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The Future of Spiritual Formation

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It is a challenge to be asked by the editor to write an essay on "the future of Spiritual formation." When I was first asked to write an essay shortly after World War II, the essay requested was simply: "Why I am still a Christian." But life has got a lot more complicated since then. The new "Dictionary of Christian Spirituality," edited by Dr. Glen Scorgie, illustrates just how much more complex the issue of being formed as a Christian[1] has now become. The purpose, then, of this essay is to map out the distinctive between what is "simple" and what lies "complex" in the Christian's spiritual formation.

THE BASIC SIMPLICITY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

When we list all the nomenclature today for "soul care," "spiritual direction," "spiritual formation,"[2] an immediate response might be simply, but what about the time-honored biblical term "discipleship," of learning how to "follow Christ;" is this no longer enough? True, there had been a cultural Jewish heritage of learning to become a disciple within diverse rabbinical schools, which Jesus knew within his own boyhood, and yet which he challenged so profoundly. Behind this was also the Greek *paideia* education, of having a mentor, in whose steps the student followed and modeled in character.

Jesus introduced a radical issue hitherto never raised with such personal consequences: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34)[3]. As Ernest E. Best notes in his significant study,[4] this is a lifelong process of selflessness, "the denial of self" itself, and of cross-bearing, "willing to make any sacrifice necessary," to become more Christ-like.

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[1] Glen G. Scorgie et al., *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

[2] James M. Houston, *Joyful Exiles: Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2006), 35–36.

[3] All Scripture taken from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

[4] Ernest E. Best, *Following Jesus* (Sheffield: J.S.O.T., 1981).

The finest conference on Christian discipleship I have ever been privileged to attend was in Sabah a decade ago. There, a Malaysian lay Christian, a medical doctor, convened Christian leaders from southeast Asia and Australia to revive the mission of discipleship today. Without the necessary public funds, our brother sold his own lovely home to use the money to fund the event. More than any of the speakers he demonstrated what discipleship really is: the personal sacrifice of self-giving. It is the exchange of self-management for surrender to a life lived "in Christ,"[5] no longer to please one's self, but to be well pleasing to God. It requires our dying for his living in us.[6] Writing to the Colossians, Paul identifies this "dying" with the hidden life—"For you died and your life is now [being] hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). "We cannot achieve this process wholly in this existence, so it remains a present participle—we are 'dying away' through-out our earth-bound existence, and it requires a continuous hiding."[7]

For sinful human beings, this moral exchange, "not I, but Christ living in me," is the hardest sacrificial exchange we can ever make. One cartoon of a churches women's tea party depicts the hostess saying: "No, I have never ever *died* to sin, though I once felt a little faint!" Dietrich Bonhoeffer's well-known classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, demonstrates that discipleship might cost us our lives, physically. But more usually, as M. Wilkins outlined in his challenging work, *Following the Master*, it means embracing a new way of life, with a new sense of identity, not as a program but as a life-task.[8] What is basic, is knowing the source of our identity is not in self-making, professionally or functionally in what we "do," but relationally in "being" in Jesus Christ alone.

Two years before he died, John Stott wrote a farewell book about his life-long convictions: *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling*.[9] He describes eight characteristics that are commonly neglected in making "following Jesus," the agenda of our life. His selection fits the profile of his personality and his own narrative, inviting the reader to draw up the characteristics that we in turn will find personally compelling. For discipleship is a "personal" call, not an abstract profession, nor a program, but a daily living with Jesus Christ. This can only be taken seriously with daily devotions, spending time in continual prayer, reading and meditating each day on a passage of the Bible, and the celebration of God's daily presence.

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[5] E. Stanley Jones, *In Christ: 364 Meditations on passages from the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961).

[6] Jones, *In Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

[7] James M. Houston, *Joyful Exiles: Life in Christ on the Dangerous Edge of Things* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2006), 35–36.

[8] M. Wilkins, *Following the Master* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[9] John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2010).

However, our cultural environment is prone to generate pseudo-simplicity of being a Christian. The publishing and popular success of "best-sellers," excellent as they may be, can create an "illusionary" or an "imprisoned perspective" on the richness of the Gospel. Even the sacred mystery of the Bible can be made shallow, to reflect the particular perspective of a particular "intentioned ministry." Clearly, serious intent is needed for the call to "follow Jesus," but our culture tends to be unreflective about how it is "marketed." When Christian intent is then commercialized, instead of having an identity "in Christ," it becomes a more robust self-promotion, the antithesis of Christian discipleship! The medium, then, is the message, not Christ's call, a reflection of our own ambitions.

Human efforts to promote discipleship then become like a parade of "changing fashions of ministry." Is this a consequence of becoming too focused upon "a particular program" or "an innovative style of discipling others," which is not biblically critical enough of our own culture, and too ignorant of self-knowledge, and of the dynamics of self-deception? We all need intensity and earnestness of desire to get things done, but in the process, the denial of one's self in such an endeavor may become eclipsed by the preoccupation with "the ministry" itself, and of our own ambitions for a "leadership role." For, as E. Best explains it, this denial of oneself is not simply ascetic practices, severe as they may be—as the denial of "things"—but far more radically in "putting off the old self to put on the new self (as found only in Christ)."[10] Could it be then, that our own unchallenged self-deceived misunderstanding and promotion of soul care/discipleship can confuse and distort our calling "to make disciples"?

Dean Inge wisely observed: "[H]e who is wedded to the spirit of the age, is condemned to be widowed in the next." Over the years our churches have adopted sequentially a variety of national programs all with earnest intent, popular for a season, then fading away. Just being a disciple of Jesus seems very hard to sustain with life-long attention when the environment around us is always craving for something "new." To sustain an earnest spirit, somehow we all need a frequency of "new causes."

Thus specific ministries of Christian discipleship have taken on various cultural nomenclatures. For example, the American "naval" model of the Navigators, as its term implies, started on the flight deck of an American navy ship, inspired by Dawson Trotman. Its military culture then "took off," with the discipline of Scripture memorization. Campus Crusade started with more of "a sales business" model, under the leadership of Bill Bright, in selling its "four spiritual laws." Its early youth leaders had to report "success" of at least five contacts/converts weekly. As one distressed university campus leader confided to me in 1976, she was on the verge of a breakdown trying to get and report on so many "converts" every week! There was a phase when the American Inter-Varsity Fellowship was focused upon "inductive Bible study," as the way to disciple others. Other youth

[10] Ernest E. Best, *Disciples and Discipleship* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986).

models have followed suit, attracting youth by sport activities. All these models, however, suggest that whenever a deliberate promotion is organized too intently, then sooner or later such a model becomes obsolete.

THE MODERN BACKGROUND TO "SOUL FORMATION" AND "SOUL CARE"

With the Roman Catholic spiritual renewal, following on Vatican II, the Ignatian Exercises received a fresh start in the popularity given to "spiritual direction." Was this a religious counterpoise to the secular "therapeutic revolution?" From the 1970s onward, it is not surprising that in the roster of "spiritual directors" some ninety-five percent of the original list were Jesuits, followers of Ignatius of Loyola, who had founded that order for the purposes of the Counter-Reformation.

Now the list of "spiritual directors" contains a much wider and eclectic range of "professional" affiliates from orthodox Christians to New Age spirituality, and even to acceptance of "white witches," some of who are chaplains officially appointed to our secular universities. For "spiritual directors" are now expected to be registered professionally so that their master's or doctor's degrees give them professional qualification, in line with that of therapists and psychologists. Does, then, the professional degree give them more credibility than the authority of doctrinal orthodoxy?

The apostles of the early church had strong views about the dangers of false teachers in their churches, as given in stern warnings in their epistles (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Can evangelicals today, well meaning in their desire for more "spirituality," become so naïvely eclectic in issues of the pursuit of contemporary spirituality? Since only truth stands the test of time these syncretistic adoptions—such as the use of Jungian personality types or the application of the Enneagram—can divert undiscerning Christians with "tools" and "techniques," instead of having a deeper biblical faith.

"Spiritual formation" originates in the training of Roman Catholic priests, whose enrolment began to fall drastically in the post-war cultural revolutionary changes. The acceptance of abortion, birth control, and sexual freedom deeply challenged the unpopular role of its clergy in Roman Catholic countries. The critical need of recruits for the priesthood then became the issue of "priestly formation," to maintain priests loyal to the Magisterium.

The American Protestant "Association of Theological Seminaries" followed this educational cause to apply to "the spiritual formation" of students in Protestant seminaries. The United Methodist Church in their ministry of "the Upper Room" extended "spiritual formation" to include Christians generally. From there it is now spreading through retreat centers, to deepen the quality of Christian life. For the mega-churches of yesterday

are beginning to see a rapid fall-off in membership. Some of its leaders sense quality may now be the primary concern, not quantity. Soon, such mega-churches may lead a new expansion of "retreat centers" for "spiritual direction" and "soul care."

Will then "spiritual formation," "soul care," and other associated interests also have "their day," yielding to something "fresh" or "more relevant" to the changing times? "Formation" is always occurring in our lives. Because of the re-shaping changes in our dynamic environment, we may need to seek de-formative and negative responses. Biblically, this tension between the "unchanging Christ" and the "changing cultures" is faced in the epistle to the Hebrews. We may affirm, "Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8), yet the portraiture of Christ throughout the history of the church has had many interpretations, as Jaraslav Pelikan has pointed out.[11] This is because it is the human tendency to distort the image of Christ to our own culture. Rather it is when we are counter-cultural, symbolically being "outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (Heb. 13:13), that our unchanging discipleship reflects truly the unchanging Christ.

It is not then for us to select a way of life, which suits our personality and preference. No, the apostle Paul seeks pastorally to be like a child-nurse ". . . until Christ may be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). Likewise the spiritual director is ideally in selfless service, listening more than directing, to facilitate the insights of the directee to gain his or her own self-understanding before God. That is why confession, remains such a central part in soul care, as being as transformational, not as conformity with the world but as conformity to the likeness of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). Some have thought psycho-analysis was a threat to the Christian ministry of confession. Max Thurian, founder of the Taize movement, in exploring the role of confession has concluded: "The psychological analysis of sin, so far from weakening the Christian's sense of sin and responsibility, will in fact make him more acutely aware of these things."[12] Truth is what we must live by, whether gained by science or faith. In fact, the professional cult of psycho-analysis has been exposed to be pseudo-scientific and exaggerated. Yet the Christian should always welcome whatever helps us to penetrate the layers of self-deception. For the aim is not exposure *per se*, but soul cure. Just as a doctor is not content with the diagnosis of a disease, but of its healing.

THE PASTORAL COMPLEXITY OF 'SOUL CURE'

"Soul care" today, is perhaps a pastoral shift from the much more traditional role of being "sin-sick," and of the need of "soul-cure." We all

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[11] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999).

[12] Max Thurian, *Confession* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1958), 81.

need primarily a relational curative focus, or even in the stronger language of the apostle, of "being rescued from the dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13). "Sin" has become a peripheral category, which needs to be reinvigorated in realistic ways by Christians. Throughout the pastoral history of the church, the recognition of "the seven cardinal sins/vices" kept the personal relevance of sin in focus. It has been reintroduced by a secular focus for non-Christians in the obvious context of evil since the wars of the twentieth century. This, it is argued, is to define evil from an existential and phenomenological perspective, even when a secular culture cannot accept "God." This is the argument of Stanford Lyman in his scholarly work, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil.*[13]

Putting it forcibly, "sin" should become much more connected with all of our emotions, and with all of our relationships. Much more than merely an infraction of the law, sin needs to be understood as intrinsically anti-relational—with God, with other people, within ourselves, and indeed with our entire environment, as expressive of God's creation. For we as humans are made in the image of God, and are created for communion with God. Sin then, is anti-creational, against both the Creator and all his creation.

Significantly, we have also lost the need for, and the exercise of, "compunction," of "confession," and of "penitence." The Latin term *compunction* from *com-pungere*, "to puncture with" as a sharp thorn may pierce the flesh, began to be used commonly after the end of the second century, as a deep distress and suffering caused by the presence of sin. Yet it expresses the earlier experience of Peter when at the trial of Jesus, he denied his Lord three times. Significantly Jesus had foretold that this would happen at the dawn of the new day, when the cock crows. This occurred then between the death of Christ when evil did its worse, and the resurrection of Christ, when the love of God triumphed over sin and death. This was in turn experienced by the audience addressed by Peter, after the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37), leading to a massive change of heart with the baptism of about three thousand new disciples. There followed a long tradition that heart-woundedness by the conviction of sin must precede soul cure by the grace of God. Evangelical Christians need therefore to recover focus as much upon the Petrine archetype of "compunction," as customarily they have given to the Pauline illumination of conversion "on the Damascus road."

While the category of "spiritual direction" may have eclipsed the role of the "confessor," the essence of soul cure remains the primary need of confession of sin(s). Even Luther, who reacted so strongly to the abuse of confession, affirmed: "If you are too proud to confess your sins, we conclude that you are no Christian." He urged further "go and confess, and use this means to health."[14] Protestants have argued that habitual confession loses its poignancy, so what about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? That

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[13] Stanford M. Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil* (Lanham, MD: General Hall, 1989).

[14] Quoted by Max Thurian, *Confession* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1958), 29.

too can lose its sacred participation in the Body of Christ. Thus in the future ministry of soul cure, confession needs stronger reinforcement rather than what is now commonly being practiced.

We recognize in medical practice today that one of the great advances of medicine lies in revealing hidden diseases that are life threatening without the patient ever being aware of their existence. Likewise in the healing that the soul may require, the unveiling of hidden thoughts, and of inordinate desires, is of critical importance. In the spiritual direction of the desert fathers, as elaborated by Pachomius and John Cassian, disclosure of the *logismoi*, or inner thoughts, was central to their pastoral ministry. For when once accepted by insight, confession, and repentance, these "inner thoughts" lose their grip upon the soul, while also deepening more intimate individuation in Christ. But gentleness and humility are essential too, so that we do not expose such repressed and denied vices too abruptly, or without compassion and loving concern for the one making self-discovery, and self-disclosure. But again as the apostle assures us: "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

The basic issue today for spiritual transformation is perhaps the sources for identity. In the past, identity was a relational given—the son of so-and-so. Increasingly our culture has been about self-creating identity, largely because of the central importance given to professions. No doubt this trend of "self-making identity" will intensify. As Robert Mulholland succinctly puts it: "transformation in the spiritual life is the process of growth from a false identity as a pervasively self-referenced being to a true identity of a pervasively God-referenced being."[15] It is then predictable as our culture becomes more narcissistic and individualistic with the "Electronic Revolution," the focus on sources of identity will intensify narcissistically.[16]

Meanwhile in the last decade, neuroscientists have intensified their research into the neurobiology of interpersonal emotions and relationships, as pioneered by Daniel J. Siegel in his book, *The Developing Mind*.[17] The human brain is now being interpreted as the most amazing source of billions of emotional connections. Search Google "mirror neurons" and discover a new library of references about human connectivity. Christians will now be able to affirm and to demonstrate more than ever before how we have been created as relational beings; far more profoundly "wired" to be "personal" than the "Cartesian isolated self" could ever have imagined possible. This line of thought has pressed forward by colleagues of Siegel,

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[15] M. Robert Mulholland, "Spirituality and Transformation," *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 221.

[16] James M. Houston, "The Credibility of the Christian Life in the Contemporary Narcissistic Society," *Knowing & Doing*, C.S. Lewis Institute (Fall 2010).

[17] Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

such as Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relations*,[18] and Diana Fosha, *The Healing Power of Emotion.*[19] Pastorally, personal and practical connections have been explored within this new field of neuroscience by a Christian psychiatrist Curt Thompson, in his recent book, *Anatomy of the Soul.*[20] As he concludes: "The more that memory, emotion, attachment, and narrative are kept in view, the more theology will lead to the emergence of the mind of Christ and the strengthening of his Body."[21] This implies that left-thinking professional theologians, still affected by the evangelicalism of the Enlightenment legacy, and who present a logical set of posited truths to convince others, will become increasingly irrelevant to the pastoral concerns of post-modernity.

Finally, the demographics of an aging population in the urbanized world are challenging us all with new cultural issues. Lowering fertility rates, with the advances of gerontology to extend the lifespan, are doubling the growing shift from youth to aging seniors. Yet, living longer without growing spirituality for such longevity only intensifies the problem of the old of today: feeling useless, marginalized, bored, lonely, depressed, and having exaggerated negative traits of character. As we have pointed out in our recent book, *A Vision for the Aging Church,*[22] our churches and seminaries are not prepared for this on-coming tsunami of a disproportionate, aging population. Where will the financial resources come from for escalating pension funds, Medicare, and social services when voluntarism has retreated and professional services have intensified?

Moreover, the quantity of individuals growing old as "seniors," far outstrips quantifiably "elders," who in the biblical sense are mature persons wholly motivated to the community. Since in our culture of achieving "functional identities," many of our denominations do not recognize the biblical role of "the elder;" instead all they have are "deacons," who are "doing things." This dysfunctional mind-set, in a youth culture afraid of aging, presents already a huge challenge to the soul care of whole people of God, old and young. As one Jewish writer—still benefitting from the re-

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[18] Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[19] Diana Fosha, Daniel J. Siegel, and Marion Solomon, *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development and Clinical Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

[20] Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, TX: SaltRiver, Tyndale House, 2010).

[21] Thompson, 262.

[22] James M. Houston, and Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2011).

spect given to "elders"—has written, *From Aging to Saging: a Profound New Vision of Growing Older.*[23]

Another pastoral challenge given recent medical advances is the ability of physicians to give a prognosis of the length of life remaining to those diagnosed with fatal diseases. Christians in the ministry of soul care will increasingly be faced with the challenges of counseling such patients and their families, afflicted with incurable diseases, of mind and body. These could be the best years of life for the afflicted as well as the caregivers, or they could be the worst. This challenge is associated with a new literary genre, which is developing, of those recording their personal stories of their own fatal afflictions. They may be muted stories such as: "I am still a 'person' even though I have dementia,"[24] or "I am travelling through the landscape of cancer, but I am still alive,"[25] or "I have Parkinson's—losing my role as Professor of Cardiology at Harvard—but I can still diagnose the progressive stages of my fatal disease."[26] How then, are these afflictions revising our understanding of the dignity of being "human," as expressive of the *imago dei*?

Thus the qualifying of the Christian identity continues to grow and to deepen, through all the cultural changes we face. All this challenges us to deepen and enrich our existential faith to become more robustly "personal" and allow the individualistic tendencies of a self-directed and self-fulfilled life wilt and indeed die. Then the integration of a simple life of discipleship will also be expressive of a complex awareness of what it means to be "persons in Christ," and as such true elders, and not tragically stunted individuals and lonely, bored, and depressed seniors. Could it be then, that an ageing society will also become a more humane society?[27]

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[23] Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and Ronald S. Miller, *From Aging to Saging: a Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1997).

[24] Lisa Genova, *Still Alice* (New York: Pocket Books, 2009).

[25] Walter Wangerin, *Letters from the Landscape of Cancer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

[26] Thomas Graboys, MD, and Peter Zheutlin, *Life in the Balance, a Physician's Memoirs of Life, Love, and Loss with Parkinson's Disease and Dementia* (New York: Union Square Press, 2009); see also Helmut Dubiel, *Deep in the Brain: Living with Parkinson's Disease*, trans. Philip Schmitz (New York: Europa Editions, 2006).

[27] Paul Tournier, *Learn to Grow Old* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1971), 36–77.