

Spirituality: What It Is and What It Isn't

Understanding Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

FOR MORE THAN TWO decades now, there has been an increasing fascination about all things spiritual in the Western world—and it is everywhere. The term *spirituality* is a buzz-word in popular culture, and the phrase *spiritual formation* is increasingly a “buzz-phrase” in the church. But what do we mean when we use the word “spirituality”? What does the phrase “spiritual formation” actually mean? And more importantly for us: What is a biblical understanding of spirituality and spiritual formation? We will explore these questions in this chapter.

It is one of the astonishing developments of the last decades that spirituality has made a strong comeback after years of being out of vogue. Do a Google search on the term *spirituality*, and you'll get you over 141,000,000 hits. And when you look closer, you'll find all different shades and types of spirituality for virtually every interest group and personality type imaginable. Even if you are an out-and-out atheist, like Janna Saliger, it is no shame anymore to talk about your spirituality. In a blog post, she wrote this:

I was diagnosed with major clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder two years ago. . . . After scouring dozens of self-help books, I've found one piece of advice from them all to be rather consistent: be spiritual. At first, I scoffed at this idea. I don't believe in a god. I'm an atheist. Spiritualism and atheism just didn't seem to fit together. I kept on reading, though, and I

discovered that perhaps even an atheist like myself could benefit from getting in touch with my spiritual side.

Now, let's get things straight—being spiritual does not mean being religious. Religion can be a component, yes, but that's not all there is to it. Spirituality does have connotations of belief in a higher power, but just because you don't believe in any gods doesn't mean you can't have faith in something larger than yourself . . . I'm a spiritual atheist!¹

Spirituality is *in* . . . but that has both a positive and a negative side.² On the positive side, renewed interest in spirituality shows people are hungry to connect with and experience God. A few decades ago, you could feel the disdain for religion and spirituality on college campuses and among the culture leaders across the country. You just couldn't talk about those things without being looked at like you had a third eye! That has thankfully changed.

But the negative side to this spirituality boom is that spirituality can mean virtually anything you want it to. Donald Carson writes that today

“spirituality” has become such an ill-defined, amorphous entity that it covers all kinds of phenomena that an earlier generation of Christians . . . would have dismissed as error, or even as “paganism” or “heathenism.” It is becoming exceedingly difficult to exclude absolutely anything from the purview [domain] of spirituality, provided that there is some sort of experiential component in the mix.³

Notice the last part of the quotation: for the average person *experience* is the key to what makes something spiritual. Virtually anything that gives you a good feeling can be chalked up as a spiritual experience, no matter what it is: a rock concert, a patriotic moment, a chat with a friend—even an fabulous meal!

Notice how Rebecca Wells' book, *Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood*, views spirituality and religious experiences in these two entries on her YaYa blog.

Dear Sweetnesses,

I've just come back from a walk outside on this evening in early summer in the Pacific Northwest. . . . So, anyway. It was on

1. Seliger, “Spiritual Atheist.”
2. Carson, *Gagging of God*, 555.
3. *Ibid.*, 558.

Sunday that I saw the rainbow. Out on the waters on which I live. I could see the beginning and the end of the rainbow all at once! I think it was a double rainbow, had so many levels I jumped up and down, and though I was on the phone with two dear pals, I said, “Scuse me, but I’m having a quasi-religious experience with this rainbow and I’m going to have to talk to yall later.”⁴

In another post, her understanding of spirituality comes out even clearer,

Dahlins!

How are yall?! Here in the Pacific Northwest, La Luna [the moon] was shooting down so much clarity and power last night that I made a big decision that I’d been praying about. I think she helped me, as she always does. Tonight, clouds are in front of her, but I know she is there, just like I know she is shining down on each of you, loving you with infinite tenderness and compassion. More and more, when I pray (or meditate or chant or whatever it is), I try to remember that the Divine KNOWS what I cannot put into words. And that the Divine loves me just as much when I am a screaming, crying mess as when I do something brave and heroic. We are all perfectly imperfect creatures, doing the best we can. Can you sometimes stand in the moonlight and let the love in? Sometimes I block it—with fear or anger or any number of things. Other times an opening occurs and then I know it: I am beloved. Just as you all are.⁵

What is Rebecca Wells’ understanding of spirituality? It’s a bit squishy and hard to nail down! Certainly, nature is on center stage. It has a divine quality that overwhelms her.

And it’s also true for me: there is something in an experience of a rainbow or a full moon on a cloudless night that evokes something deep within us. I’ve had the same types of overpowering “senses of the divine” in nature as well, and I resonate a lot with what she says, even though I don’t describe it the way she does. My take on her spirituality, though, is that she confuses the *creation* with the *creator*—or perhaps fuses them together.

Now, as Christians we are not called to a jelly-like spirituality as many in our culture define it. The question we need to ask ourselves is

4. Wells, “Dear Sweetnesses.”

5. Wells, “Dahlins.”

this: How can we think biblically about the concepts of spirituality and spiritual formation?

Spiritual Formation Happens . . .

Of all the writers I have read over the last decades, Dallas Willard has done some of the most careful, biblically rooted thinking on spirituality and spiritual formation.

In one of his discussions on this topic, Dallas makes the point that there is nothing special about the term *spiritual formation*. He writes:

We could forget the phrase “spiritual formation,” but the fact and need would still be there to be dealt with. The spiritual side of the human being, Christian and non-Christian alike, develops into the reality which it becomes, for good or ill. Everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education. The only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one.⁶

What is Willard driving at here? Simply stated, *spiritual formation happens!* (I was thinking of creating a bumper sticker with this on it, but I don’t think it would catch on!) Spiritual formation is something that happens to every human being, and it happens through every thought we think and every step we take. Whether we want to be or not, every one of us is being formed each and every minute of our lives. Yes, Hitler was spiritually formed, and Mother Teresa was spiritually formed. But their spiritual formation was profoundly different!

Spiritual formation, then, is not tied to any one religious tradition, but is what inevitably happens to each one of us, whether we are atheists or devout Christians. That is why Dallas Willard writes: “We all become a certain kind of person, gain a specific character, and that is the outcome of a process of ‘spiritual formation’”⁷ *Spiritual formation happens*—and we can’t do anything to stop it.

Spiritual Formation Happens . . . But We Can Influence the Direction and Outcome

Even though it is inescapable that we will be spiritually formed, we *can* do things that directly influence *how* we are being spiritually formed. We can

6. Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ,” 254.

7. Willard, *The Great Omission*, 105.

engage in practices that reshape our interior and exterior lives that will then aim our lives in certain directions. In other words, there are things we can do that lead us in the direction of becoming like a Mother Teresa, and that will keep us from ending up like a Hitler.

So, let's summarize what we have been saying up to now and take it a step further: We have said that spiritual formation happens to all of us, but we are not simply passive in the process. We can actively participate in our own spiritual formation in order to aim ourselves in the direction we want to go.

But what specifically is that direction? That is what we want to explore next.

From Generic Spiritual Formation— to Christian Spiritual Formation

As followers of Jesus, we want to ask the question: What is *Christian* spiritual formation? What, in other words, does spiritual formation look like that is fully, truly, and unmistakably *Christian*? After scouring the way authors who write about spiritual formation understand Christian spiritual formation, I have found the working definition that Dallas Willard offers to be the most helpful. He views Christian spiritual formation as *the redemptive process of forming the inner human world so that we take on the character of the inner being of Christ himself*.⁸

I think this is right on, but I would like to add a bit more nuance to Dallas Willard's description. I see Christian spiritual formation as *the redemptive process of intentionally forming our interior and exterior life so that so that we increasingly take on (acquire, develop) the character of the inner being of Christ himself*.

Every part of this definition is significant, so let's explore what each word or phrase means.

Spiritual Formation is Redemptive.

The word "redemptive" implies something about us humans: it implies that we humans are estranged from God in our spirits, thoughts, actions,

8. He modified his definition of Christian spiritual formation slightly in *Renovation of the Heart* to the following: "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" (22).

and attitudes. Jeremiah talks about the heart being “deceitful above all things and beyond all cure” (Jer 17:9), and Paul tells us that we were at one time dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). In other words, something has gone fundamentally gone wrong in us. To fix it, we don’t merely need to try a little harder. We don’t just need therapy. We need to be given a new life. We need to be redeemed.

Spiritual Formation is a Process

The word *process* implies a number of things: It implies development and progression; it implies struggle and learning; and it implies that we have not yet reached a goal that we are aiming at.

Redemption begins with conversion—being reconciled to God. But redemption does not end there. It is a *process* that takes place over time. Sometimes a very long time. Spiritual formation isn’t granted to us once-and-for-all when we first said “yes” to God. It is a daily, step-by-small-step sort of thing.

Spiritual Formation is Intentional

Spiritual formation is conscious and deliberate. This implies that we are not merely passive agents waiting for it to happen to us. We need to actively engage in the process. We become fully involved participants with God in this process. God has a part to play in our spiritual formation, and so do we. Paul explains it this way: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you” (Phil 2:12–13). But our part in this process of spiritual formation is not simply related to our thoughts. It is not just agreeing with God about certain spiritual truths—as I had originally believed in my teen years. It is an intentional process that encompasses the transformation of every dimension of our being—both our inner and outer human world.

Spiritual Formation is about Forming

The term “forming” is also significant, and it too implies something about us. This word indicates that we all are, in some sense, “*de*-formed” and are in the need of becoming *re*-shaped. There are areas in our lives that are not the way God intended for us to be. The apostle Paul talks about

our need to be *conformed* to the image of Jesus (Rom 8:28), and of our minds needing to be *transformed* (Rom 12:2). Jeremiah uses the imagery of humans as clay that has been badly marred (Jer 18:4). This clay needs to be *reformed* and *reshaped* into the image of God that was marred in the Garden of Eden.

Spiritual Formation is about Forming the Interior and Exterior Life

This part of the definition identifies the specific dimensions that need to be re-formed: our inner and outer human world. Why both interior and exterior? Because our relationship with God goes far beyond what happens between our ears or even, as we often say, in our hearts. It extends to every nook and cranny of our lives: what is going on within us and how we are living our lives through our bodies as we interact with the “outside world” around us. That is why Jesus speaks of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors (Mark 12:30). He indicates with this comment that the sum total of all of who we are needs to be transformed.

Spiritual Formation has a Purpose

The words *so that* signal the purpose of Christian spiritual formation. It tells us why we should even be interested in spiritual formation in the first place: *so that* our inner lives become like the inner life of Jesus himself.

Spiritual Formation is about Becoming Something We Are Not

The phrase “take on” implies there is something we do not have that we need to acquire. Dallas Willard describes this as “the character of the inner being of Christ himself.” What we *take on* is Christ himself.

It is challenging to convey the right understanding of the phrase, *take on*. It does not refer to “putting something on”—as in the phrase, “he’s just putting on a show.” Rather, it refers to acquiring something that is absent: the life of Christ in us. It is the reality of Christ within us that we can nurture and grow—like a seed that we plant, water, and care for.

We are not, contrary to much of modern psychology, complete in ourselves. We lack something. We don’t have all the resources within

ourselves to solve all of our problems, to heal ourselves, and be whole persons. There is something that must come from outside ourselves that we need to *take on*: the life of Christ within us.

It is at this point that Christian spiritual formation runs into conflict with our culture's understanding of spirituality that we mentioned earlier. Our culture approaches spirituality with a "what's in it for me" mentality, whose ultimate aim is for *me* to feel good about *myself* through warm spiritual experiences.⁹

True, Jesus' early followers were often full of joy and had warm spiritual experiences, but that was not their primary *aim*. If we make it our primary aim, it will lead to frustration, guilt, and disappointment. The New Testament is packed with joyful people, who had "warm spiritual experiences"—but these were often encountered *in the midst of* suffering, challenge, pain, and sometimes death. Christian spirituality is marked both by joy and suffering.

The promise of New Testament spirituality is that through taking on the inner being of Christ himself, though it may lead us down a path marked by suffering, it will ultimately lead us to joy. Peter expresses this well: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:12–13).

Spiritual Formation is about Acquiring the Character of Jesus

What is character? The topic is actually quite a complex one,¹⁰ but I understand character as the settled way of being and responding that a person has developed over time that becomes *characteristic* of them. It refers to the unique set of virtues and qualities of an individual that consistently manifests itself in the way they order their lives, the choices they make, and the way they interact with others. All of this refers to a person's character.

Spiritual formation is about examining our own character and bringing it into alignment with the character of Jesus. It speaks of our

9. This is a bit of a caricature—but not by much!

10. See the helpful discussion of this topic by Cox and Kallenberg, "Character," 127.

need to develop specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that conform us to the way Jesus himself lived.

These character qualities are often referred to as *virtues*. In the ancient world, Greeks and Romans (speaking very generally now) held to the four ideals of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice.¹¹ Judaism also had its own set of forty-eight virtues.

Although these are noble virtues to strive for, these are not the virtues Christian spiritual formation aims at. Christian spiritual formation is aimed at *taking on the virtues and character qualities of Christ himself*. That means it is Jesus

- who **establishes** the content and shape of the character we are striving for;
- who **determines** which virtues we are to strive for;
- who **defines** what those virtues are;
- and who **exemplifies** how we are to live these virtues out in the real world.

So, it is not, for example, “goodness” as society around us defines goodness that we are to strive for. We want to have *Christ’s kind of goodness* formed in us. And so, we need to ask ourselves: How was Jesus good? How did *he* show goodness to others?

In the process of reflecting on Christ’s kind of goodness, we may need to shake off our culture’s understandings of what goodness is. In fact, Christ’s kind of goodness and our culture’s understanding of goodness may conflict with each other. We need to have Jesus define our understanding of those virtues.

Spiritual Formation Aims at Transforming the Heart

The final aspect of our understanding of spiritual formation zeroes in on developing our character that is in line with *the inner being of Christ himself*.

The reason it is important to emphasize the *inner being* of Christ is that it will keep us from falling into three traps—traps that are actually close cousins to each other.

11. See Plato’s *Republic* 427e for his description of these; see also Seneca, *De Inventione* II and LIII.

The first trap we might call *externalism*.¹² Externalism is when people think that how they act on the outside is all that counts. The focus is on doing things that others can observe—whether or not it’s in line with who we are on the inside. Who we are on the outside is disconnected from who we are on the inside. They don’t mirror each other.

Have you ever seen a mother or father make their child smile or behave nicely when in the company of others—even though it is obvious that on the inside the kid wants to kick somebody or say something nasty? It is possible to say and do the right things on the outside, while being the complete opposite on the inside.

Jesus calls people who pretend to be religious on the outside, but who are not genuine about it on the inside, “white-washed tombs.” Their external actions mask the brokenness below the surface.

The second cousin of this first trap is *legalism*. The mindset of a legalist is: “I have to do the right thing in order to be a good Christian.” It is the grit-your-teeth, white-knuckled approach to spiritual formation. It emphasizes human responsibility and self-discipline, but cuts God out of the equation. It focuses on self-reliance, disregarding God’s empowering presence within us.

When we focus on taking on the inner being of Christ, it also helps us avoid a third trap: *judgmentalism*. Judgmentalism is an orientation of the heart that is based on *comparison* with others. It is performance-based, competitive, and driven by the question, “Am I doing all the things that a *good Christian* should be doing—and am I doing it *better* than other people?”

When we focus on the external performance, it often leads to two polar-opposite reactions. *On the one hand*, we become proud. We pat ourselves on the back for all the things that we have done—and we look down on others who, well, just aren’t as holy as we are. We look at others, and in our hearts we pray the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.”

On the other hand, when we meet someone who is even more externally holy than we are, we become jealous, angry, or depressed.

In order to avoid these three traps, we need to focus exclusively on ever increasingly taking on and developing the character of the inner life of Christ within us.

12. This is a helpful term that I believe Dallas Willard has coined. Willard, *Renovation*, 23.



Although I have mentioned three traps to avoid as we seek to take on the inner character of Christ, I still have not told you what the phrase, “taking on the inner being of Christ,” actually means. The best way to do this is with an illustration.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, after he has been brutally beaten, mocked, jeered at, and verbally abused; after he had endured a trial that was a mockery of justice—after all of this, what did Jesus say as he looked at the people who did that to him? He said “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

From the way the Gospel writers tell the story, these words just flowed out of him—as if this was nothing unusual for him to say. His first and natural response when people abused him was to bless and not to curse.

Taking on the character of the inner being of Christ has to do with developing the same “heart condition” that Jesus had, which made his spontaneous reaction possible as he hung on the cross. It is a condition of the heart, where forgiveness, love, and mercy flow out of us—instead of us gritting our teeth, trying to say words that sound forgiving and loving, but inside wishing we could destroy someone.

The ultimate goal of spiritual formation is developing the same heart attitudes that Jesus has so that we begin to live out the kinds of external responses that Jesus would have were he in our situation today.



So, in this first chapter, we’ve introduced the topic of spiritual formation by noting the following:

- We’ve seen the increasing interest and openness to spirituality, but this has an upside and a downside.
- Spirituality is understood by our culture as an *experience* we have, regardless of the content.
- Everyone is spiritually formed, whether they actively seek it or not: Hitler, Mother Teresa, and you.
- Christian spiritual formation is about “the redemptive process of intentionally forming our interior and exterior life so that we

increasingly take on (acquire, develop) the character of the inner being of Christ himself.”

- In our quest for this, we need to avoid the traps of externalism, legalism, and judgmentalism.

In the next section, we’ll examine the biblical foundations of spiritual formation.

SAMPLE