

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

DEFINITION

- **Synonym for Discipleship?**
- **Mentoring?**
- **Or something else and something different?**

ROOTS OF THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION MOVEMENT

- 1974 Father William *Menninger*—*The Cloud of Unknowing*.
- This 14th century book offered a means by which contemplative practices used by Catholic monks, could be taught to lay people.
 - Thomas Keeting
 - Basil Pennington

ROOTS CONTINUED

- Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* introduced the Catholic & Eastern Orthodox disciplines practiced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers as well as monks and hermits, to evangelicalism.

- **Bruce Demarest, Professor at Denver Seminary states “The heart discovers and experiences God; reason demonstrates and explains God.”**
- **Brennan Manning: “The engaged mind, illumined by truth, awakens awareness; the engaged heart, affected by love, awakens passion.”**

CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUALITY/ SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

“Spiritual formation is an ancient ministry of the church, concerned with the ‘forming’ or ‘shaping’ of a believer’s character and actions into the likeness of Christ.”

Bruce Demarest in
Satisfy Your Soul

- **“Christian spiritual formation is a God-ordained process that shapes our entire person so that we take on the character and being of Christ himself.”** **Richard Foster**
- **Spiritual formation is not only concerned with orthodox doctrine but with “many practices that open [us] up to the presence and direction of God.”** **Bruce Demarist**

What distinguishes spiritual formation from discipleship is not in its basically similar definition, but its source, its practices, and its philosophy.

SOURCE

The problem is that the spiritual formation leaders do not go back far enough. In their march into the past they stop at the classical or vintage age of church history instead of returning to the New Testament Scriptures.

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY ON SCRIPTURE

“Today the historical-critical method of interpretation has nearly exhausted its claim on the biblical text and on the church. In its wake there is a widespread yearning among Christian individuals and communities for the wholesome, the deep and the enduring.”

In misguided zeal (and without direction from Scripture) these men and women would often starve themselves, expose their bodies to the elements, go as long as possible without sleep and live isolated from civilization. Under these peculiar and extreme conditions many of them claimed to have visions and encounters with the Lord. Some declared these individuals super-saints and their visions and dreams as revelatory words from the Lord.

DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS

The teachings, methods,
and concepts behind the
Spiritual Formation
Movement are drawn from
these early contemplative
hermits, as well as the
medieval monks and nuns,
principally from the Counter-
Reformation period, not
from Scripture



We are to “turn to our Christian past—to men and women who understood how the soul finds satisfaction as we grow in God, and how His Spirit finds a more ready home in us.”

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“SPIRITUAL MASTERS”

- John of the Cross
- Henri Nouwen
- Francis of Assisi
- Teresa of Avila
- Thomas Keating
- Thomas Merton
- Francis De Sales
- Thomas Kelly
- Madame Guyon
- Theophan the Recluse
- Ignatius of Loyola
- Meister Eckhart
- Julian of Norwich

The Spiritual Formation Movement is not based on Scripture but on the experiences, writings, and imaginations of those who teach a false gospel and misunderstand the Christian life as detailed in God's Word.

DISCIPLINES

John Ortberg describes spiritual disciplines as “any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it. How many spiritual disciplines are there? As many as we can think of.”

Foster, in his *Celebration of Discipline* book provides a chapter on each of the following:
meditation, [contemplative] prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

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PUBLISHERS

- InterVarsity Press—*Formatio* series
- Thomas Nelson Publishing—“The Ancient Practices Series”
- NavPress—“Spiritual Formation Line”
- Zondervan—Youth Specialties

PROMINENT AUTHORS

- Richard Foster
- Dallas Willard
- Phyllis Tickle
- Robert Benson
- Dan Allender
- Scot McKnight
- Nora Gallagher
- Adele Calhoun
- David deSilva
- Ruth Barton
- Jan Johnson
- Helen Cepero
- Leighton Ford
- Larry Crabb
- Calvin Miller
- Tricia McCary Rhodes
- Eugene Peterson
- M. Robert Mulholland Jr.
- Brian McLaren
- John Ortberg
- Mark Yaconelli
- Brennan Manning
- Bruce Demarest
- Kenneth Boa

“The only way to overcome this alienation from their sort of life,” Willard suggests, “is by entering into the actual practices of Jesus and Paul as something essential to our life in Christ.”

Dallas Willard in
The Spirit of Disciplines

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- Do we, as believers in *sola Scriptura*, take out marching orders from the written Word, or do we look to the “white spaces” in Scripture to determine how we live?
- Once it is accepted that we can enhance the Christian life by augmenting the inspired words of Scripture there is no limit to where we might end up.

PHILOSOPHY

- **The Spiritual Formation Movement is concerned more about individual experience than biblical knowledge or truth.**
- **Contemplatives will strongly encourage Bible reading and prayer but they mean something different from what most Christians mean when they reference the same terms.**

TWO WAYS:

Two ways spiritual formation leaders attempt to establish a biblical foundation for the disciplines. The first: ancient people were already practicing disciplines and so direct revelation from God was not necessary:

Dallas Willard writes:

“Thoughtful and religiously devout people of the classical and Hellenistic world, from the Ganges to the Tiber, knew that the mind and body of the human being had to be rigorously disciplined to achieve a decent individual and social existence. This is not something St. Paul had to prove or even explicitly state to his readers—but it also was not something he overlooked, leaving it to be thought up by crazed monks in the Dark Ages. It is, rather, a wisdom gleaned from millennia of collective human experience.”

SECOND WAY:

- They make the claim that spiritual disciplines were practiced by Jesus and the apostles followed suit, therefore we are to do the same thing. Willard states: “It is solitude and solitude **alone** that opens the possibility of a radical relationship to God that can withstand all external events up to and beyond death.”
- Colossians 2:20-23 (what Paul tells us)

SPIRITUAL FORMATION MOVEMENT

The essence of the SFM is that through the use of disciplines our fleshly nature will be tamed and we will grow to become like Christ. Willard writes, “[Paul’s] crucifixion of the flesh, and ours, is accomplished through those activities such as solitude, fasting, frugality, service, and so forth, which constitutes the curriculum in the school of self-denial and place us on the front line of spiritual combat.”

**STRENGTHS
&
DANGERS**

RICHARD FOSTER WRITES IN 2004:

“When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term ‘Spiritual Formation’ was hardly known, except for specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction.”

MICHAEL HORTON:

“We want to have direct, intuitive supernatural experiences. But God has determined that we derive all our knowledge of Him, not through direct encounters, but through the written Word, the Bible, and in the Person and work of His incarnate Son.”

JOHN MACARTHUR:

“Lifeless, dry orthodoxy is the inevitable result of isolating objective truth from vibrant experience. But the answer to dead orthodoxy is not to build a theology on experience. Genuine experience must grow out of sound doctrine. We are not to base what we believe on what we have experienced. The reverse is true. Our experiences will grow out of what we believe.”

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

- It begins with detachment.

“Christian meditation is an attempt to empty the mind in order to fill it”

Richard Foster

Celebration of Discipline

- Illumination is union with God

LECTIO DIVINA

- *Lectio divina* is a method of biblical meditation on the Scriptures that has been practiced by some Christians as far back as the fourth century
- Foster documents that *lectio* is rooted in the allegorical interpretation of Scripture that reigned from the time of the early church fathers such as Origen until the Reformation.

“Many Christian leaders started searching for a new approach under the banner of ‘spiritual formation.’ This new search has led many of them back to Catholic contemplative practices and medieval monastic disciplines.”



**BRIAN
MCLAREN**