

Forming

A Work of Grace

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Preface

I never meant to write a four-hundred page book. My only goal was to share with others the things I wish someone would have told me thirty years ago. Despite the length and breadth of this work, I have tried to remain focused on a single theme of utmost importance: *How are we to participate with God in ways that actually make a difference in our life?* This one area has caused perhaps more difficulty than any other throughout the history of the New Testament church, from Galatia to the present day.

One of the greatest challenges in writing this book and the related *Forming* course material was deciding what to include and what to leave out. There were so many areas I wanted to address, but choices had to be made. To be clear, my overarching objective was simply this – to help Christians develop an authentic relationship with God that is real enough and vibrant enough to change them from the inside out. Among other things, that means spelling out as clearly as possible what it looks like to connect with our unseen God, how that connection produces change in us, why trying harder to live well does not work, and why Christian education alone fails to change lives.

The resulting twelve-session course, *Forming: Change by Grace*, has been met with an overwhelmingly positive response – lives are being changed as people discover a deeper relationship with God than they ever had before. The great advantage that a course has over a book is that we can incorporate the kind of experiential training that is necessary for transformation. On the other hand, twelve training sessions cannot possibly cover all of the nuances regarding our relationship with God, let alone the many implications of spiritual development that come out of this incredible shift toward authentic relationship. For those reasons I felt it was necessary to write this book.

Again, I have had to limit the scope of this material, because there are so many things that could be said about how we grow spiritually. So I have

followed the course itself quite closely, with the intention of providing more context and supporting theology for the things we are teaching there. I have expanded many of the basic concepts presented in the *Forming* course and provide additional examples and further clarification of the various themes covered by the workbook and video.

My intention here is to fulfill two main functions. First, I want to provide additional background and context for anyone who is facilitating the *Forming* course. The truth is that much of the understanding and many of the practices taught in the course have been neglected by much of the Western Christian world for many years. Bringing it back to the forefront necessitates an incredible paradigm shift in our thinking and practice. Anyone who wishes to lead a group through the course would be well-advised to equip themselves with as much background as possible, and by doing so enable the group to get a great deal more from the experience.

Second, there are many who will want to go deeper than the time in the course sessions will allow, and others who simply do not have the opportunity to attend a formal course. It is my hope that this book will help them to re-orient their Christian walk so that they are better able to set their feet on a path that leads to the kind of life they always believed should be possible.

All of that said, there was one additional unintended result of this work for which I am truly grateful. As I reflect on the content here and the amazing changes I have experienced in my own life that have come from this approach to our spiritual journey, I sometimes wonder how I survived the first forty-plus years of my Christian life without this relationship with God. It would, in fact, take another volume to describe how vastly different my life has become. Which means that what has emerged here is not some optional way to proceed in our Christian walk, but rather a vision that is totally faithful to the New Testament declarations of the abundant life, and absolutely foundational to how God intended for us to live.

My prayer is that this book will help others to find this same foundation, and point them to the path that leads to life.

Rowing or Sailing?

For many Christians, the spiritual life is a lot like rowing a boat. Although it may become wearisome at times, they do their best to persist and remain as consistent as possible, often in the face of considerable difficulty. Not that they try to do this all on their own. Having attended many seminars on the value of rowing and the dangers of slacking off, they keep up their energy by attending weekly meetings and praying for the Holy Spirit to give them the strength and endurance to row well.

Of course there are setbacks. Some find themselves in an opposing current and no matter how hard they row, the boat just seems to go more backward than forward. Still others could swear they were never issued both oars, and spend much of the time going in circles or switching sides to keep from getting too far off course. Most distressing of all are those who can never row for more than a few minutes at a time before becoming exhausted. No matter how much they pray they never seem to have enough energy, and may privately wonder if the Holy Spirit is holding out on them.

Sometimes those who are stronger and pulling well will call out advice on how to steer or how to hold the oars. The advice usually lands on the strugglers like an anchor, but they take a deep breath and try harder. From time to time the leaders just shake their heads and wonder why it is that so much effort is spent making so little progress.

Another Way

Imagine now a sail, full and bright, pulling each boat with all the power of the wind. The oars are gone, along with sore arms and aching backs. Instead, the boaters are learning how to catch the wind and give up the work of forward movement to something much more powerful than they could ever be. And movement it is! Waves pour off each bow and the wake they leave behind churns with foamy water. It's actually fun!

Oh, there are things to do, and lots more to learn. But this is so far removed from rowing that it's not even possible to compare the two. Even more exciting is the discovery that the wind in their sail is none other than the Holy Spirit Himself. Which means that the apprentice sailors are in truth witnessing the power of God and learning to engage with Him in tangible ways that they never experienced as rowers. Clearly they still need to learn how to sail and align with the wind. But that is light-years from asking God to give them the strength to do all the work of rowing.

Enter Christian Formation

Christian formation is every bit as different from traditional models of discipleship as sailing is from rowing. Most of us have experienced the heavy weight of knowing all the things we *should* be doing and all the things we *should not* be doing, and the exhaustion of being forever behind where we think we ought to be by now. Giving more and trying harder seem to be the only alternatives to poor performance, despite the desperate prayers for God to provide the power for our efforts. Many of us have virtually given up hope of becoming more of what God wants us to be, because we have no idea how to add any more to what we are already doing.

When we stop and ask what it is that Christians need to do in order to grow, what do we hear? Read your Bible, pray, and get involved in ministry. But Bible reading often feels more like doing homework than feeding the soul, and what many Christians seem to get out of it is an even stronger sense of how poorly they are rowing. Prayer is also hard, sometimes because we cannot seem to focus and other times because we cannot figure out how to pray for help. On the one hand we feel the need to ask for forgiveness for what we can't seem to *do* right. On the other hand, when we pray for strength we are left perplexed as to why God does not make us strong enough to *get it* right. Lastly, the prospect of getting more involved in ministry is the very thing we dread, *doing more*. We keep hearing the same thing over and over: "Row harder!"

What all of these approaches have in common is the belief that *it really is up to us* to do what Christians are supposed to do, and that God's part is to

provide the energy we need to make it happen. We are more or less left with the conclusion that the only difference in “rowing” between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is that New Testament rowers get spiritual vitamins to help them.

This paradigm is terribly mistaken!

We need to come to grips with the fact that this approach to the Christian life has very little to do with life led by the Spirit. It is essentially life under the law dressed up in New Testament terminology. No matter how much we try to give the Holy Spirit credit for whatever good happens through this approach, this whole way of proceeding is firmly rooted in our own effort, based on our own willpower and our own understanding of what we need to do in order to become better Christians.

Now as it turns out, some of those among us are really good rowers! Unfortunately, that adds to the illusion that this really is the way to go. But quite literally, this is the way of mastery as it is known in the world, not the way of transformation in the kingdom of God. All of life outside the kingdom tells us that advancement is earned, and mastery is achieved through hard work.

Not so in the kingdom of God. Purity, wholeness, healing, and restoration of the ruined soul result directly from engaging with God – not in traditional one-way prayer, but from dynamic tangible interaction in which we are involved both actively and consciously. ***Instead of trying to make ourselves do more of what we think Christians ought to do, hoping that will make us into the people we were meant to be, we need to be made into who God meant us to be so that we can do what we were meant to do.*** That’s the difference between rowing and sailing!

Instead of making myself say the words that my offender is forgiven, what if God changed my heart so that I actually forgave him and my mouth then expressed the care of my heart? Instead of trying hard to *act as if* I love my enemy, what if I engaged with God in ways that changed me so that I actually loved my enemy and my actions came out of that? My task then becomes a matter of lining up my sail with the wind, rather than rowing

against the current of my own heart in order to achieve an outcome I think is right.

Many people have given up the belief that such transformation is even possible. Feeling helpless in the face of their own mal-formed souls, they resort to forcing the behavior they believe Christians ought to portray out of obedience to God. But that amounts to picking up the oars because we never learned to sail.

Well, what if we could learn? What if I came to believe that God not only *can* change my heart, He very much wants to do so? What if the biggest thing by far between my heart and my transformation is my own misinformation and poor training on how to engage with God in ways that bring life? What if I *can* learn how to sail? Now *that* would be Good News!

Learning to be with God, develop a genuine relationship with God, and to engage with God for transformation is precisely what Christian formation is about – how to be formed more and more into the image of Christ, so that the life of Christ comes out of us by virtue of who we are – how to change from the inside out so that good that comes out of us *because* of who we are and not in an effort to *override* who we are.

Formation is about learning how to receive from God those things that we cannot do on our own, namely, *to change our own heart to be more like His*. We learn how to feel the wind, to tack with it, to be changed by it, until we find ourselves moved to places that would never have been possible by rowing alone.

We have a God who moved heaven and earth for our restoration and who is committed to restoring our souls as the first fruits of His new creation. What we need to do is to stop trying to get there by direct effort, and instead become apprentices of life, learning how to *be with* this God who transforms, and to engage with Him for our restoration. Then we will become free to be who He has designed us to be and to do what He wants us to do.

I say, “Let’s go sailing!”

Chapter 1

Changing Our Minds About Change

You have put on a new nature which is still being renewed.
(Col.3:10, paraphrased)

Have you ever looked at your own spiritual journey and thought ...
“There *has* be more to the Christian life than *this*”?

If you have, you are not alone. Even though we do not say it out loud very often, most Christians who long for a deeper spiritual life at some point experience a profound sense of having missed something along the way – something very important, perhaps vital. Whatever it is, they have been unable to find it or even give it a name that might point them in the right direction.

From time to time they may wonder if they are just hoping for more from life than will ever be possible in a broken world. But then they read Paul's letters, written from a Roman prison, where he is encouraging his listeners to discover more of what God wants for them. Or they read the words of Jesus as He promises rest to the weary and an abiding presence of His Spirit, not to mention the stream of water that would well up inside those who drink of the water He offers. “What on earth is He talking about?” they may ask themselves.

They may question whether they are too loaded down, too defective, too *something* to ever receive what God has promised. Maybe they have not tried hard enough or cared enough or prayed enough. Maybe they need to repent. Or perhaps they are too selfish and would see God move in their life if they just gave more or did more to prime the pump.

Or maybe God overstated His promises. The first disciples probably got more grace and more power than we could ever expect, so we need to take what they said about the Christian life with a little dose of realism and

understand that we could never do what they did or live that close to God. After all, they got to walk with Jesus for three years.

Whatever it is, we find ourselves feeling cheated, that for some reason this life we were promised never quite lives up to what we thought it would be like. And we don't know why.

It seemed to work for a while. The joy we felt and the changes we went through right after our conversion were amazing. We had so much hope, and could not get enough of it. Then one day it just started slowing down. We began to notice places where we seemed to be permanently stuck, along with a few issues that never seemed to diminish in strength or intensity. Our energy started sagging and our devotional times dried up. The more we tried, the more remote those things became.

This cannot be what God had in mind. There must be something more. But what is it? How do we find it?

If you have ever felt any of these things, you have also probably made enough attempts to resolve them to know that there are a lot of people out there trying to tell you what the answer is. So if you are at all skeptical that this book will help, I understand. For over thirty years I combed the Christian world looking for the “magic bullet” that would make everything clear. I found plenty of promising leads that turned out to be mostly short-term distractions. What I wanted was a way to change who I was. All I found were more things to do and behaviors to change and ways to avoid changing the real me.

While I no longer believe in a magic wand that will suddenly make everything all right or give me instant transformation from who I am to who I want to be, I have found something far more compelling and far more life-giving than I ever thought possible.

More than anything else, I would call it *a path that leads to life*, a trajectory that brings me closer each day to becoming the person I know God has called me to be, a way of proceeding that frees my heart more and more from the stuff I carried around for so many decades, a way that helps me know my Father's heart and brings me into relationship with Him –

closer than anything I have ever known before. My heart is changing, my fears are diminishing, my hope is growing. With each passing year it gets better and better.

And I am not alone. All across the planet there are thousands of Christians who are finding this path. We are learning more and more about how God intends for us to be involved in deliberately fostering our spiritual growth. We even have a name for this process – *Christian Formation*. And although that may be a strange term for some, it means only that we are learning how to be actively involved in what God is doing to form us into the image of Christ.

So I invite you to join me for a while, and see the ways that God has made it possible for us to truly become one with Him, to be formed more and more into the people He designed us to be, and to live as He meant for us to live.

I can assure you that there is nothing in here that falls outside of the true faith that was given to us in the New Testament. For that matter, there is nothing “new” in here at all. Christian formation is actually a rediscovery of what dear Christian saints have always known, but which has been lost by much of the modern world. So please come along with us as we consider. ...

What If There Really Is a Way to Live as Christ Promised?

Now if I was reading a book like this, the last thing I would want to find is another list of things that I should be doing, or worse yet, some new fad that will blow through the church and be gone in ten years. Personally, I have no desire to spend time or energy on a warmed over version of the same old stuff, or some strange variation of Christianity that somebody dreamed up when they got too emotional one day.

So what exactly is Christian formation and why should I listen long enough to find out if it makes any difference for me to know this?

The short answer is that *Christian formation is about developing an authentic relationship with God that is vibrant enough to change us from the inside out to become more the person God created us to be*. But those are very loaded terms, and the meaning behind them is not at all self-

evident. That is why it takes an entire book and a course about formation to recapture what it means to be a Christian. What we want to emphasize here is that this approach to spiritual growth is quite different from what most of us have been taught. And as you will discover, it is also far more in tune with the spirit of the New Testament than what most of us have tried. This difference is significant enough to lead us to an incredibly refreshing, life-giving way of engaging with the Holy Spirit that causes real change in our life from day to day.

What Christian formation *is not*, is a repackaged discipleship model or a five-step program for getting more involved in your church. This is learning how to engage with God, not academically, but in tangible ways that go beyond saying ‘grace’ at mealtime; learning how to develop a conversational prayer life from which we can discover His heart for us and be taught by the Spirit of God, learning how to balance our part and God’s part in the process of transformation, and making a space *for God to do in us what we cannot do* – to change our heart and mind to be more like Him.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you may have discovered the great unspoken secret of Western Christianity: *We have lots of good ideas about what a Christian should do, but we have almost no idea at all about how to help you actually change your heart to become more like Jesus.* If you do ask how to become more Christ-like, you will be told:

- Read your Bible.
- Pray.
- Go to church.
- Get involved.

But what you will *not* be told is that while these things may give you new information and new skills, beyond a certain point they will not change your basic character very much at all. The longer you try to make this work, the more tired you will become and the more disillusioned you will be with your own lack of transformation. Eventually, your devotional life will dry up and you will feel farther and farther from God.

What makes this even more confusing is that it seems to work for some people some of the time. If it is not working for you, then you are told there must be something wrong like:

- You are not committed enough.
- You have sin or bitterness or unforgiveness in your life.
- You have lost your first love.

Or perhaps you need a shot in the arm from some itinerant preacher or a particular ministry. Usually these explanations just pile more condemnation on us and offer very little real hope for change.

The truth is that the whole process of trying really hard to be a good Christian is a terribly misguided venture, even though this approach is what dominates many Christian circles. Theologians and laypersons alike routinely miss the very heart of the gospel and thus fail to find the life that is promised to those who know Jesus. In fact the majority of Christians today have radically distorted views of what it means to grow up and become mature both as human beings and as Christians.

[Original Material Deleted Here from This Excerpt]

Spiritual development, far from being acquired through hard work (or happening automatically over time) is mostly *received*, and that is a concept and a process which is very foreign to many Christians today. We are not talking about some abstract mystical work of the Holy Spirit that goes on virtually undetected in the background of our mind. God intended for us to grow spiritually by means of a concrete, tangible connection with Him that creates life and truth inside our soul and changes who we are from the inside out. You do not learn how to “love your enemy” by baking him a cake while grinding your teeth in anger. You engage with God about your heart condition, and when He shows you how He sees your enemy and changes your heart, you actually care about his well-being and can love him without having to drag yourself down the road to “obedience.”

*Spiritual growth is the fruit of engaging with God, not something achieved by trying hard to do the right things. So what do we mean by *engaging with God*?*

Well, that is what Christian formation is all about. Engaging with God is a multifaceted process that is learned experientially and involves a number of perspectives and practices that many Christians today are unfamiliar with. So there is no short answer to that question. But if you stay with us, the phrase “engaging with God” will soon take on a whole new meaning. To begin, we will recast a vision of what spiritual growth looks like, because there are so many mistaken ideas floating around regarding the basic nature of the Christian life.

HOW IS CHRISTIAN FORMATION DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL DISCIPLESHIP PROGRAMS?

Although that question will be addressed repeatedly throughout the rest of this book, it is important to present a little preview to prepare the reader for the kind of paradigm shift that is necessary in order to deliberately pursue Christian growth and transformation.

At the outset, we should emphasize that the New Testament does not view a *disciple* primarily as a person who practices a certain lifestyle or learns a few ministry skills or studies theology. *A disciple is a person who participates in a meaningful mentoring relationship with a teacher.* This distinction is crucial. Being a disciple means that a person engages regularly with a mentor who trains and instructs his followers in whatever it is that he is a master of. So when we talk about being a disciple of Jesus, we are not using a catchy phrase that means we are having devotions or working in a church ministry. We are envisioning a very dynamic relationship in which we are actively involved with God to learn how to become more Christ-like and how to live in this new kingdom as we continue our physical existence in this broken world.

That is *why* Christian spiritual formation is different from most other discipleship programs that focus on making behavioral changes and learning

doctrines, however valuable those may be. Now we will look at *how* it is different.

Our Expectations are Different

Let's begin by looking at some of the things the New Testament says about the Christian life. As you slowly read these passages, think about how they compare to your own experience as a Christian.

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, **streams of living water will flow** from within him. (Jn.7:38 NIV)

So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.** (Eph.4:12-13 NIV)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, **to put off your old self**, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; **and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** (Eph.4:22-24 NIV)

So that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph.3:19)

Those are amazing promises! They seem almost too good to be true!

Honestly, some of us wonder if they *are* too good to be true. When we read passages like that we have to ask, How does that square with my own life? How many Christians do I know who truly reflect this way of life?

Just look at some of these statements: "Created to be like God." What does that mean? How do we make sense of that in light of the unhealed wounds and repetitive sins that plague most Christians?

Did you ever look at verses like this and just shake your head? Have you ever compared your life to the stories in the New Testament and think, "They seemed to have something that I don't have"? Have you ever thought, "There has to more to the Christian life than this"?

For most of my life I could say that Christianity was a way of life for me, and yet in spite of that I was aware of a huge gap between what I saw in my life and what I saw in the New Testament. When I read about an artesian well of water springing up and flowing out of us, (Jn.4:14) I had to wonder what in the world He could be talking about.

But let's assume for a minute, just for the sake of argument, that this kind of life is really possible. What if we could...

- Break the patterns of the past.
- Pursue transformation by some deliberate means.
- See evidence of Biblical maturity on an on-going basis.
- Experience the reality of the kingdom.
- Have a genuine relationship with God, not just know about God.

What would that mean?

Even entertaining the idea can be difficult or painful for some people. After all, how many of us have wondered whether this is at all possible? How many have found it totally elusive? How many of us feel like this is a far-away dream or too much to hope for? Perhaps all of this talk of being Christ-like is just a target, an ideal that we can never really expect to experience. Maybe Paul and others were exaggerating a bit or talking about life after death or something else.

For most of us, if any of that stuff is truly possible, it means that we have missed something along the way. And the prospect of having to try and make up the deficit is daunting, if not shaming. We naturally equate "I'm missing something" with "There's something I'm not doing that I should be doing" and feel defeated before we begin. Others have simply ruled out such a possibility and instead adopted a theology that explains why falling short of the New Testament vision is perfectly normal.

If we are honest within ourselves, most of us will find that we have come to harbor a kind of disbelief in ongoing transformation and have settled instead for the status quo, whatever that may be. We have tried all that we know to do without seeing much change. So while we are willing to keep

trying, we have lowered our expectations to be more “realistic” about what might be possible in our journey toward wholeness.

But what if there is another way to get there from here? What if becoming more Christ-like is something that we cannot do because it's God's job not ours? And the reason we have been having so much trouble with this process is that we are trying to make this happen by sheer will power and our own effort, because we have not been trained how to engage with God in ways that will change who we are?

What if, instead of trying to do *more* to make life come out better, there were some things we could do *differently* that would allow the Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out? Then we could become the kind of people who are naturally inclined to think about and desire the things of God much like the way Jesus did. Rather than expending so much energy fighting our inner nature in order to live the way we think we should, we would do by nature the things that align with the kingdom and produce life.¹

When we embark on a journey of Christian formation, we have good reasons to raise our expectations of what God will do in our life. Because when we give up on the failed methods of the past and seek to learn how to be closer to God, we open the doors to receiving life in ways we have not known before. As we learn how to receive life from God, we begin to change in ways that we could never accomplish in our own strength. Discovering how God can change our life in such identifiable, concrete ways gives us hope that life can be different.

So let's continue to look at some of the other ways in which Christian formation may be different from what most of us have tried in the past.

Our Goals are Different

For much of the Christian world, following after Christ means trying to do all the things He said to do and trying not to do any of the things we are not supposed to do. Of course we assume that the Holy Spirit is helping us, but only so far as we are already being “obedient.” Our immediate goal in

¹ This is precisely the heart of Paul's argument in Romans 7 and 8.

this process is to be able to do the right things, say the right things, have the right attitude about things, and to respond in godly ways to the various events of life.

Shocking as it may be, this approach to Christianity is a terrible mistake. *Aiming for obedience this way actually makes the Christian life impossible.* Now if that makes your head spin a bit, please take a few deep breaths before going on so that you do not miss this important point.

Obedience to the written code in the Old Testament was paramount to their way of life. But no matter how hard they tried to keep it, the law could not produce transformation of character. That was why God granted a New Covenant founded on different principles. “For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have come through the law” (Gal.3:21; Heb.8). But that was not possible, so God gave us something else entirely.

Tragically, the Christian world has by and large failed to grasp the enormity of this paradigm shift, and has instead opted to replace the Old Testament law with New Testament Principles, all the while continuing in the belief that trying to do the right things will make you a good person. But Jesus did not just give us better principles to replace the law. He did away with the whole process of achieving righteousness through human effort! Claiming that the Holy Spirit gives us the power to keep the new principles only obscures the seriousness of this error on multiple levels:

- That is not the primary role of the Spirit.
- Whatever power we do receive from the Spirit does not change us automatically. If it did, we would be a lot farther along than we are. If change comes from our hard work aided by the Spirit, we would have to conclude that how much effort *we* supply is what makes the difference,² which runs contrary to Scripture.

² Or worse yet, that God only gives assistance to those who try really hard.

- God never intended to empower us to keep an external set of principles. He chose instead to write His laws on our heart (Heb.8:10). That is a metaphor that means He wants to change our heart to act naturally in accordance with His laws and to not have to keep trying to do what our heart resists doing.

Instead of trying to do things right until we “get it,” our goal is to be changed at the core of our being to be more Christ-like. If we take both God and our condition seriously here, we are forced to admit that this job was not finished when we were converted. Writing God’s laws on our heart is a promised benefit of the New Covenant, but it does not happen all at once. The reason we try to finish the task by committing ourselves to a works-oriented process of growth, is because we have not learned how to receive what we need from God. So we make the same mistake that the Jewish nation made. “Not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Rom.10:3 NASB).

If we intend to become Christ-like, we must acknowledge from the start that we cannot get there by direct effort. We are aiming at the wrong goal. Instead, we should aim at learning how to engage with God in ways that change our heart. As our heart becomes molded by God, we will then be able to live in the way God designed us to live, the way we are called to live. If that seems hard to grasp, it is only because we have not been taught how to live this way. Our hope is that by the time you finish this book, you will not only know how to engage with God for change, but you will have actually done so!

The Role of Holy Spirit is Different

As stated above, the Holy Spirit was not given to us to enable us to keep a new set of rules. That is one of the most persistent myths regarding His role in our lives, and it comes from not understanding His real ministry and from misunderstanding the process of spiritual formation. Even leading theologians teach that “participating with God” means if you do all the right

things the best way you can, the Spirit will encourage you and empower you to do those things. There is so much wrong with that perspective that it is hard to know where to begin.

First, the ministry of the Holy Spirit becomes almost indiscernible. Often a person will exclaim, "I don't know how I could have done that without God's help." Now to be clear, I do believe there are times that the Holy Spirit sustains us in ways beyond our normal capacity. But we must also stop a minute and notice that people who are not Christian, or even hostile to Christianity, do hard things all the time, even heroic things. And they often look back and say, "I don't know how I did that!" So how *do* they do that? And when I do something hard, how much is me and how much is God? To be honest, I have no real way of knowing what part is God and what part is me. So if the Spirit's main job is to give us the power to do what we are trying our best to do, we actually have relatively little real awareness of what He is doing in our life.

Second, this does not sound anything like the ministry of the Spirit as described by Jesus. According to John 14-17, the Holy Spirit's primary ministry is to mentor us about life in the kingdom. Now there are a number of reasons why this idea may be hard for Christians to grasp, so what often happens to this passage is that it gets turned into something we are familiar with, like learning from Bible studies or listening to sermons. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. To make this into something commonplace is to miss the fact that this is a radically different approach to life.

The Holy Spirit is not someone who follows us around and gives us a booster shot when we try to do good things. He is the one that *we* are supposed to follow! *He* is the active leader, and we are to learn how to live by His direction. Most of us have never been taught what that means or how to do that, and many have only the vaguest notion of who the Spirit is and what He does. But His role in our lives was never meant to be that abstract. He was given to us as a life-giving companion and mentor with whom we would have direct contact.

While Jesus was on the earth, His disciples were completely dependent upon Him for every bit of direction and insight they had into what God was doing in the world. He opened up to them the character of God, He revealed the distrust that underwrote their anxieties, He corrected their faulty thinking, cleared up their distorted values, and gave them understanding of things that they had been clueless about before. Much of that training was in relation to whatever else they were involved with at the time – whether being confronted by religious leaders or discussing eternal life with a rich man or settling a disagreement about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. His teaching was always relevant and tailored to the people He was speaking to, because He knew what it was that they needed to hear so they could see its significance in the moment.

When Jesus left the earth, the disciples' dependence did not decrease, it became greater than ever. They were not suddenly left to their own wisdom to figure out which principles applied in a given instance. Jesus gave them the Spirit to pick up where He left off, to continue the training that they would need throughout their lives. And the Spirit continues to teach in much the same way that Jesus did, turning the spiritual world right side up, event by event, opening our eyes to the way God sees things instead of the ways that we see them.

The problem is, we have lost the art of being mentored. We no longer know how to listen or how to engage Him in conversation so that our spirit can be retrained in the light of the kingdom. That leaves us in the precarious position of being more or less self-taught, doing our best to extract what principles we can see in the text and apply them to our life. Truth is, we are not that good at it. By taking this approach we cut ourselves off from the most important resource we have been given, the Spirit Himself.

If we could clearly see the choice we have before us, between being taught by the Spirit of Truth or by the best practical theologians, it would be a no-brainer. The only reason we have trouble with this paradigm shift is that most of us have had little to no experience in being taught by the Holy Spirit, and so we cannot make sense of the choice. But if we suppose for a

minute that it is possible to have conversations with God about our life, and take the time to learn how to do this, then we open the door to a way of life that we never thought possible.

Aside from the vast difference in wisdom between our thoughts and God's, a tremendous difference exists between the *voice* of God and our own. Although at times we can say true things to ourselves and each other that we need to hear, God's voice has a power that we cannot possibly imitate, a power that can birth new life and transform minds that have been malformed by life experience in a broken world. When He speaks to us, the words get in deeper and have more impact than when we say them. That is why we need His wisdom, spoken by His Spirit.

That brings us to the next main difference between spiritual formation and other ways of pursuing growth.

The Means We Depend On for Change are Different

Nearly all discipleship programs have a plan for people to follow that involves Bible study, learning about prayer and some of the more important doctrines, developing good habits, attending church and joining a small group, and for those who show potential, training on how to lead such studies and groups. This is all good as far as Christian education goes. But this approach has a hole in it that is big enough to swallow your soul.

First, what is left unsaid in most programs is actually the most important part – how to engage with God. We are taught how to *pray to* God, but we are almost never shown how to *listen to* Him or *receive from* Him. In terms of what we miss by way of necessary training, this is like trying to learn how to fly a jet liner by studying books and never sitting in a real jet. This deafening silence about listening in prayer has a very powerful impact on our assumptions about what is possible. We learn from its absence in our teaching that it is either unimportant or unreliable or impossible.

Second, the underlying presupposition of the average discipleship program is that with enough information and enough motivation, you can grow spiritually and make this Christian life work. For people who are converted from a spiritually impoverished lifestyle, this may actually feel like

water in the desert and help them in many ways – for a while. Giving God’s truth to a person who was spiritually confused can be like handing a compass to a person lost in the woods. That’s a good thing.

But most people find that after about three to five years they no longer know where to go, spiritually speaking. Whatever issues they live with that have not been impacted by their church involvement become a continual source of frustration and defeat, a feeling that something important is missing in their relationship to God, something that they cannot seem to “get.” Their training tells them to try harder and be more dedicated. But the harder they try the more impossible the task seems to become. They may doubt themselves, they may doubt God, or they may just give up. Many turn to books and conferences looking for answers. Some begin seeking to have power encounters with God.

Sadly, those who struggle with some stubborn sin, nagging self-doubt or painful memory are usually told they need to be more committed, more repentant, or more obedient to the things they already know. After all, Christians are not supposed to have emotional problems or sin that cannot be overcome. Anyone who is unable to “succeed” in their spiritual walk is moved to the back of the class in the hope that they will not be too noticeable or disruptive.

Christian formation takes an entirely different approach to spiritual growth and recovery. By discovering how to depend on the Holy Spirit as our Mentor, we learn to have conversations with Him about our life, our wounds, and our failings, and how to receive His healing ministry in the deepest parts of our soul. We acknowledge from the beginning that we cannot change our nature by an act of the will or by beating it into submission. Transformation is something only God can do in us. Our part in that process is *not* to do everything we can in our own strength, hoping that God will mysteriously alter our heart as a reward for our effort. Rather we give up on trying to force the right outcome by our own power, and engage with Him directly and ask Him what He wants to do or say to us and how He wants us to participate in the process. Dependence upon God is

then no longer a euphemism that means relying on our grasp of doctrine, it is an everyday experience that is fleshed out in tangible interactions with Him. That is how we change and grow.

In short, we do not produce the fruit of the Spirit by trying to produce fruit. We become fruitful when we connect well to the Vine. Discipling programs often try to teach people how to *act as if* they have the life of the Spirit, without actually helping them have that life. In Christian formation, we draw our life from God rather than try to change our heart and mind by sheer resolve. That brings us to entirely different places.

Our Relationship With God is Qualitatively Different

One day when I asked a friend of mine how his relationship with God was going, he hesitated for a few moments and then began, “Well, the Bible study I’m leading on Sunday mornings seems to be going OK. As for the rest, I’m not so sure. I know it could be better. I’m still dealing with my anger issues, my wife and I fight about a lot of stupid things, and I have yet to get involved in one of the small groups at church.” After acknowledging his struggles and empathizing with his efforts, I repeated my question. “How is your relationship with God going?” He responded with a quizzical look and asked, “You mean my quiet time?”

It is interesting that when you ask people about the quality of their relationship with God, they will talk about the things that they do, whether they do them well or poorly, and how they measure up against some ideal standard of what a Christian ought to be like. For the vast majority of Christians, the phrase “relationship with God” is almost synonymous with the phrase “how well I am doing in my Christian obligations.”

But relationship with God is not about how we are performing or how many vices we have conquered. Imagine for a moment that when you ask someone about their relationship with a favorite professor they respond with, “Well, I get to most of the classes on time, I’m getting a 3.5 in his classes, and I’m fairly certain I’ll pass the final without too much trouble.” Those things might have some connection, but they tell you almost nothing about that person’s relationship with the professor.

A genuine relationship has some substance to it, an emotional closeness, a trust that is tangible and meaningful, and an expression of time together, with conversations and gifts of life from one to another. Yet for most Christians, their relationship to God is about on par with their relationship to their banker. They know how to ask for help when they need it, but they have no idea what the guy even looks like.

My friend's question about his quiet time is getting closer to the point, but may or may not have anything to do with a real connection to God. A time set aside to be with God is an essential part of building a relationship with Him. Unfortunately, most of us have been taught to have a Quiet Time that bears a striking resemblance to cramming for a test. It looks and feels more like doing homework than connecting with a person.

The very fact that we confuse *having a relationship with God* with doing Bible study or going to church or conquering sin ought to be evidence enough that something is terribly wrong in the way many Christians have been trained.

A major part of Christian formation is understanding the nature of our relationship with God and learning how to *be with* Him, not just think *about* Him or have correct theology about Him. An authentic relationship with God is a lot more than just being legally adopted into heaven's family tree. It is something we need to give time and attention to because relationships involve shared experience and a knowing of each others heart. Even a strong bond with another person will change us in ways we do not expect and in ways we could not accomplish in isolation. Much more, a functioning relationship with God will change us from the inside out.

Many Christians today have more of an *arrangement* with God than a relationship. The arrangement goes something like this: "God, I will believe Your explanation of reality and confess my need for Your redemption, and in return You will take me to heaven when I die. And then in gratitude for what You have done for me, I will try my best to do Christian-like things and live an ethical lifestyle." In many places this sort of thing actually passes for the gospel message.

As delicately as I can put it, that kind of transaction is a travesty, a mere caricature of the Good News. Jesus did not come to earth to make a deal with us. He came to offer us LIFE itself, an invitation to live in the presence of God. These words are not some fancy way of talking about a legal contract. They are the very heart of the matter. God came to participate in a tangible, substantive relationship with us that is as real as any we have with another human being, only far more life-giving.

Rather than view our relationship with God as primarily an arrangement whereby we get to have *life after death*, Christian formation views our relationship with God as the very definition of *life itself*, a relationship that leads to living forever with the King. Only a perspective of this nature can make any sense of the passion of the early followers and the kind of language they employed in their writings.

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We Address Spiritual Struggles Differently

Judgmentalism is not just a symptom of an unkind spirit, it is a predictable result of the way in which much of the Christian world views spiritual development and its related struggles. In our performance-oriented approach to Christianity, those who have difficulty with old wounding or obvious persistent sin are often viewed as having a weak will or character. If we believe that it is possible to achieve the Christian life through obedience to the principles we see in Scripture, then it would only be natural to assume that most spiritual problems can be blamed on one of the following:

- Not committed enough.
- Not obedient enough.
- Too preoccupied with self.
- Failure to forgive.
- Unconfessed sin.

Of course, rebellious people do exist. So in some cases one or more of these reasons these might be partially true statements. More on that later. For most people though, these explanations land on the soul like a ton of rock, condemning them for having trouble in their spiritual walk. Not only that, but those who offer such pat answers generally offer little else – nothing that will help the struggling person who asked for a life saver and got handed an anchor.

Again, all of this is entirely predictable. When Christians do not understand the true nature of spiritual recovery and growth, they cannot offer meaningful help to those who have trouble living up to the faulty paradigm they were given. For the majority who find the performance-driven life impossible, there is a double failure. First, because they were told to follow a law-based system that could not possibly give life, and then because they were condemned for not making it work!

The way out of this mess is to see the fallacy of trying to grow up by following *principles*, and return to the original message of following a *person*, developing a functional relationship that gives life and getting to know our Mentor who can actually help us with our struggles, not just cite laws from a distance.

Rather than try to coerce obedience from an already beleaguered traveler, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the underlying causes for our malfunctions, heals those wounds that keep us bound in fear, anger, and hopelessness, and then shows us what we need to see in order to move forward. Our part in the process is to run to Him when we are in trouble, open ourselves to His teaching and training, and receive from Him what we need in order to grow and change.

Again let me emphasize that this is not a jazzed up way of talking about figuring things out on our own “with God's help,” but a direct engagement with God in order to receive what we need. Learning to engage with God in this way is startlingly effective in breaking the destructive patterns in our lives so that we are free to live as God intended. Instead of the “try harder” approach to spiritual struggles, we come to grips with the limitations of our

resolve and our energy, and ask God to do in us what we are unable to do – change who we are from the inside out.

A CLOSER LOOK AT COMMON APPROACHES

I do not mean to belabor this issue, but because this is so entrenched in our current Christian culture it may be quite helpful to take another look at the dominant paradigm of Christian growth, how it came about, why we buy into it, and why it fails to deliver what it promises.

How We Got Derailed

At the risk of offending some, allow me to make some historical observations. First of all, in many ways we are still suffering from the institutionalization of the Church that took place in the fourth century after Christianity became legalized in the Roman empire. Once in place, *the institution* quickly became the means for people to get to God, and consequently came to be seen as the dispenser of grace. People were no longer taught how to engage with the Holy Spirit, but were instead instructed to go through the clergy for their spiritual needs. This made God very inaccessible and left the average layperson in perpetual need of an “expert” who would approach God for them.

With the coming of the Reformation, we reclaimed much of our access to God – we could pray to Him and receive His forgiveness directly. But in the process a new problem was created, that of hashing out doctrine. As history shows, sorting out doctrine has consumed much of the life of the Protestant movement and resulted in literally thousands of fractures between Christians. Important as it was, the fervor and dedication to pure doctrine tended to foster the belief that the more correct your theology was, the closer you would be to God. Even today many people mistake correct doctrine for spiritual development. Good theology is necessary to point you in the right direction, but it will not feed your soul.

Add to this the reverence for learning that developed during the Renaissance, and understandably you have the makings for an intellectual

form of Christianity that has little room for God's direct guidance. Bible knowledge can easily replace authentic experience of God, with little notice of what has been lost. Indeed, it would seem that so much has been gained (as opposed to an ignorant kind of faith) that it could be mistaken for having a relationship with God.

With a few notable exceptions, the old problem that never got resolved was the lack of direct connection to God which is the birthright of every believer. Instead of relearning how to engage with God as our source of life, we depended on our new doctrines. We extracted the Biblical principles necessary for discerning between right and wrong, and then used those principles to try and fill the deficit left by our relative distance from God. Over the years there have been changes in the indicators that we rely on to tell who is following well and who is not. But the basic premise has remained intact, that given the right information you should be able to be a good Christian.

What Most Christian Training Looks Like Today

As noted earlier, if you were to ask the average person how you can grow as a Christian, you will probably get an answer that contains the following elements: pray, read your Bible, repent of any sins you become aware of, and get involved in church ministry. These all sound rather self-evident and make good sense. But when we begin to take these apart and look at what they really mean, there is a great deal wrong with this approach to growth and some very important things missing.

First, we are usually taught that prayer is *talking to* God. Few places around the globe teach Christians how to *listen* to God. In many places they are even discouraged from trying. In some circles people are taught with total certainty that God stopped talking at the end of the first century, and anything we think we hear from God today must be considered suspect at best. Yet the Bible itself is *full* of stories of people who heard from God and stories about those who *failed* to hear. Those to whom Paul wrote were evidently quite accustomed to hearing from God. We might even ask how

we are supposed to apply the Bible at all, if indeed it was written to people with completely different resources than we have.

If the suggestion that we can hear from God runs against your theological convictions in any way, I would ask that you suspend judgment on this aspect of spiritual formation until Chapter 3 where we take this up in detail.³ In the mean time, just for the sake of argument, consider how great a tragedy it would be if God intended for us to rely on His voice for our spiritual food but we gave that up because it seemed too risky. Such a vacuum might actually explain the current state of affairs in the Western Church.

Second, the admonition to read your Bible is another mixed message. We know that Bible study is crucial to understanding the Christian life, because it is the only revelation God gave to His people as a whole, and because it is the only reliable pointer back to God. But Jesus Himself warned against substituting the Scriptures for the Person of God.⁴ The reason the Bible is full of stories of people who listened to God is that we are being shown what a Spirit-directed life looks like. To reduce those stories to ethical issues and doctrines is to fall into the same problem we see in those to whom Jesus was talking.

Furthermore, attempting to read the Bible without the guidance of the Holy Spirit is like trying to perform brain surgery from a medical textbook without ever having been mentored in the process. We get it wrong, and the results are not good.

Third, we are told to repent of sin in our life. Again, a good thing to do. However, this directive is accompanied by a great many unspoken premises that may actually keep us from living as God intended. Repentance today has come to mean, “Be sorry and try harder in the future to get it right.” But this assumes we can do it better if we just care enough about the problem.

³ I would also heartily recommend *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard

⁴ “You search the scriptures, because you think that in *them* you will find life. But the purpose of the scriptures is to *point to* the source of life, which is *me*.” (Jn.5:39, paraphrased)

While that may be true for a few limited issues some of the time, this approach does little to nothing for deeply embedded problems, the kind where we get caught in a cycle of fail-repent-try-fail-repent, over and over.

As we will see in Chapter 9, repentance of this type intervenes at the wrong place in the cycle of defeat and uses the wrong tools. If we step back and consider a broader concept of repentance as “wanting whatever it takes to be free of this problem” we open the door to some highly accessible, life-giving options that come from God Himself rather than relying on our own efforts to change.

Fourth, we are told to get involved in ministry. Once again, an idea that has some merit. Yet this time the unspoken assumption is that spiritual activity will foster growth. And in some very small ways, it can. But doing good things does not make you a better person. The idea that if you pedal fast enough you will grow your character is terribly misguided and leads to all sorts of problems.

But the problem gets worse. An underlying presupposition often accompanies this push to “do” ministry that can obscure the very nature of growth. In some Christian circles, the group is more or less divided into those who minister and those who are ministered to, as if the need for ministry was a temporary condition. Other places have an explicit road map whereby people (1) join, (2) get trained, and (3) get involved, almost like a multilevel marketing program. When this is the dominant paradigm of church involvement, complete with charts and graphs on the wall, the whole matter of how the Holy Spirit changes lives tends to get buried somewhere in all the activity.

Motivating Christians to To Do the Right Things

Another interesting problem that is present in traditional discipleship models is that of trying to motivate people to do more in regard to their spiritual journey. The obvious question is, “Why bother? I’m going to heaven when I die. What difference does it make how much effort I make in the mean time?”

From the perspective of Christian formation, that is not even a legitimate question because it is rooted in an impoverished view of the gospel. But in much of the Christian world this issue of motivation has been a major problem. Given all that we have said so far, it is not too surprising to hear that the number one reason given for why Christians should try to grow spiritually is out of gratitude for God's gift of eternal life. "After all that God has done for you, you ought to at least make an effort to live in a way that is honoring to Him."

In practice this often translates to shaming people into trying to look like they are doing something. Yet that is only a symptom of a much bigger problem, which is turning the gospel into a transaction. There are far more compelling reasons to pursue our growth than being thankful for heaven. But those reasons are rooted in an active, functioning relationship with God, something that is noticeably missing from discipleship models that ignore the mission of the Holy Spirit to train God's people.

What is Missing?

That brings us back to the giant gaping hole that exists in the middle of most traditional approaches to discipleship. *Where is the Holy Spirit?* Virtually every branch of the Christian Church declares that the Holy Spirit is the source of all transformation that occurs in a Christian's life, a process we normally call sanctification or spiritual development toward Christ-likeness. Yet most Christians are unable to articulate what that means in any practical sense. Even in a highly technical discussion among theologians of different backgrounds,⁵ the question of how the Spirit works in us is left highly ambiguous. They quote lots of verses telling us that the Spirit does *something*, and then include a few vague comments along the lines of, "the Spirit helps us live the Christian life."

When they do try to describe the actual details about participating with God, they often will say that the Spirit adds His power to what we do when we are doing the right things, which is really not what the Bible teaches at

⁵ Dieter, et al. *Five Views on Sanctification*

all. When you think about it, if that were true, it puts the Holy Spirit in an incredibly passive position. He has to wait until we do something that He can put His stamp of approval on and then He adds His energy to whatever we are doing.

This understanding of God's action in our lives also introduces a huge problem in regard to explaining why efforts to do ministry or get free of spiritual bondage go unrewarded. Anyone who has put their hand to any form of ministry has experienced empty results at times and even outright resistance from other people. In what way is the Spirit aiding them? For that matter, how does one explain ministry burnout? If the Spirit's job is to empower our efforts, one would think that the harder we worked the more power we would receive. But the evidence appears to say that the more you do the more likely you are to crash and burn.

There is more. Christians everywhere have experienced times when they prayed to be released from some pain or persistent sin without seeing anything change. Where is God then? Why would He not add His power to our efforts to be free? Are we doing something wrong? Do we need more faith? Is there a better way to ask? Are we being punished? Are we being tested?

During the summer of 2008 a leading Christian magazine published a short article from a pastor who supposedly had an insightful explanation for this dilemma. He proposed that God often withheld His hand from our efforts as a way of stripping us of pride. Of course, he had no Scriptural basis for this conjecture. The truth is he was just grasping at straws, hoping to find an explanation for this very difficult question that comes to everyone's mind when all the right prayers and actions come to nothing. Where is God's power? And how long will we need to keep trying this thing before God decides to lend a hand and do something? But these are the kinds of mistaken explanations people come up with when they begin with faulty ideas about how we grow.

Most notable in this paradigm of "God helps those who try real hard" is the complete lack of deliberate, direct engagement with the Spirit of God.

Praying to God for His help is good as far as it goes. But the second we get done praying we either sit back and wait for Him to do something (which is way too passive) or put our best efforts to the task at hand and hope that God comes along and “helps” us (far too much self-effort). Either way, we fail to engage with Him directly and receive what we need for the changes we so desire. Does this not sound like a problem? Should this not get our attention and tell us that something is terribly wrong with our whole approach?

What do we do with all those verses in the New Testament that talk about God being with us, working in us, becoming an artesian well of water gushing out of us, and *leading* us? *We either have to read our experience into those verses to make them sound like something we know about, or else we have to confess that most of us have no idea what what sort of experience the Biblical authors are talking about.* I know that's a very disconcerting thought. But it *would* explain the apparent lack of God's involvement in our efforts to grow. If we have somehow found ourselves in the place of not knowing what it means to engage with the Holy Spirit in our lives, then it would make perfect sense that we cannot figure out why He does not show up the way we think He should! It would also begin to explain why trying harder does very little to solve the real problem.

Back to a Relationship With God

What if God intends for the Christian life to be an experience of God that is far more real and intense than what most of us have known? What if He means for us to know His presence within us? What if He means for us to know not just what He wants us to do *out there*, but to know *what He wants to do in us*?

This is Christian formation: *developing an authentic relationship with God that is vibrant enough to change us from the inside out, and learning how to participate with God in ways that allow Him to bring about that change, so we can become more and more the person God created us to be.*

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SHIFTING THE PARADIGM

If the ideas about the Christian life presented in this chapter are at all valid, then much of the Christian world is in need of a deep paradigm shift – away from a performance-driven Christianity – to a relationship-oriented life with God.

If we are going to actually grow and become more Christ-like, we have to stop trying to *act* like Jesus, and instead focus more on getting to *know* Jesus. Because only when the life of God is truly *in* us will we have any hope of that life coming *out* of us.

But let us not underestimate the size of this paradigm shift. As we have seen above, nearly every aspect of spiritual development has been distorted by our dominant performance-driven mindset. That is why this book has grown to the size that it is. We have many things to unlearn and relearn in order to see what God wants to do in us, and to build the kind of relationship we are talking about.

Changing how we understand change is just the beginning. By the end of this book, our hope is that you will be engaging with God in ways that are literally changing who you are on the inside. Because once you begin to experience this kind of life first hand, you will have no doubt that this is how God intended for us to live.

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If you have enjoyed this excerpt from Chapter 1, please avail yourself of the full version of this book: It is being released in stages beginning July 26, 2013, and will be available at the following places:

Resources.LifeModel.org (see the Thriving: Recover Your Life category and look for “Forming” materials there).

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