

Descriptors of “Biblical Spiritual Formation”

Preamble

God manifests His glory by the advancement of Christ’s kingdom in the world through the spiritual transformation of individuals and communities of faith to reflect the image of Christ. This work flows from the heart of God and is empowered by the Holy Spirit in the community of faith. We participate with resolute and biblically informed action.

1) The theology of spiritual formation emerges from the Trinitarian nature of God – relational, loving, gracious, mutually submissive, and unified in will.

Explanation: This is the cornerstone statement. Everything that follows regarding Spiritual Formation flows from who God is. The God who is there, revealed in Scripture, and who lived among us in Jesus Christ, exists as a loving community of grace in three persons. From eternity past to eternity future, Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to each other with grace, love, mutual submission, unity of heart, and by honoring their roles practicing functional submission - the Holy Spirit to the Son and the Father, and the Son to the Father. Marvelously, this Triune God has invited us, in relationship with himself, to participate in this culture of grace.

2) Spiritual formation is rooted in relationship with God and one another. Communities of grace define who we are and how we shall live in trust, love, grace, humility, dignity and justice. Communities of grace open the door to gaining permission to share the truth among fellow believers and the unbelieving world.

Explanation: Those who receive this invitation will incorporate in their relationships with God and others the principles of grace that characterize the life of the Trinity. Safe communities of grace will be both the byproduct of those who experience and live out these principles and the invitation for others to experience and live them out. The process of experiencing grace with God and others validates who I am, matures who I am becoming, and therefore is defining the way I should live.

3) Spiritual formation takes place by the direct work of the Holy Spirit, regenerating and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ as the Spirit indwells, fills, guides, gifts, and empowers people for life in the community of faith and in the world.

Explanation: The best place to start in defining and understanding biblical formation is with scripture passages about the Holy Spirit forming and transforming believers.¹ The Holy Spirit is at work to regenerate us and to progressively conform us to the image of Jesus Christ – reflecting purity, passion, and sacrifice, empowering us to live as salt and light in the world.² The Holy Spirit indwells and fills³ us as believers and communities of believers in order to guide us into all truth⁴, bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit in our lives⁵, and gifts us for ministry in the church and in the world.⁶

- 4) Spiritual formation is based upon the Bible as God’s reliable and authoritative revelation. The Bible, our primary source of truth, guides and informs the use of spiritual disciplines and models of spirituality as they have emerged worldwide and throughout time.

Explanation: The Bible is God’s special revelation so we need to rely on it and align with it as we study, practice, and teach spiritual formation⁷. The Scriptures are living and active in penetrating, exposing, and transforming our hearts and lives as the Holy Spirit brings it to bear upon us individually and together⁸. The Bible calls us to, and illustrates the use of, spiritual disciplines as invitations to grace and ways and means of living well in the kingdom and in the world⁹. The historical and contemporary models of spirituality from various traditions and ethnic contexts can be valuable sources for stimulating thought and progress in spiritual formation as they correspond to the teachings of Scripture.

- 5) Spiritual formation is a lifelong pursuit of being conformed to the image of Christ from the inside-out, and is not a matter of external activity alone.

Explanation: Spiritual formation involves a radical internal change in which the spiritual heart directs the transformation of the entire person to reflect Jesus Christ.¹⁰ This means developing congruency between inward transformation and external activity, so that the entire person is obedient to Jesus.¹¹ This kind of obedience intends to please God, not humans – Scripture extols effort but opposes forms of legalism that earn favor with

¹ Romans 8:26-29; 12:11-2

² Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19, Matthew 5:13,16

³ Ephesians 5:18

⁴ Romans 8:14; John 16:13

⁵ Galatians 5:22

⁶ 1Cor 12

⁷ Ezra 7:10; 2Tim 3:15-17

⁸ Hebrews 4:12-13

⁹ Joshua 1:8; Matthew 11:28-30

¹⁰ Matt 5:20; 15:18-20; Romans 6:17-19

¹¹ Gal 4:19; Rom 6:12-14; Eph 4:22-24

God.¹² Inside-out transformation is a life-long process, so that while the outer person decays, renewal of the inner person continues throughout one's lifetime.¹³ This life-long process requires tools and assistance in accomplishing holistic transformation into the image of Christ through every phase of life.

- 6) Spiritual formation is a continual process of transforming the whole person, including the healing of woundedness and rebellion, by the power of God, not to be confused with a mere technique or program.

Explanation: People have been created in the image and likeness of God. The Fall marred every part of that image and likeness and brought struggle and corruption into our experience so that we are deeply rebellious, alienated from God and one another, troubled, wounded, and our soul is in ruin.

The journey of the human life is a process of experiencing lifelong changes: in our relationships, our physical maturation, our sufferings, our goals, desires and hopes. The Bible's primary metaphors for spiritual development likewise focus on long duration concepts of growth: training for the race, wandering in the wilderness, and healing of woundedness and rebellion. In contrast to this, our culture's primary metaphors are those of quick fixes based on proper technique, tools, and programs. Against this the scriptures point us into the lifelong goal of transformation into the likeness of Christ using in the process, techniques, programs, and life circumstances.

- 7) Spiritual formation into Christlikeness involves an intentional, public, personal and communal commitment to living as Jesus disciples who are being transformed into his image in all aspects of our lives as we learn to obey as He commanded.

Explanation: Discipleship to Jesus Christ is a transformational process that begins with regenerated life as a person becomes Jesus' disciple, identifies with the community of faith, and engages in a purposeful pattern of life in which he or she learns to obey all that He commanded.¹⁴ Transformation continues as the disciple intentionally pursues being conformed to Jesus' image, which is carried out in our everyday world of personal, public, community and family life.¹⁵ As we align our lives with Jesus' example and commit ourselves to the purposeful pattern of life in which we learn to obey all that He commanded, all aspects of our lives are brought into conformity to Christ.¹⁶

¹² Matt 6:1-18

¹³ 2Cor 4:16-18

¹⁴ Titus 3:3-7

¹⁵ 2Cor 3:17-18; Eph 5:21-6:9

¹⁶ Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:29

8) Spiritual formation in Christ is a process of growing in Kingdom living and participating in God's mission. This begins with our personal reconciliation with God¹⁷ and results in an irrepressible manifestation of God's good news. Disciples of the Kingdom in community labor for reconciliation, justice, and compassion for all people, and work to correct institutional sin inherent in all human structures.

Explanation: The Kingdom of God is the reality of God's transforming presence, power and goodness manifested in the community of Jesus' disciples.¹⁸ This community witnesses to the reality of the presence of the Kingdom throughout this age.¹⁹ Spiritual formation is not the end itself, but is always pursued through and focused on the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. We are God's chosen strategy for the world. The Spirit-energized community of Jesus' disciples is God's agency of reconciliation in this world as it calls all people to be reconciled to each other across divisions of class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc., as they are reconciled to God.²⁰ Witness comes both through the declaration of the gospel message and through the example of living out the gospel message as a family of faith characterized by humility, purity, accountability, discipline, reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness.²¹ The task is profoundly beyond us, but God's invitation is to take what He gives and return it to Him in simple obedience. As we follow Him in his risky and costly call we become the aroma of His life to a broken and needy world – and God works a miracle.

¹⁷ II Cor 5:18

¹⁸ Matt 5:13-16; I Cor 5:9-11

¹⁹ Eph 2:1-21

²⁰ Matt 5:24; 9:35-38; 2Cor 5:18-21

²¹ Matt 18:1-22