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Reformation
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**SPIRITUAL
FORMATION**

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FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

The noun "spirituality" never occurs in the Bible. The Latin form, *spiritualitas*, appeared first in a fifth-century letter. The idea expressed by this first use seems quite close to Paul's use of the term spiritual (*pneumatikos*) in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:25. Christian spirituality is about life in the Spirit if the biblical and historic uses are properly understood and balanced.

Spiritual formation seems to be the rage today, at least in some evangelical circles. Magazines and articles, a whole line of books, hundreds of websites, personal and group retreats at monasteries, and organized prayer walks indicate that this topic is truly alive and well. But will this movement impact our lives, our churches and our prayer for the renewal of the church? I wonder.

I am not skeptical about this. I believe finding various traditions and ancient Christian paths is a good thing generally. It should be fostered by pastors and lay leaders. But will it be another passing fad? I have lived long enough to see programs burst on the scene with great force, involving thousands of Evangelicals for a season, only to disappear again, seemingly leaving us not that much better for the experience. In an age of marketing, could this be another "fad" we try for a time?

I, for one, need the insights of various spiritual traditions and classical Christianity. I find prayer a struggle, fasting a challenge, and spiritual retreat a necessity but something hard to plan and do well. I find reading in general a joy but spiritual reading very difficult to do. I do not like memorization but I need to do more of it. I certainly do not find it easy to

account for my life to any other human person, mentor, director or whatever. For all these reasons, and many more, I need the spiritual formation renewal that has grown over the past decade or so. My guess is that you need it too.



Spiritual direction has a long history in the Christian church. Richard Peace has suggested that it "might even be argued that the roots of spiritual direction are found in the relationship between Jesus and the small group of men whom he called to be apostles or between Paul and the various individuals (such as Timothy) to whom he gave guidance" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, Warren S. Benson, Daryl Eldridge, and Julie Gorman, editors, 655).

As we know this discipline evolved in the fourth to sixth centuries following the conversion of Constantine. The more the Roman Empire became officially Christian the more Christians found they needed spiritual direction in their lives in order to remain distinctly Christian. In this context monasteries and orders arose. In time ordinary Christians looked for help to these "spiritual" people.

Could it be that technology has so charmed our modern world that we need this recovery of spiritual formation more than we realize? I think so. I recognize dangers in this renewal movement but I welcome the rediscovery so long as we add discernment to the mix. Leaders need to immerse themselves in both the literature and the practice of a healthy grace-based spirituality that leads to real godliness. There are serious dangers ahead, but to never begin the journey is to miss out on a reformation that is needed in all of our lives and churches.



The spiritual disciplines are generally part and parcel of the spiritual formation recovery that is going on in our time. The term *spiritual disciplines* refer to various exercises, or patterns of living, that are carried out on a regular basis by individuals or

groups for the purpose of establishing habits that lead to godliness.

As an example, every true Christian acknowledges that prayer is a necessary part of the normal Christian life. To treat prayer as a spiritual discipline means we build into our lives times for prayer and ways for praying effectively. We can learn a great deal about prayer from others. We can learn even more from Christian practices over the centuries. Ritualism is not only a problem for non-Protestants but even the most fervent and ardent Evangelicals. We create our own rituals, often less content informed than those of the more ritualistic traditions we reject. We tend to associate ritual with works and we are petrified of falling into works.

The counsel of John Wesley, a true Evangelical, is helpful at this point. He wrote:

I was surprised to hear an extemporary prayer and a written sermon. Are not then the words we speak to God to be set in order at least as carefully as those we speak to our fellow-worms (Works, XVIII, 460)?

And further, Wesley says, "By our reading prayers we prevent our peoples contacting a hatred for forms of prayer, which would naturally be the case if we always prayed extempore" (*The Works of John Wesley*, Thomas Jackson III, editor, XIII, 13.)

Read that again very slowly. Wesley is suggesting, rightly I believe, that we easily fall into forms by the use of our extemporaneous means of speech and practice. I haven't met a Christian yet whose prayer life was not powerfully formed by the influence of someone else, or a group of people they first heard pray aloud. The language and form soon become a ritual of their own. In time the whole experience is quite unsatisfying. I have asked hundreds of Evangelicals, "Are you satisfied that you pray meaningfully and earnestly on a regular basis?" Almost all confess they need great help. Perhaps the spiritual formation movement will reacquaint us with the kinds of spiritual disciplines that will greatly aid many of us.



I am not generally a list person. I do, however, carry around a simple “to do” list for my work/project routines. I find a great deal of evangelical debate these days about what list of spiritual disciplines should we adopt? Richard Peace has noted that there is no *single list* of all the disciplines. And different writers categorize the disciplines in very different ways. This is one reason for the popularity of books by best-selling authors like Dallas Willard and Richard Foster.

Dallas Willard properly tells us that practicing the spiritual disciplines “is not a mark of exceptional piety; it is a sign of need” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, Warren S. Benson, Daryl Eldridge, and Julie Gorman, editors, cited by Richard Peace on 655). These disciplines are not about mastering our lists, or finding a way to becoming exceptional Christians, but rather they are about simple faithfulness to Jesus on a day-to-day basis. We are not meriting anything by pursuing deeper spirituality. We are simply acting upon what we are and know by virtue of our union with Christ.