in—though it was hard—and I went home, thought about what I should do next, and wrote down a few ideas.”) Finally, give me a sense of how this was an experience of Christian spiritual formation for you in light of your readings this week and the materials you have covered in the course. Draw from these material in order to give a review of this as a practice of Christian spiritual formation both for you personally and for others more generally.

# Chapter 7: Formed into Prayer

## 1. Composing Collects: A Guide to Powerful (but Brief) Prayers

I have taken to writing and praying “collects” these days. And I have found it to be a wonderful confidence builder in my prayer life.

First, it might help to know just what a “collect” is. Our English noun *collect* comes from the Middle English *collecte*, which may be a shortened version of the Latin *oratio ad collectam* or “prayer at the collection.” Other historians identify the roots of the collect in the function of these prayers: a “collecting” of the intentions of the gathered people into one common prayer. Early in the history of the church, prayers were written that expressed particular themes of the church’s celebrations and then were offered during the common service of worship. For example, someone would summarize the church’s gratitude for the resurrection of Christ and its hope and prayers for new life in a single prayer offered during an Easter service. Over time, the writing and reciting of such prayers multiplied. Entire books of such prayers were published for use in the practice of common and personal prayer. The *Book of Common Prayer*, a very influential guide to common and private worship, has sections devoted to “collects” appropriate for certain days and occasions and to other similar prayers and thanksgivings. One collect for the unity of the church prays:

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*.

Beyond the possible occasion of these prayers (at the collection of offerings? before the readings?), I see two important other “collections” involved in the making of collects:

• First, they *collect* the common and sincere intentions of the people of God around a single topic. Our common desire as Christians for the unity of the church is expressed in a few phrases. “Be one,” “bound together,” “unity,” and similar images and words are used to give voice to a prayer that we all might have but might express in slightly different terms. A collect uses a few of these to indicate both the single theme and the different ways of expressing our common prayer to God. Thus we can all join in.

• Second, they *collect* biblical and theological language together around a theme into a single prayer. You can see in our example how Jesus’s prayer in John 17 stands behind this collect. Other passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 John are also reflected in this prayer. This is characteristic of collects. They are summaries of biblical truth in the form of prayer.

The result of this is a brief, easy-to-understand prayer that expresses both the heart of God and the will of the people—a wonderful “collection.”

Sometimes I struggle with knowing what to pray. I am grateful for the ministry of the Holy Spirit who, in times like this, offers my truest heart to God through “sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26–27). But I have also learned to read Scripture regarding a topic and summarize my learnings into a prayer that I then use to communicate both my prayers and those of others. I write my own collects.

For example, I may wonder how to pray for the influence of the Holy Spirit for people who don’t have a relationship with God. So I meditatively read passages that speak about this ministry of the Spirit (e.g., John 3:5–8; 15:26; 16:8–11; Acts 8:29; 9:17; 13:2). Then I write the following prayer summarizing these passages and my desire for the Spirit’s work among unbelievers (or a particular unbeliever):

O Holy Spirit, who links those you have made new with those who need your newness, who empowers the message of those you have made new and accompanies their message with signs of your powerful presence, please arrange divine appointments. Bring conviction to \_\_\_\_\_\_ and lead them into new life, all so that you may be honored and they might have the fullest possible life. In the name of Christ the risen Lord. Amen.

This is really a very simple task:

 1. Identify a theme for your prayers and those of others.

 2. Find Scripture passages and theological summaries relevant to this theme.

 3. Read and meditate.

 4. Summarize in a single prayer.

I have written many of these prayers over the years. I continue to use them in my prayers for and with others.

Perhaps you would like to join me?

Your assignment is simply to write a collect. You are to submit the following:

• A list of the biblical passages and theological resources that informed the composition of your prayer. You might also like to explain how they influenced the prayer.

• The prayer itself.

• A summary of your own experience doing this exercise (insights, spiritual noticings, etc.).

• Conclude with any ideas, thoughts, lessons, or questions you have gained from this exercise regarding the meaning of collects for personal and private Christian worship.

## 2. Reciting Morning and Evening Office Together

Prayer is central to our Christian faith. And the pattern of the first Christians—following Jewish custom—was to pray multiple times each day. The New Testament portrays Jesus praying in the morning (Mark 1:35) and also in the evening (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12). In Acts, the early disciples are mentioned praying at the third (2:1, 15), sixth (10:9), and ninth hours (3:1; 10:3, 30). Prayer together at least in the morning and evening was an established practice for the earliest Christians. Christian monastic practice simply expanded on this, devoting seven or more distinct times throughout each day to the work of prayer. This pattern of praying a number of times throughout the day is called an “horarium” or the “divine office.” Morning and evening prayer was the foundation and the bare minimum.

Morning and evening prayer have had special meaning from the beginning. In evening prayer we reflect on the day as it ends, and we remember that our life is short and someday we will rest eternally. We remember Christ who died for us. We examine our day and our life at the end of things. We confess. We repent. And we choose to make a new beginning when the sun rises again. Morning then, is a small celebration of the resurrection. We greet the rising of the sun by remembering the rising of the Son. We look forward to what lies ahead in the day and in eternity. These themes have always guided the content and structure of morning and evening prayer.

It is good to remember our Lord throughout the day. We reorient ourselves to what is valuable, to what is beautiful, to what is true. Certainly a full seven-times-per-day horarium is more than the average Christian can muster. But perhaps we can at least learn to offer our mornings and evenings to the Lord and perhaps even to offer them together with others of like mind or similar geography.

Your assignment is simply this: gather together a few people and pray morning and evening prayer, like many Christians have always done.

*• Select*. First select your times and people. You must gather at least three people. You must do one morning and one evening prayer, though they need not be on the same day.

*• Prepare*. Then select your resources. You must choose one “old” resource (common resources are the Orthodox *Horologion*, the Roman Catholic *Liturgy of the Hours*, and the *Book of Common Prayer*). You may use other “old” resources (the Coptic *Agpeya*, etc.), but they must be appropriate. You may need, depending on the resource, to do a bit of homework to find out how to use the resources. Looking up the troparion for the day for the *Horologion* might be difficult. Just do the best you can; look online or ask somebody. You must also choose one “new” resource (common resources used by new-monastic communities are *Common Prayer*, *Celtic Daily Prayer*, and the *Divine Hours* compiled by Phyllis Tickle). You can use another or even invent one if it is appropriate. Part of your planning will also include scheduling the times for folks to meet and getting materials ready so all can participate well (sheets of paper or books; musical instruments; props like candles, art, etc.). If you want you can plan your worship space. Monasteries old and new frequently celebrate seasons and themes by the way a room is arranged. You all might want to wear robes and have special colors hanging in the room. Got that? You need **one morning and one evening prayer**, **one “old” and** **one “new” resource**, and at least **three people**.

*• Participate*. Then meet and celebrate. Invest in worship together in both the morning and the evening office.

*• Report*. Write a report of the event. State the reasons for your choices of people, resources, and times. Describe the event itself. What did you do and how did it go? Give me a sense of your own (and the group’s) experience of the times of prayer. Finally, say something about how this practice was relevant to your education in prayer and Christian spiritual formation. How does our daily rhythm of prayer form us into prayer?

## 3. One Night of Vigil

When Jesus wanted to hear from God about who to choose as disciples, he “went to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). When morning came, he was ready to select his closest disciples. And thus was born the practice of Christian vigil. People have been staying up at night to pray ever since. All-night prayer meetings have long been a staple of Christian life. Pachomius, founder of one of the early monastic communities in Upper Egypt, tells how he learned his practice from a mentor named Palemon. Palemon described the practice of the elders—what he calls the “law of monastic life”—as follows: “We always spend half the night, and often from evening to morning, in vigils and the recitation of the words of God, also doing manual work with threads, hairs, or palm-fibres, lest we be overcome by sleep.” Similarly, in the Celtic tradition we learn that “they fasted, abstained from certain foods, performed manual labour, kept vigils, and sang psalms, all as part of their normal religious regimen.” The night “vigil” or “matins” has been a significant element of monastic prayer since its inception, and it continues to be practiced today, for example by groups of people participating in 24/7 prayer movements.

Vigils often involve a good deal of reading the Psalms, along with other passages of Scripture and other readings, hymns, and prayers of various sorts. The point is to devote ourselves to undistracted prayer for a significant period of time. It is both worship and asceticism. As the quote from Palemon indicates, care must be taken to maintain attention to prayer. A blend of activities nourishes our ability to stay awake and focused in prayer. And as many people will testify, a lot of spiritual work can be accomplished in the middle of the night. There is a special kind of freedom in the middle of the night that is not present at other times.

Your assignment is to do a single stint of prayer vigil. You can choose either to schedule a session from 9:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., or to schedule a session between 2:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m.

*• Select*. You will need to select your time and place for vigil in advance. That’s about it for selection.

*• Prepare*. If you want, you can prepare the room for your time with decorations and resources. You will need resources for prayer (and perhaps for basket weaving). Some people have a rotating rhythm of Psalm-reading, looking up Scriptures, writing prayers, listening to worship music, intercession, and walking around the room. Some use readings, psalms, hymns, antiphons, and such to give variety to the evening, along with standing, bowing, sitting, singing, and so on. Prepare for your time by having a plan ready, even though you might find yourself modifying the plan once you are there.

*• Participate*. When the time comes, just do it, paying attention to what happens and how it feels.

*• Report*. When your time is up, finish the vigil, and at some point (before your memory of the experience fades), write a report of the experience. What did you do? Why did you do it? What were your resources? What was it like? Finally, say something about how this practice was relevant to your education in prayer and Christian spiritual formation. Draw from the resources of the week and the course. How does the practice of vigil serve to form us into prayer?

## 4. Personal, Private Retreat with the Lord

This assignment, along with the other practice assignments, is designed to improve your capacity to engage in activities and exercises related to Christian spiritual disciplines and Christian spiritual formation. Your assignment will be tied closely to your associated reading for this assignment: “Treasure from the Desert: A Brief Guide to Personal, Private, Retreats with the Lord.” I wrote this guide (<http://spiritualityshoppe.org/treasure-from-the-desert-a-brief-guide-to-private-personal-retreats-with-the-lord/>) long ago to assist people in taking private, personal retreats. Your assignment is simply to prepare for, to take, and then to reflect upon one half-day retreat (four hours in retreat) as directed in the guide.

When you are finished with your retreat, submit a report sharing something from your experience of solitude. Areas you will want to cover include the following:

*• General information*. What, where, when, and how?

*• Preparation*. What did you do and why did you do it? Include body, location, what you took with you, spiritual preparations, etc.

*• Distractions*. What did you experience and what did you do about it? (See the guide for an outline of this.)

*• Presence and rest*. How (if at all) did you experience rest and the presence of God in this retreat?

*• Time with the Lord*. Was this more of an “agenda” or a “non-agenda” retreat? What did you do (or *not* do) on this retreat? What did you experience? What did you notice regarding your relationship with God in the midst of this retreat (tensions, healings, questions, feelings, or the like)?

*• Closing*. What were your takeaways from this retreat? What might you look forward to in future retreats? What are the implications for your future practice of worship living? What invitations did you sense (if any), and what responses might be appropriate? Did you share any content of the retreat with someone else? If so, what was that like?

# Chapter 8: Formed Together

## 1. Awakening Your Inner Prophet

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy”(1 Cor. 14:1).

After Paul outlines for the Corinthian church a theology of spiritual gifts and Christian unity (1 Cor. 12) and finishes his masterful discourse on love (1 Cor. 13), he turns in chapter 14 to make the application: What does a Spirit-led love look like in the context of Christian worship gatherings? His exhortations?

• Follow love

• Desire spiritual gifts

• Especially prophecy

For Paul, the gift of prophecy is a Spirit-led contribution of love for the sake of the edification of the body of Christ and the advancement of God’s kingdom. This is clearly the New Testament counterpart to Ezekiel, whom the Spirit lifted up (Ezek. 3:12) and who followed the Spirit’s leading by speaking—and acting—what the sovereign Lord had to communicate.

Where are the prophets in the church today?

Prophecy is a gift from God and cannot be manufactured. One can, however, improve one’s predisposition for God’s work in this area (expressing our “eager desire”) by developing a few skills and sensibilities. I like to summarize these skills and sensibilities with six words.

 1. ***Open***: Generally, prophets are open to God’s speech. How can we hear if we are not listening? Part of this openness is a simple receptivity to God’s leading in our hearts. Yet often the development of the prophetic gifts requires a practice of literal, physical, periodic stillness and waiting on the Lord.

 2. ***Perceive***: We must also perceive the Spirit’s movements. We are aware, and then we notice. There is a thought, a feeling, an inclination that appears in our consciousness. We see an image. We hear a “voice.” Or there may be more. We may, like Ezekiel, be “taken away.” The practice of prophecy requires the prophet simply to admit what is perceived.

 3. ***Discern***: But is what we perceive of God or not? Perhaps what we perceive is only our own personal agenda (this happens). The gift of prophecy, like all gifts, is clarified in the midst of doctrinal, personal, and corporate discernment. “Do not quench the Spirit,” Paul urges the Thessalonian community. “Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all” (1 Thess. 5:19–21). Perhaps the simplest step of discernment is just to ask, “Does this sound like the God I know?”

 4. ***Consent***: It is one thing to hear from the Lord. It is another to consent to act or to deliver the word. It may be easier to follow Jonah’s example and flee or, like Ezekiel, to sit down in a funky depression (see Ezek. 3:14–19). But the prophet is one who is willing in the end to follow God’s lead. I find it helpful at this stage simply to state your intention: “OK, God, I will.”

 5. ***Act***: The natural step after consent is action. We deliver the word. We act the communication that needs to be acted. We contribute what needs to be contributed. Yes, a prophetic contribution may be as dangerous as confronting a leader with a divine warning. But we can just as easily receive a divine nudge to give a lonely brother or sister a hug. And who knows? The second may be as significant as the first.

 6. ***Consequences***: Then we live with the results. Our job is faithfulness. The results are God’s business. We feel it deeply when God shares his heart and permits us to share that with others. We may be praised. We may be persecuted. Our word may be completely ignored. Often prophets are given images and words for the body while others are given wisdom regarding how the images and words are to be applied to the body. Part of the ministry of prophecy is learning to “let go.”

So how do we make our “eager desire” to serve the body of Christ in love through prophecy practical?

Here is my suggestion. Just keep these six words present with you every morning, noon, and evening. Just look at them three times a day. Then wait. Ask yourself: Am I open? Have I perceived anything? What am I discerning about this matter I have perceived? Where is my consent? When/how should I act? What consequences am I facing? Tell the Lord that you are especially desiring the gift of prophecy.

Then see what happens.

Your assignment is simply to take my suggestion for five days (Monday through Friday). Along with taking my suggestion, you are also to write a brief journal entry each day documenting what you notice.

• You need not say something about all six words each day, but you should have said something about each of them by the end of the five days.

• The point is to notice how *you* interact with these six words. You may embody “openness” different than others. God’s voice might sound different for you than for others. It will take some sitting still and “being with” your feelings, thoughts, images, and such through the week to be able to articulate these matters. We don’t often talk about this stuff, but you can learn this kind of awareness if you practice. Just do the best you can.

• My hope is that somewhere through the week you are actually led to some prophetic action or to deliver some “word.” If this happens, please report what went on and reflect on your experience of prophetic contribution. If nothing happens, just say so and reflect on your experience in general. You will be evaluated not on whether you “receive” a prophecy but on the care you take in your own attention to the six words and how you interpret your experience in general.

• Conclude with any ideas, thoughts, lessons, or questions you have gained from this exercise regarding the meaning of the prophetic for personal or corporate Christian spiritual formation. Particularly attend to the role that prophecy may play in being formed together. In this final section you should incorporate material from this week’s resources and perhaps other weeks as well.

## 2. Fieldwork Assignment

Your fieldwork assignment is designed to help you gain something of an appreciative perception of Christian worship. You will invest into this kind of appreciation by visiting different worship services and making participant observation reports on those visits. For more information on participant observation research, see the article “Participation Observation as a Data Collection Method” by Barbara B. Kawulich (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/466/996>).

The idea is to gain experience at perceiving what community worship services might be like somewhere else. The steps of your assignment are as follows:

• First, locate and confirm a context or event where you can participate and observe worship services *cross-culturally*. You may choose a worship tradition different than what you are familiar with (liturgical, Pentecostal, Quaker, emerging, mainline, etc.). You may choose an experience of worship in a culture that is different than what you are familiar with (African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Russian, etc.)—by the way, you might be surprised how much you can observe and receive from a worship service even when you don’t understand the language. I am aware that perhaps a few of you might have difficulties locating such a context. Try your best and let’s work it out together if you need help. Yet in order to receive full credit for this assignment, you must choose contexts that are as different as possible. (Choosing Presbyterian or Methodist when you are Lutheran is just not enough variety.)

• Second, do some homework and prepare in advance for your visit. Check the congregation’s website. Look up the history of the denomination. If you are really ambitious, you might want to arrange for an interview or two. Then, write yourself an outline of what you intend to observe, to “look for” in this cross-cultural worship experience. This outline may differ somewhat with each group you visit. Yet as an exploration of *worship* you will want to observe the key structural, interpersonal, and spiritual characteristics of worship as appropriate to this particular context. To what forms, what rites, what persons, what moods, what images or sounds will you attend? You may or may not be able to take notes during the actual experience, but having an outline in advance will help you to be aware as you enter the experience.

• Third, visit and experience. There is always a bit of a tension between participation and observation. On the one hand, it is nice to just let go and encounter it all. On the other, this *is* an assignment, and you will need to make a report in the end. I imagine you will attend the service with Kawulich’s stance of *observer as participant*.You will join in and receive from this service, but you will join the gathering primarily as an observer.

• Finally, write a report of the experience. Your report should include the date, time, and location of the event. It should also summarize your preparatory homework and provide the outline that guided your observation. The report should document both what you did and what went on at this occasion. Briefly describe the venue. Describe sights, sounds, events, actions, and so on as appropriate to the event. You do not have to give me a minute-by-minute description; just present the event clearly, particularly as it relates to the characteristics you intended to observe. Also, as a report of an *appreciative* perception of worship formation, you should identify where you sensed the presence of God in the corporate gathering most. The final portion of this report should include an *integrative summary*.Draw from your readings, lectures, wiki resources, personal experience of the event, and so on, evaluating your experience as an experience of formation together.

# Chapter 9: Formed in Thinking, Feeling, and Acting

## 1. Self-Examination

### Introduction

God longs for our growth in Christian maturity. Ultimately God’s plan is to make “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). We set our eyes on things like loving God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37–38), putting off vice and putting on virtue (Col. 3:5–14), or becoming holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16).

But if these goals seem too unreachable, God—who longs for our growth in Christian maturity (did you hear me tell you this?)—reveals another aim that helps us take real and realistic steps toward the ultimate goals. That aim is *increase*. Just listen:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.(2 Cor. 3:18)

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control. . . . For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.(2 Pet. 1:5–8)

On the one hand, our transformation is “from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” On the other hand, we are encouraged to “make every effort.” But what effort are we to make? How are we as Christians to foster our own growth in holiness and maturity in Christ? The Scriptures mention a variety of means through which the Spirit works to transform us. When we meditate on the Word of God and pray, God uses these activities to heal, to convict, and to transform us into the image of Christ. While the Scriptures do not prescribe any particular type of Bible study or prayer practice, we are encouraged to use these practices as appropriate to our personality and schedule.

Another practice that is at least hinted at in the Scriptures is the practice of prayerfully reviewing one’s life, perhaps at the end of a day, a week, or some other season of time. Some people call this practice *self-examination*, but truly we are just opening ourselves up to the God who examines us most deeply (Pss. 11:5; 26:2; Jer. 17:10). In different settings God seems to encourage us to examine ourselves to assess where we are at with the Lord (Lam. 3:40; 1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5). We are urged to be alert, aware of the thoughts and feelings that arise from God or arise from the evil one (Luke 12:35; 1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Pet. 5:8). More specifically, Psalm 139 provides a good example of one who calls upon God to “search me” and “lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

For a Christian this is a matter of seeing our lives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There is a *forward* look: What is the measure of increase that is appropriate for me at this time? What might it look like if I lived to the image of Christ in this particular area of life? This will be different for one person than another. Indeed some use a passage of Scripture to point to areas of focus (Rom. 12). Other people just reflect on one vice or virtue.

But there is also a *backward* look: How have I lived today? We look back at the videotape of our day (or week) to see how we have honored the Lord in the area of our increase. And then comes the key moment: the *adjustment*. Prayerful review is not about mere guilt and confession. The point is the fostering of increase, any little step of increase. So we look at the goal and at our lives and we contemplate adjustments, the way golfers might adjust their swing ever so slightly after attending to the details of a shot. In the spiritual life this pattern of forward looking (imagining what maturity might look like), backward looking (remembering the day or season), and adjustment (thinking and praying about what changes might be appropriate) is often used in association with the keeping of a journal or an ongoing relationship with a spiritual director.

A variety of techniques for this self-examination have been developed in the history of spirituality. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, suggests beginning by choosing particular sins to be addressed. After committing to obedience upon rising in the morning, you then review your practice regarding the sin in question at noon and in the evening. You mark your progress regarding the sin and notice the various factors that influence the power of that sin and victory over it. William Law, along with Jeremy Taylor, another Anglican, encourages a more general review of the day, asking for pardon for what went amiss in the day and giving thanks for what was good. Both emphasize the need for a deliberate review and attention to the “prevailing temper” surrounding the moments of victory or defeat. Puritan father Jonathan Edwards frequently emphasizes the use of particular passages of Scripture in self-examination. Using this technique, you select passages of Scripture that are applicable to your personal growth in holiness (for a list of Scriptures appropriate for this use, see Evan B. Howard, *Praying the Scriptures: A Field Guide for Your Spiritual Journey* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 136–37). Then, in the evening, you set aside a little time to prayerfully rehearse the day, reflecting on (1) the activity of your thoughts, feelings, words, and actions in light of (2) the sense of the passages of Scripture.

Prayerful review need not be a depressing habit of morbid introspection. Rather, it can be an honest and thankful review of the day, thanking God for victory and pressing on toward further growth in holiness. Remember, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

### The Assignment

In this assignment you are to experiment with prayerful review (or self-examination) by allowing God to search your life daily for one month. You are to choose either a particular vice or virtue to consider or a short passage of Scripture to serve as the focus of your review (for a list of sample Scriptures, see Howard, *Praying the Scriptures*, 136–37). You are to keep a journal identifying your forward looks, your backward looks, and your adjustments for each day. For this reason it might be helpful to choose an item to consider that has easily recognizable development (later you can explore the nuances of this practice). The purpose is not to describe the lurid details of your sinful habits. You don’t need to describe the sins, only your practice of examining the sins (if you are exploring a sin). At the end of the month, you are to write a summary of what you experienced and what you learned from your time with this exercise.

Later you will do this same assignment again, in light of some required reading and my comments on your exploration with this first exercise. After two experiments with this practice, I suspect that you will be able to adapt it to match the needs and situation of your own life.

## 2. Growing in Virtue: An Aggressive Plan

Growing in virtue is an important aim of the Christian life—so important that Scripture urges us to be aggressive about it. For example, 2 Peter exhorts us to “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:5–8). The attainment of virtue is a primary aim of the Christian life. John Cassian summarizes the monastic strategy that the devout Christian should, like a sagacious bee, collect the nectar of each virtue from him who holds it dearest, and store it in the cells of his heart. The literature of Christian spiritual formation repeatedly urges us to develop habits of obedience, penitence, compassion, simplicity, humility, and love.

But how are these to be developed? How is this “every effort” conducted? Most importantly, our life is transformed by the grace of God’s Spirit. But it is also nurtured by our own efforts, by “every effort.” How? By the intentional use of means. Dutch Reformed pastor Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) speaks of the means to attain the true purpose of life (which is to glorify God with our lives). These means include spiritual activities (like Scripture reading and prayer), the duties of our ordinary lives, and special charitable efforts. Benedict of Nursia (480–547), author of the well-known *Rule of Saint Benedict*, speaks of the “tools of good works” and lists over seventy habits that foster godliness of life. Devotional classics such as *The Imitation of Christ* or *The Practice of Piety* describe various means by which virtues might be fostered. These strategies often include, for example, the use of imagination (meditating on life after death, picturing ourselves before God, and desiring those virtues that would please God), the use of relationships (submitting ourselves to another by giving an account of our progress in virtue on a regular basis), the use of actions (reading and reflecting on particular passages of Scripture or regularly receiving the Sacrament), or the use of repetition (fostering compassion by repeating a loving phrase in our heart each time we meet someone). These are just a few ideas. The possibilities are endless.

So, after you identify a virtue to work on and a strategy of means to employ, go to work. Allow your faith in God’s plan and Spirit to work its way out in your own life practice of love for God and others.

After a time of applying your strategy, pay attention and notice what the Spirit of God (and your spirit) is doing. You may perceive a change. Either all at once or over time, a new habit emerges, and you increase in virtue. Or you see that you are making a bit of progress and need to press in even more. You may also perceive that an adjustment is needed in your strategy. Perhaps counting compassionate acts is not really getting at the internal root of your need for compassion and you need to foster some way (perhaps a scheme of meditation) of prayerfully working on the patterns of your heart and mind. Or you simply realize that this is getting nowhere, and it is time just to drop your strategy and plan entirely. It also might happen that over time you “hit the wall.” It may not be just that nothing is happening but that God is taking you somewhere else and perhaps deeper through this experiment. It is not just a matter of revising or quitting a strategy. It is that this effort is doing something different inside you, and you need to pay careful attention to this new work of the Spirit. When you do this, new (and perhaps unconsidered) virtues will arise.

Do you want to be effective and productive in your knowledge of Jesus Christ? I suggest making, by God’s grace, some effort. God has given us means by which we can make an aggressive plan for growth in virtue. Who knows what might happen if we act?

Your assignment will be simply to follow the instructions below:

*• Select*. First, select a virtue to foster.

*• Prepare*. Next, design a plan to nurture this virtue. Passages of Scripture, sections of monastic rules, models of saints’ lives (old and new), and your own independent explorations (just type “Christian virtues” or “monastic virtues” in a search engine and see what you find) will all come in handy as you design your plan. Think of employing relationships, repetition, imagination, actions, and so on.

*• Participate*. Carry out your plan for two weeks. A proper experiment should really last longer, but this is a class. Watch what happens and see if you can notice a need (at this early point) for further aggression or adjustment or if you are hitting the wall.

*• Report*. Finally, write a report summarizing what you did for each of the above steps, what you experienced in this experiment, and how this practice is relevant to your education in Christian spiritual formation. Draw from our readings from the week and the course and evaluate the practice of aggressive virtue formation for today.

## 3. My Talking Back Journal: Responding to Unwelcome Voices

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. . . . The tempter came and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:1, 3–4)

Sometimes we are assailed by unwelcome voices. Voices from our past. Voices from our culture. The voices of our dysfunctional habits. Voices from the devil. Jesus responded to the subtle lies that tempted him away from true life by talking back—and talking back with Scripture. We can find in this practice of Jesus Christ, as many others have found throughout Christian history, a model for our own lives.

Fourth-century monastic and spiritual writer Evagrius of Pontus developed a handbook for just such occasions. He states, “Now the words that are required for speaking against our enemies cannot be found quickly in the hour of conflict, because they are scattered throughout the Scriptures and so are difficult to find. We have, therefore, carefully selected words from the Holy Scriptures, so that we may equip ourselves with them.” There is no doubt that Evagrius’s selection emerged from his own personal struggles and his ministry of hearing others’ struggles.

Why not try your own Talking Back journal? The practice of talking back requires four simple steps.

 1. *Identify an unwelcome voice*. There are some unpleasant voices that need to be explored, understood, and even welcomed. There are others that should be refuted as obstacles to the knowledge and love of God. The point at this stage is to notice and recognize them as such. Sometimes you will be able to distinguish a clear source of the voice. Sometimes you will only be able to identify *that* this voice—when it arises—is unwelcome.

 2. *Name the lie*. It is one thing to recognize the voice of the evil one. It is another to discern the lie that is being promoted through this voice. Here you must look at what arises in the mind to see what this voice is trying to accomplish.

 3. *Find the biblical response*. Once you’ve recognized and named the lie, you must search the Scriptures for an appropriate response. Some Scripture passages serve to strengthen motivation. Some speak directly against particular lies. Others draw us to God. See if you can find the right Scripture that will best serve God’s work in you whenever you face this particular unwelcome voice again. Then write it down in your journal. Better yet, write it *and* memorize it. Now you are ready to fight.

 4. *Talk back*. Next time that voice assails you, reach for your new sword. Recognize the unwelcome voice. Consciously name that lie. Turn to your biblical response and proclaim it with all the courage you’ve got. “Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan!” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him” (Matt. 4:10–11).

Your assignment is simply to follow the instructions above and “talk back” for a week. You will need to:

*• Select*. Identify the unwelcome voice that you intend to address in this particular assignment. Make sure and pick a voice that you hear frequently, even several times a day, so that you are bound to encounter it in the course of this assignment.

*• Prepare*. Spend time reflecting until you perceive a lie that dwells beneath the voice. Then dig around in Scripture until you discover the truth and the sources of a response or responses. You may wish to do a bit of background homework in Evagrius’s *Talking Back* (*Antirrhetikos*): *A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons.*

*• Participate*. Write your response(s) down. Perhaps memorize it. Then use it for a week and watch what happens. You may need to create “remembering” aids so that you remember to talk back when the situation arises. Reviewing periodically during the day will help. Over time you will remember more readily, but for the sake of this assignment you must be very intentional right away. You might want to make adjustments after a few days.

*• Report*. Finally, write a report of your experience. State the reasons for your choices of voices and Scriptures. Describe the experience of “talking back” itself. What did you do and how did it go? Did the voice simply go silent and that was the end of the assignment? Finally, reflect on this experience as a practice in Christian spiritual formation. Draw from your resources for the week and in the course as a whole. How might you evaluate the practice of “talking back” as a vehicle for fostering Christian spiritual formation in the lives of individuals and communities?

# Chapter 11: Discerning Formation

## 1. God Hunt (and Your God Hunt Journal)

I learned about the God Hunt from *Chapel of the Air*, a radio show led by David and Karen Mains that I used to enjoy long ago. Ultimately Karen wrote a book (and a blog post: <http://kmains.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2012-01-01T00:00:00-07:00&updated-max=2013-01-01T00:00:00-07:00&max-results=50>) about it. She writes, “A God Hunt begins when you teach yourself to look for God’s hand at work in the everyday occurrences of your life.” Her blog periodically recounts “God Hunt Sightings.” My point is this: we move from contemplative seeing and listening to prayerful discernment when we positively identify our sightings, or hearings, as *God* noticings. This is when we say with Simeon, “You may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:29–30, a passage, by the way, that is regularly read at night prayer).

So here is the assignment. Take five minutes each day (or as best you can) and review your day. This exercise is usually done at night, just before bed, but a few people find that they can do it better at some other time. Then ask yourself one single question: Where did I notice God today? This is not a self-examination exercise, where you “rummage for God” by reviewing your feelings. It is a more general review of any signs of the presence or activity of God anywhere—yes, in your feelings, but also perhaps in nature, another person, or a passage of Scripture. Just look back and identify anywhere that you can say, “That was God.” Then briefly record it in a journal.

And here is the point: you are not to fuss about times or events that you thought MIGHT be from God. Just note those moments where you can pretty confidently say, “Yes, *that was* God.” If, after five minutes of reflection, you haven’t noticed anything for that day, fine. Just leave that day blank or write down “nothing today.”

My conviction is that this is the best way to learn discernment. After a few years of doing this for five minutes every day, your sense of discernment will have improved dramatically.

Do this every day (or as best you can) and keep a journal. By the end of our first week you should have submitted a first sample of your God Hunt noticings. I will share a few of these here and there, revising when necessary in order to honor confidentiality. Then later in the course you will submit a final God Hunt journal as a way of summarizing your experience in this class.

## 2. Discernment Virtues Reflection

Now is the time to think of yourself as a discerner. Remember, quality discernment is not so much the fruit of good discernment *process* as it is the fruit of good *discerners*. This is a matter of cultivating valuable discernment virtues over a long time. And to become good discerners, we must make a commitment to foster virtues such as freedom in faith, obedience, shared concerns with God, listening, humility, prayer, wisdom, love, and others as we mature in Christ.

So now is the time to begin examining yourself as a discerner and to review your own strengths and weaknesses with regard to discernment virtues. Examine the list of virtues found in *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* (p. 218; for more detail, see *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, pp. 384–85). As you look at this list (or others) and think of your own discernment practice, ask: Which are my strongest virtues? Which are my weakest? How might my strengths and weaknesses affect my discernment practice either in the past or in the present? What should I do to address these strengths and weaknesses in order to improve my discernment in the future?

Your assignment is simply to write your own reflections regarding these questions. Draw from your resources for the week and in the course more generally. How might fostering particular discernment virtues also foster your formation into discernment generally (and into intimacy and conformity with the gospel of Christ)?

## 3. Discernment Conversation Exercise

This exercise is designed to move you ever so slightly from exploring discernment personally to helping others discern. And the exercise is simply this: have a conversation with someone (an individual or a group) about a discernment that they have made or are making. It doesn’t matter what type of discernment it is. They may have had a crazy dream and want to know if it is from God. They may be making a decision. It’s all OK. Furthermore (and this is really important), you don’t need to do any spiritual direction or helping or anything. Just spend some time talking and listening to someone about their discernment. That’s it.

Then, when the conversation is over, write up a small summary of the event and what you learned. See if you can integrate any of the insights you have had in the class so far (texts, videos, discussions, etc.) into your summary. See if you can summarize how you see the place of discernment fitting into the Christian life generally and the task of formation more specifically.

# Chapter 12: The Ministry of Christian Spiritual Formation

## 1. Rule Prologue

This assignment is designed to provide you with the opportunity to summarize your preparation work toward writing a rule of life. You will do this in the form of writing your own rule prologue,much as the *Rule of Saint Benedict* begins with a prologue. You may have seen the “Writing a Rule of Life: The Preliminary Work” video lecture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH3FP6TdvT4>), which provides you with a general overview of the purpose and process of writing a rule prologue, and you have read the prologue in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. Now is the time to put your own life on paper. In this prologue you will summarize the following:

*• General vision*. What is the gospel about? Why are we on earth? What does God want of us? How does this relate to my own life? In the “How does it relate to my own life?” section you should include your reflections on course material or other appropriate resources on the nature and function of a rule of life.

• *Particular vision*.

—What are the *values* that characterize my life? What is my own particular “charism”?

—What are my current *circumstances* in life? What can and cannot be changed? What are the “givens” of my context in this next season of life?

—What is my *cutting edge*?Where is God taking me? What has God been speaking to me lately? Where am I being led?

Note: A rule prologue should not be a brief story of your life. Neither should it be simply a theological treatise on the Christian life. A rule prologue is meant to put the two together. It ought to be integrative. Consequently, in this assignment I expect to see theological (historical, biblical, etc.) reflection, personal evaluation, and concrete links between the two. The point is to explore this particular avenue of Christian spiritual formation—how our theology becomes our life lived out.

## 2. Rule of Life

This assignment involves writing (or revising) a rule of life, demonstrating integration of course materials into both the reasoning and the rule itself. The aim of this assignment is to enable students to envision, and even to plan, what a life of Christian spiritual formation might look like. You have explored both historical and contemporary rules of life. You may have seen the “Writing a Rule of Life: The Principle Work” video guide (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAdBO-SrMRo>) to writing the main section of a rule. Your assignment is to write that rule in light of the vision, circumstances, values, and cutting edge expressed in your rule prologue. (Note: you may include your rule prologue for the sake of context, but I will only be grading the rule itself.) You should address in this rule at least the following:

• Your *rhythms* of life. How do you intend to make use of your time? Say something about your seasons, your schedules, and the different “types” of days you expect to encounter. What are the basic elements of your use of time (e.g., prayer, work, community, study, ministry, and so on), and how do you imagine these being allocated in the various kinds of times in your seminary career?

• The *ordinary* things of life. How do you intend to live your ordinary activities? Say something about how you plan to handle money and possessions, food and drink, sleep, entertainment, travel, your key relationships, your guests, and so on.

• The *inner* things of your life. What attitudes do you wish to pursue? What vices do you wish to battle? Are there inner healings or equippings ahead for your upcoming season of life? What do you see as you look forward into your relationship with God?

• Interaction with *other* rules and religious forms of life both old and new. This does not mean that I want you to paint your life as a nun or monk. I am aware that the religious life (or even a semireligious life) is its own calling. Nonetheless, I would like for you to reflect on your life in dialogue with the material presented in class on monastic rules of life. If you do not feel called to any of this, explain why and do so in dialogue with the assigned (or unassigned) resources for the class.

Depending on your situation, one of these categories may need more attention than another. Just do what needs to be done.