
RENOVATION OF THE HEART



PUTTING ON THE CHARACTER
OF CHRIST

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY*

DALLAS WILLARD

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To L. Duane Willard,
who was big when I was small
and always made a place for me,
and whom I dearly love and treasure

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PRELUDE

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never again be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

JESUS OF NAZARETH (JOHN 4:14, PAR)

When we open ourselves to the writings of the New Testament, when we absorb our minds and hearts in one of the Gospels, for example, or in letters such as Ephesians or 1 Peter, the overwhelming impression that comes upon us is that we are looking into another world and another life.

It is a divine world and a divine life. It is life in the “kingdom of the heavens.” Yet it is a world and a life that ordinary people have entered and are entering even now. It is a world that seems open to us and beckons us to enter. We feel its call.

The amazing promises to those who give their life to this new world through their confidence in Jesus leap out at us from the page.

For example, we read Jesus’ own words, that those who give themselves to him will receive a “living water,” the Spirit of God Himself, that will keep them from ever again being thirsty—being driven and ruled by unsatisfied desires—and that this “water” will become a well or spring of such water “gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14, PAR). Indeed, it will even become “rivers of living water” flowing from the center of the believer’s life to a thirsty world (John 7:38).

Or we read Paul’s prayer that believers would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that they may be filled with all the fullness of God . . . by the power at work within us, that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:19-20, PAR).

Or Peter’s words about how those who love and trust Jesus “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8, NRSV), with “genuine mutual love” pouring from their hearts (1:22), ridding themselves of “all malice, and

all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander” (2:1, NRSV), silencing scoffers at the Way of Christ by simply doing what is right (2:15), and casting all their anxieties upon God because he cares for us (5:7).

The vision is clear, and no one open to it can mistake what it means. But while all is clear and desirable, we must admit that, in many historical periods as well as today, Christians generally only find their way into this divine life slowly and with great difficulty, if at all.

I believe one reason why so many people do in fact *fail* to immerse themselves in the words of the New Testament, and neglect or even avoid them, is that the life they see there is so unlike what they know from their own experience. This is true even though they may be quite faithful to their church in the ways prescribed and really do have Jesus Christ as their only hope. Therefore the clear New Testament presentation of the life we are unmistakably offered in Christ only discourages them or makes them hopeless.

Why should this be so? Surely the life God holds out to us in Jesus was not meant to be an unsolvable puzzle! And that only leaves us with the explanation that, for all our good intentions and strenuous methods, *we do not approach and receive that life in the right way*. We do not comprehend and convey the wisdom of Jesus and the Bible about the human being and about its redemption by grace from the destructive powers that have come to occupy it in all of its primary dimensions.

It really isn't true that where there is a will there is automatically a way, though of course will is crucial. There is also needed an understanding of exactly what needs to be done and how it can be accomplished: of the instruments for the realization of that life and the order of their use.

Spiritual formation in Christ is an orderly process. Although God can triumph in disorder, that is not his choice. And instead of focusing upon what God *can* do, we must humble ourselves to accept the ways he *has chosen* to work with us. These are clearly laid out in the Bible, and especially in the words and person of Jesus.

He invites us to leave our burdensome ways of heavy labor—especially the “religious” ones—and step into the yoke of training with him. This is a way of gentleness and lowliness, a way of soul rest. It is a way of inner transformation that proves pulling his load and carrying his burden *with him* to be a life that is easy and light (Matthew 11:28-30). The perceived distance and difficulty of entering fully into the divine world and its life is due entirely to *our failure to understand that “the way in” is the way of pervasive inner transformation and to our failure to take the small steps that quietly and certainly lead to it*.

This is a hopeful, life-saving insight. For the individual it means that all of the hindrances to our putting off the old person and putting on the new

one *can be removed or mastered*. And that will enable us to walk increasingly in the wholeness, holiness, and power of the kingdom of the heavens. No one need live in spiritual and personal defeat. A life of victory over sin and circumstance is accessible to all.

For our Christian groups and their leaders, it means that there is a simple, straightforward way in which congregations of Jesus' people can, without exception, fulfill his call to be an *ecclesia*, his "called out" ones: a touch point between heaven and earth, where the healing of the Cross and the Resurrection can save the lost and grow the saved into the fullness of human beings in Christ. No special facilities, programs, talents, or techniques are required. *It doesn't even require a budget*. Just faithfulness to the process of spiritual formation in Christlikeness exposed in the Scriptures and in the lives of his "peculiar people" through the ages (Titus 2:14, KJV).

INTRODUCING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The “Beyond Within” and The Way of Jesus

*Watch over your heart with all diligence,
for from it flow the springs of life.*

PROVERBS 4:23

We live from our heart. The part of us that drives and organizes our life is not the physical. This remains true even if we deny it. You have a spirit within you and it has been formed. It has taken on a specific character. I have a spirit and it has been formed. This is true of everyone.

The human spirit is an inescapable, fundamental aspect of every human being; and it takes on whichever character it has from the experiences and the choices that we have lived through or made in our past. That is what it means for it to be “formed.”

Our life and how we find the world now and in the future is, almost totally, a simple result of what we have become in the depths of our being—in our spirit, will, or heart. From there we see our world and interpret reality. From there we make our choices, break forth into action, try to change our world. We live from our depths—most of which we do not understand.

“Do you mean,” some will say, “that the individual and collective disasters that fill the human scene are not imposed upon us from without? That they do not just *happen* to us?”

Yes. That is what I mean. In today’s world, famine, war, and epidemic are almost totally the outcome of human choices, which are expressions of the human spirit. Though various qualifications and explanations are appropriate, that is in general true.

Individual disasters, too, very largely follow upon human choices, our own or those of others. And whether or not they do in a particular case, the situations in which we find ourselves are never as important as our responses to them, which come from our “spiritual” side. A carefully cultivated heart will, assisted by the grace of God, foresee, forestall, or transform most of the painful situations before which others stand like helpless children saying “Why?”

The Bible is full of wisdom on these matters. That is why we call major books of the Old Testament “wisdom literature.” Jesus sums it all up in his teachings. He is the power and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). For example, he tells us, “Seek first the kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all else shall be provided to you” (Matthew 6:33, PAR). And “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house upon rock. The rain fell and the streams rose and the winds blew and beat upon the house. But it did not collapse, for it was built on rock” (Matthew 7:24-25, PAR).

Accordingly, the greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is *renovation of our heart*. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed.

Indeed, the only hope of humanity lies in the fact that, as our spiritual dimension has been *formed*, so it also can be *transformed*. Now and throughout the ages this has been acknowledged by everyone who has thought deeply about our condition—from Moses, Solomon, Socrates, and Spinoza, to Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Oprah, and current feminists and environmentalists. We, very rightly, continually preach this possibility and necessity from our pulpits. Disagreements have only to do with *what* in our spirit needs to be changed and *how* that change can be brought about.

❧ THE REVOLUTION OF JESUS ❧

AND ON THESE TWO points lies the inescapable relevance of Jesus to human life. About two thousand years ago he gathered his little group of friends and trainees on the Galilean hillsides and sent them out to “teach all nations”—that is, to make students (apprentices) to him from all ethnic groups. His objective is eventually to bring all of human life on earth under the direction of his wisdom, goodness, and power, as part of God’s eternal plan for the universe.

We must make no mistake about it. In thus sending out his trainees, he set afoot a *perpetual world revolution*: one that is still in process and will continue until God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. As this revolution culminates, all the forces of evil known to mankind will be defeated and

the goodness of God will be known, accepted, and joyously conformed to in every aspect of human life.¹ He has chosen to accomplish this with and, in part, through his students.

It is even now true, as angelic seraphim proclaimed to Isaiah in his vision, that “the whole earth is full of His glory,” the glory of the holy Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6:3). But the day is yet to come when “the earth will be filled with the *knowledge* of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14, emphasis added).

The revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit. It did not and does not proceed by means of the formation of social institutions and laws, the outer forms of our existence, intending that these would then impose a good order of life upon people who come under their power. Rather, his is a revolution of *character*, which proceeds by changing people from the inside through ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another. It is one that changes their ideas, beliefs, feelings, and habits of choice, as well as their bodily tendencies and social relations. It penetrates to the deepest layers of their soul. External, social arrangements may be useful to this end, but they are not the end, nor are they a fundamental part of the means.

On the other hand, from those divinely renovated depths of the person, social structures will naturally be transformed so that “justice roll[s] down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Such streams *cannot* flow through corrupted souls. Conversely, a renovated “within” will not cooperate with public streams of unrighteousness. It will block them—or die trying. It is the only thing that can do so.

T. S. Eliot once described the current human endeavor as that of finding a system of order so perfect that we will not have to be good. The Way of Jesus tells us, by contrast, that any number of systems—not all, to be sure—will work well if we are genuinely good. And we are then free to seek the better and the best.

This impotence of “systems” is a main reason why Jesus did not send his students out to start governments or even churches as we know them today, which always strongly convey some elements of a human system. They were, instead, to establish beachheads of his person, word, and power in the midst of a failing and futile humanity. They were to bring the presence of the kingdom and its King into every corner of human life simply by fully living in the kingdom with him.

Those who received him as their living Lord and constant instructor would be “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (Colossians 3:12, NRSV) and would learn how to “be blameless and harmless, children of God, faultless in the midst of a twisted and misguided generation, from within which they shine

as lights in the world, lifting up a word of life” (Philippians 2:15-16, PAR).

Churches—thinking now of local assemblies of such people—would naturally be the result. Churches are not the kingdom of God, but are primary and inevitable expressions, outposts, and instrumentalities of the presence of the kingdom among us. They are “societies” of Jesus, springing up in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the furthest points on earth (Acts 1:8), as the reality of Christ is brought to bear on ordinary human life. This is an ongoing process, not yet completed today: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come” (Matthew 24:14).

❧ THE HUMAN “WITHIN” ❧

THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF his kingdom, Jesus answers the deepest needs of human personality for righteousness, provision, and purpose. If we set him aside, we still face the unavoidable questions: What makes our lives go as they do? What could make them go as they ought? Inability to find adequate answers leaves us rudderless in the flood of events around us and at the mercy of whatever ideas and forces come to bear upon us. And that, basically, is the human situation. You can see it day by day all around you.

However, thoughtful people through the ages have tried to answer these questions, and they have with one accord found, as already stated, that what matters most for how life goes and ought to go is what we are on the “inside.” Things good and bad will happen to us, of course. But what our life amounts to, at least for those who reach full age, is largely, if not entirely, a matter of what we become within. This “within” is the arena of spiritual formation and, later, transformation.

Within are our thoughts, feelings, intentions—and their deeper sources, whatever those may be. The life we live out in our moments, hours, days, and years wells up from a hidden depth. What is in our “heart” matters more than anything else for who we become and what becomes of us. “You’re here in my arms,” the old song says, “but where is your heart?” That is what really matters, not just for individual relationships, but also for life as a whole.

The author Oscar Wilde once remarked that by the age of forty everyone has the face they deserve. This is a truly profound, if painful, truth. But it really applies to the “within” expressed by the face—to the heart and also the soul, and not to the face merely as one surface area of the body. Otherwise it would not much matter.

Now, right on the conscious surface of our “world within” lie some of our thoughts, feelings, intentions, and plans. These are the ones we are aware of. They may be fairly obvious to others as well as to ourselves. In terms of

them we consciously approach our world and our actions within it.

But these surface aspects are also a good indication of the general nature of the unconscious “spiritual depth within,” of what sorts of things make it up. But the thoughts, feelings, and intentions we are aware of are, after all, only a small part of the ones that are really there in our depths; and they often are not the ones most revealing of who we actually are and why we do what we do.

What we really think, how we really feel, and what we really would do in circumstances foreseen and unforeseen may be totally unknown to ourselves or to others familiar with us. We may pass one another—even pass ourselves, if you can imagine that—like “ships in the night.” We do it all the time.

The hidden dimension of each human life is not visible to others, nor is it fully graspable even by ourselves. We usually know very little about the things that move in our own soul, the deepest level of our life, or what is driving it. Our “within” is astonishingly complex and subtle—even devious. It takes on a life of its own. Only God knows our depths, who we are, and what we would do.

Thus the psalmist cries out for God’s help in dealing with—himself! “Search me, O God.” “Let the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you.” “Renew in me a right spirit.” At a certain point my own “beyond that is within” (my heart) has been formed and I am then at its mercy. Only God can save me.

❧ THE “SPIRITUAL” ASPECT OF MAN ❧

I HAVE ALREADY SPOKEN of the hidden world of the self as our *spiritual* side. The language of “spiritual,” “spirit,” and “spirituality” has become increasingly common today, and it cannot be avoided. But it is often unclear in meaning, and this can be dangerous. It can lead us down paths of confusion and destruction. “Spiritual” is not automatically “good.” We must be very careful with this language. Nevertheless, in the sense of “spiritual,” which means only “nonphysical,” the hidden or inner world of the human self is indeed spiritual.

Interestingly, for all our fine advances in scientific knowledge, the proud product of human thought, they tell us *nothing* about the inner life of the human being. The same is true for all the fields of study that try to base themselves upon such knowledge. At most the sciences can indicate some fascinating and important correlations between our inner life and events in the physical and social world running alongside it.

This is because the subject matter of the sciences is, precisely, the outer, physical, measurable, publicly perceptible world: roughly, the world of “the five senses,” as we often say. In its nature the physical is a totally different

type of reality from the spiritual side of the human being, which remains “hidden” in a way the physical world never can be. This is by now an old story, but often repressed or forgotten. Science misses the heart.

Paradoxically, the “spiritual” side of us—though it is not perceivable by the senses and though we can never fully grasp it in any way—is never entirely out of our mind. It always stands in the margin of our consciousness, if not the center. It is really the only thing that is celebrated (or degraded) in the arts, in biography and history, and in most of our popular writings in magazines and the like. Their emphasis is continually upon what people think and feel, on what they might or should do and why, and on what kind of character they have. Human beings “gossip” about nothing else, and now much of what is called “news” is really just gossip.

But that only emphasizes how we are constantly aware of the spiritual side of life. We know immediately that it is what really matters. We pay more attention to it—in ourselves and others—than to anything else. And there is a deep, if often perverted, wisdom in this. For *the spiritual simply is our life*, no matter what grand theories we may hold or what we may say when trying to be “intellectual,” “well informed,” and “up-to-date.”

This insuppressible interest explains why, in recent decades and in many ways, the spiritual, in the inclusive human sense, has repeatedly thrust itself to the forefront of our awareness. From the cultural and artistic uprisings of the sixties to the environmentalisms and countless “spiritualities” of the nineties—from pop-culture new age to the postmodernisms of the academy—the swelling protest from the human depths has recently been shouting at us that the physical and public side of the human universe cannot sustain our existence. “Man shall not live by bread alone.” We would do well to listen, no matter who is talking.

Those are, of course, words from Jesus. And his way is truly the way of the heart, or spirit. If we would walk with him, we must walk with him at that interior level. There are very few who really do not understand this about him. He saves us by realistic restoration of our heart to God and then by dwelling there with his Father through the distinctively divine Spirit. The heart thus renovated and inhabited is the only real hope of humanity on earth.

The statement that “Man shall not live by bread alone” was adapted by Jesus from the history of the Jewish experience with God. Jesus was, among other things, the most profound and powerful expression of that experience. But it was also given new and profound meaning by his death and resurrection. Through them he established a radically new order of life on earth within the kingdom of God. It was free of any specific ethnic or cultural form. All human beings can now live the life of the renovated heart by nourishing ourselves constantly on his personal presence—now here in our

world, beyond his death and ours.

Contrary to what many say today, our deliverance (salvation) does not arise out of the murky human depths from which our natural life springs—whether that includes an “oversoul” or “collective unconsciousness” or not. But Jesus moves into and through those very depths, whatever they contain, to bring us home to God. There, too, he is Master. The spiritual renovation and the “spirituality” that comes from Jesus is nothing less than an invasion of natural human reality by a supernatural life “from above.”

✧ SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS *MERELY HUMAN* ✧

IN SHARP CONTRAST, SPIRITUALITY and spiritual formation are often understood today as entirely human matters. The “beyond that is within” is thought to be a human dimension or power that, if we only manage it rightly, will transform our life into divine life. Or at least it will deliver us from the chaos and brokenness of human existence—at a minimum, perhaps, from life-destroying addictions, such as to alcohol, work, sex, drugs, or violence. We are engulfed by books, programs, and seminars that rest upon this assumption.

Thus, for example, one now hears “spirituality” described as “our relationship to whatever is most important in our life.” Or perhaps as “the process of becoming a positive and creative person.” These are words taken from contemporary writings, and they represent deep currents of human thought and culture.²

Certainly we do not intend to deride any good thing, and we are thankful for whatever truly helps human beings in their desperate life upon the earth. Nothing else would be compatible with the spirit of Jesus. The constant love of God is extended to every human being who ever lives, sometimes in places and postures that God himself would not prefer, but still with some good effect. But whether or not a spirituality adequate to human need and producing genuine renovation of the heart can be a matter of mere human abilities is a question of fact. To be mistaken about it will have consequences of the most serious nature.

In any case, we may be sure of this: the formation and, later, transformation of the inner life of man, from which our outer existence flows, is an inescapable human problem. *Spiritual formation, without regard to any specifically religious context or tradition, is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite “form” or character.* It is a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons have had a spiritual formation. Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed. Period.

We each become a certain kind of person in the depths of our being,

gaining a specific type of character. And that is the outcome of a process of spiritual formation as understood in general human terms that apply to everyone, whether they want it or not. Fortunate or blessed are those who are able to find or are given a path of life that will form their spirit and inner world in a way that is truly strong and good and directed Godward.

The shaping and reshaping of the inner life is, accordingly, a problem that has been around as long as humanity itself; and the earliest records of human thought bear eloquent witness to the human struggle to solve it³—but with very limited success, one would have to say.

True, some points in human history have shown more success in the elevation of the human spirit than others. But the low points far exceed the high points, and the average is discouragingly low. Societies the world around are currently in desperate straits trying to produce people who are merely capable of coping with their life on earth in a nondestructive manner. This is as true of North America and Europe as it is of the rest of the world, though the struggle takes superficially different forms in various areas. In spiritual matters there really is no “Third World.” It’s all Third World.

❧ REACHING BEYOND THE MERELY HUMAN ❧

SO SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION, THE renovation of the human heart, is an incapable human problem with no human solution. We take no satisfaction in pointing this out. It is something that can be learned from a survey of world history, world cultures, and past and present efforts to deal with human life by religion, education, law, and medicine. And this observation unfortunately stands firm when we take into consideration the many techniques that are taught in the various psychologies and competing spiritualities of our own day.

Genuine transformation of the whole person into the goodness and power seen in Jesus and his “Abba” Father—the only transformation adequate to the human self—remains the necessary goal of human life. But it lies beyond the reach of programs of inner transformation that draw *merely* on the human spirit—even when the human spirit is itself treated as ultimately divine.

The reality of all this is currently veiled from view by the very low level of spiritual life seen in Christianity as now placed before the general public. That low level explains why there are at present so many psychologies and spiritualities contesting the field—often led or dominated by ex-Christians who have abandoned recognized forms of Christianity as hopeless or even harmful.

Recently, however, a widespread and intense interest in spiritual formation, under that very name, has arisen among many groups of Christians and

their leaders. Why is that? It is mainly due to a realization—confirmed now by many thorough and careful studies, as well as overwhelming anecdotal evidence—that, in its current and recent public forms, Christianity has not been imparting effectual answers to the vital questions of human existence. At least not to wide ranges of self-identifying Christians, and obviously not to nonChristians. And spiritual formation has now presented itself as a hopeful possibility for responding to the crying, unmet need of the human soul. The hope springs once again for a response to the need that is both deeply rooted in Christian traditions and powerfully relevant to circumstances of contemporary life.

🌿 GOD MOVES FORWARD 🌿

GOD PERIODICALLY MOVES UPON his people and in their surrounding culture to achieve his everlasting purposes for that tiny stretch of cosmic time we call “human history.” This usually happens in ways that no one but he could have planned or foreseen and in ways that lie far beyond our control or comprehension.

We discover, usually after the fact, that a pervasive and powerful shift has occurred. It may happen to the individual, to the group, or to an entire culture. Old ways of doing things cease to be effective, though they may have been very powerful in the past. There arises a very real danger that we will set ourselves in opposition to what God truly is doing now and aims to do in the future. Often we miss the opportunity to act with God in the now. We fail to find, quickly enough, new wineskins for the new wine.

Such a new move of God was what happened in the emergence of the Hebrew people from Egypt “when the time was right” and again in their entry into and emergence from Babylonian exile. Again, we see it in the emergence of a “Christian” people within Jewish culture, and then the emergence of a nonethnic “body of Christ” from the Jewish church.

Since then, the pervasive and powerful movement of God has happened again and again during the sojourn of Christ in his people on the earth: the overwhelming of classical paganism, the emergence of the monastic form of Christian devotion, the Cistercian, Franciscan, and Devotio Moderna transformations within monasticism, the Protestant Reformation, Pietism, Wesleyan and American revivalism, and many other such movements of less historical effect, such as the twentieth-century charismatic countercultural upsurges (“Jesus People,” and so on). The rise and outworkings of such movements are clearly the result of God’s hand in our midst.

And God is still moving. The quest for spiritual formation (really, as indicated, spiritual *transformation*) is in fact an age-old and worldwide one. It is

rooted in the deep personal and even biological need for goodness that haunts humanity. It has taken many forms and has now resurfaced at the beginning of the twenty-first century to meet our present situation. This is, I am sure, part of an incoming tide of God's life that would lift our lives today for our voyage into eternity. Our hearts cry out, "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart."

So this quest, currently so deeply felt, is at once new and very old, both very promising and full of danger, illuminative of our lacks and failures and bursting with grace, an expression of the eternal quest of God for man and of man's ineradicable need for God. This contemporary quest for spiritual formation is essential to the life of God in his people as they presently move toward the fulfillment of his purposes for today and beyond.

Viewed sociologically and historically, as well as spiritually, the new impulse is an aspect of the dissolution of Protestant denominationalism as we have known it and of the emergence of a new—but also an old—identity for Christians: crossing all denominational lines and national and natural boundaries.

It is now generally recognized that the question, "Am I a Christian?" can no longer be answered in any significant manner by citing denominational, ethnic, or national names or symbols. There are now 33,800 different Christian denominations on earth.⁴ Clearly, an adequate answer must go deeper than our religious associations. It must refer to what we are in our heart—before God, in the depths of our being, always the focal point of *Christian* spiritual formation.

Such an answer has always been required "before God." Who can deny it? But that has not always been recognized and given adequate emphasis among us—especially not in the recent past—although we are increasingly doing so today. This change is an extremely good thing and a highly promising departure from the recent past of Christians worldwide.

❧ DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION ❧

WE CAN SAY, IN a preliminary manner, that *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.*⁵ In what follows we must carefully examine what this means for today. But we can say at the outset that, in the degree to which spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.

Christian spiritual formation is focused entirely on Jesus. Its goal is an obedience or conformity to Christ that arises out of an inner transformation accomplished through purposive interaction with the grace of God in Christ.

Obedience is an essential outcome of Christian spiritual formation (John 13:34-35; 14:21).

External manifestation of “Christlikeness” is not, however, the focus of the process; and when it is made the main emphasis, the process will certainly be defeated, falling into deadening legalisms and pointless parochialism. That is what has happened so often in the past, and this fact is a major barrier to wholeheartedly embracing Christian spiritual formation in the present. We know now that peculiar modes of dress, behavior, and organization just are not the point.

“Externalism,” as we might call it, was even a danger in New Testament times. But “That Christ be formed within you,” is the eternal watchword of Christian spiritual formation (Galatians 4:19, PAR). This word is fortified by the deep moral and spiritual insight that, while “the letter of the law kills, the spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6, PAR).

To illustrate briefly, Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) refer to various wrong behaviors: acting out anger, looking to lust, heartless divorce, verbal manipulation, returning evil for evil, and so forth.⁶ But, as abundant experience teaches, to strive merely to *act* in conformity with his expressions of what living in the kingdom of God from the heart is like is to attempt the impossible. And it will also lead to doing things that are obviously wrong and even ridiculous—such as self-castration as a presumed act of devotion to Christ, which unfortunately has repeatedly occurred in Christian history.

The “outward” interpretation of spiritual formation, emphasizing specific *acts* as it does, will merely increase “the ‘righteousness’ of the scribe and Pharisee.” It will not, as we must, “go beyond it” (Matthew 5:20, PAR) to achieve genuine transformation of *who I am* through and through—Christ’s man or woman, living richly in his kingdom.

❧ A WAY OF GRACE AND REST ❧

THE INSTRUMENTALITIES OF *CHRISTIAN* spiritual formation therefore involve much more than human effort and actions under our control. Well-informed human effort certainly is indispensable, for spiritual formation is no passive process. But Christlikeness of the inner being is not a human attainment. It is, finally, a gift of grace.

Though we must act, the resources for spiritual formation extend far beyond the human. They come from the interactive presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who place their confidence in Christ. They also come from the spiritual treasures—people, events, traditions, teachings—stored in the body of Christ’s people on earth, past and present.

Therefore we must understand that spiritual formation is not only formation *of* the spirit or inner being of the individual, though that is both the process and the outcome. It is also formation *by* the Spirit of God and by the spiritual riches of Christ's continuing incarnation in his people—including, most prominently, the treasures of his written and spoken word and the amazing personalities of those in whom he has most fully lived.

Spiritual formation is, in practice, the way of rest for the weary and overloaded, of the easy yoke and the light burden (Matthew 11:28-30), of cleaning the inside of the cup and the dish (Matthew 23:26), of the good tree that cannot bear bad fruit (Luke 6:43). And it is the path along which God's commandments are found to be not "heavy," not "burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

It is the way of those learning as disciples or apprentices of Jesus "to do all things that I have commanded you," within the context of his "I have been given say over everything in heaven and earth" and "Look, I am with you every minute" (see Matthew 28:18,20).

But—I reemphasize, because it is so important—the primary "learning" here is *not* about how to act, just as the primary wrongness or problem in human life is not what we do. Often what human beings do is so horrible that we can be excused, perhaps, for thinking that all that matters is stopping it. But this is an evasion of the real horror: the heart from which the terrible actions come. In both cases, it is *who we are* in our thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and choices—in the inner life—that counts. Profound transformation there is the only thing that can definitively conquer outward evil.

It is very hard to keep this straight. Failure to do so is a primary cause of failure to grow spiritually. Love, we hear, is patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4). Then we mistakenly try to *be* loving by *acting* patiently and kindly—and quickly fail. We should always do the best we can in action, of course; but little progress is to be made in that arena until we advance in love itself—the genuine inner readiness and longing to secure the good of others. Until we make significant progress there, our patience and kindness will be shallow and short-lived at best.

It is love itself—not loving behavior, or even the wish or intent to love—that has the power to "always protect, always trust, always hope, put up with anything, and never quit" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8, PAR). Merely trying to act lovingly will lead to despair and to the defeat of love. It will make us angry and hopeless.

But taking love itself—God's kind of love—into the depths of our being through spiritual formation will, by contrast, enable us to act lovingly to an extent that will be surprising even to ourselves, at first. And this love will then become a constant source of joy and refreshment to ourselves and others. Indeed it will be, according to the promise, "a well of water springing up to

eternal life” (John 4:14)—not an additional burden to carry through life, as “acting lovingly” surely would be.

❧ THE PRESENT OPPORTUNITY ❧

IN RENEWING THE LANGUAGE and reality of “spiritual formation” in our time and in opening afresh the way to the reality of it, the Spirit of God now calls his people to live from an adequate basis for character transformation, resulting in obedience to and abundance in Christ. This really is something different. The present moment is not an occasion to keep on doing the same things Christians have been doing in the recent past—except now “really meaning it.” It is time to change our focus, individually and in our Christian groupings.

If we as Christ’s people genuinely enter Christ’s Way of the Heart, individuals will find a sure path toward becoming the persons they were meant to be: thoroughly good and godly persons, yet purged of arrogance, insensitivity, and self-sufficiency. Christian assemblies will become what they have been in many periods of the past and what the world desperately calls for today: incomparable schools of life—life that is eternal in quality now, as well as unending in quantity.

This is possible because the spirit and inner being of the human, as well as the process of its renovation in Christ, is an orderly realm where, even in the disorder of its brokenness, God has provided a methodical path of recovery. Grace does not rule out method, nor method grace. Grace thrives on method and method on grace.

Spiritual formation in Christ is therefore not a mysterious, irrational—possibly hysterical—process: something that strikes like lightening, whenever and wherever it will, if at all. Or something that is magically conferred upon us as we dwell in the midst of curious rituals and antique practices. Spiritual experiences (Paul on the Damascus road, and so on) do not constitute spiritual formation, though they could be a meaningful part thereof and sometimes are.

This, I freely admit, is contrary to a view of grace as passivity that is widely held now. But the God-ordained order of the soul under grace must be discovered, respected, and cooperated with, if its God-intended results for spiritual growth are to be attained.

Spiritual formation is something we human beings can and must undertake—as individuals and in fellowship with other apprentices of Jesus. While it is simultaneously a profound manifestation of God’s gracious action through his Word and Spirit, it is also something we are responsible for before God and can set about achieving in a sensible, systematic manner.

The aim of this book is, accordingly, intensely practical. It aims to help those who are “seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness” to find them and to fully live in them. It also hopes to be of help to leaders of groups that seriously intend to carry out all aspects of Christ’s Great Commission by training people to do all things he said (Matthew 28:18-20).

Finally, it offers itself to any seeking person—whether explicitly identified as Christian or not—as an avenue to the goodness in God, for which the heart by nature longs. It would be a guide for all who intensely desire to attain the inner life of Jesus Christ himself, allowing him to

Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.⁷

Matters for Thought and Discussion

1. How do you understand Jesus’ promise about the “water” he gives and about our never thirsting again (John 4:14)? What does it mean for you practically? For others you know?
2. Can you describe in some detail the spiritual (nonphysical) side of you? And how that side of you affects your actions and life? Try extending your description to the spiritual side of a saint (such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta) and of a committed terrorist.
3. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that Jesus and his apprentices intend perpetual world revolution through character transformation?
4. Can it be true that “spiritual” does not automatically mean “something good”?
5. Compare “spiritual formation” as a merely human reality and project with distinctively Christian spiritual formation.
6. What are some of the issues that have driven the recent widespread interest in spiritual formation, both in the broader society and among Christians?
7. What dangers lie in an “outward” or “external” interpretation of spiritual formation? How is this related to legalism?
8. Does the recent emergence of spiritual formation offer a genuinely new opportunity for advancing the cause of Christ and blessing human life in our time?