

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN CHRIST *and* MISSION WITH CHRIST



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The perennial tension between the contemplative life and the active life, between spiritual formation in Christ and mission with Christ,¹ might be likened to the tension between breathing in and breathing out. Can there be any breathing in without breathing out? Can there be any breathing out without breathing in? One might say, “Yes”; but the consequences are less than desirable! There is a symbiotic reality here. There are not three classes of humans: “breathers in,” “breathers out,” and “breathers in and out.” Healthy physical life requires a synergy of breathing in and out. In this synergy, however, there must be a breathing in before there can be a breathing out. Technically, there can be a breathing in without a breathing out but it is impossible for there to be a breathing out without a prior breathing in.

The dynamic of breathing provides a useful analogy for the Christian spiritual life. No healthy spiritual formation in Christ is possible apart from mission with Christ. Similarly, no transformative mission with Christ is possible apart from formation in Christ. The question remains, however, must there not be formation in Christ (breathing in) before there can be mission with Christ (breathing out)?

Perhaps a place to begin is with the spiritual nature of human existence. The essentially materialistic worldview of our age presumes that human life at its core is a physical phenomenon developed to its present state over eons of evolution. Within such a perception, spirituality² is usually understood to be an “add on,” possibly beneficial but not essential. The consequence of such understanding reduces spirituality to a “mechanism” or “method” which enables persons to enhance certain aspects of their lives and/or to function more effectively.

What if, however, human existence at its core is a spiritual reality? Suppose, rather than being physical beings incorporating various spiritualities,

¹ “With Christ” will be used throughout rather than “for Christ.” The latter implies we are doing something on our own whereas the former indicates our participation in what Christ is already doing in the world.

² “Spirituality” is used here in its broadest sense to include the diverse multitude of spiritualities being practiced today and not limited to a Christian context.

we are spiritual beings incarnate in a physical life and creation? This perspective leads to two broad options with respect to human existence: gnostic and hedonistic. The gnostic option views the created order as bad or evil at worst or inconsequential at best. Such a negative posture toward creation can lead either to extreme asceticism, minimalizing the role of creation; or to utilitarianism, using and abusing creation because, in the final analysis, it is expendable. The goal of human life is to “escape” from the bondage of matter and be restored as pure spirit. The hedonistic option views the created order as a resource to be enjoyed and as a source of materials for the fulfillment of one’s desires. While this may seem to be an improvement over the negativity of Gnosticism, creation still suffers abuse and diminishment since both options inflict their spirituality upon creation. In other words, they are “in mission” with a spirituality that is inherently destructive to creation and to all those within it.

Mission is an integral aspect of being human. Every human being is a “missionary” of the spirituality which forms their understanding of themselves, others, and creation. Even the anti-spirituality of atheists results in a lived mission which seeks to incarnate that spirituality in the created order.

There is, however, an alternative: Christian spirituality. Many claiming the Christian tradition, like the Gnostics, deny the goodness of creation and look forward to escaping its prison. Others, like the Hedonists, affirm its goodness but only for self-centered motives. Genuine Christian spirituality views humanity as spiritual beings created in the image of God and participating with God in a fallen creation which God intends to fully redeem. Spiritual formation, therefore, takes place within a Trinitarian context of God, others, and creation.

THE GOD CONTEXT

The God context is fundamental. The primary purpose of being created in the image of God is to be grounded in a relationship of loving union with God as we engage with others and live in creation. This relationship is so profound that Peter speaks of it as “becoming a partaker of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4),³ and Paul describes it as being “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).⁴ Jesus prays for this mystical reality of union with God, “. . . that they⁵ may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . .” (John 17:21). It is to this mystical reality that the Mothers and Fathers of the Christian tradition bear witness and to

³ All Scripture taken from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ This is the same phrase he uses to describe Jesus in Col. 1:19: “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

⁵ “[T]hose who will believe in me through their (the apostles’) word,” John 17:20.

which they call us. The mystical experience of loving union with God is the heart of the Christian life. “We can now say that the ‘Mystery of faith’ contains, in summary form, all that Christian life and existence is. ‘The Church professes this mystery in the Apostles’ Creed and celebrates it in the sacramental liturgy, so that the life of the faithful may be conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that *they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God.*’”⁶ Thomas Merton put it like this: “What God seeks of us is His own image in ourselves. This image is not something that we can produce by our own efforts. Indeed we do not have to produce it. It is already there. It is the simple reality of our true being as sons [*sic*] of God by grace. Our job in life is not so much to produce anything, as to be what we are supposed to be, letting the divine image come out and manifest itself in our lives by the way in which we live.”⁷

Such a life of loving union with God results in Christlikeness—wholeness in the image of God. This is not a self-referenced, self-contained, achievement independent from our life with others in creation. A realistic understanding of Christlikeness as the image of God makes this clear. The deepest revelation of the essence of God’s image is disclosed through the Cross. The Cross is not something God did; it is God’s ultimate and crucial revelation of the essence of God’s being: God is cruciform love.⁸ God’s love is a radically other-referenced love, a love that seeks the wellbeing of the other and of all creation devoid of any self-referenced motives, a love that pours itself out for the redemption of others and all creation. To be in the image of God, to be Christlike, therefore, is to be one in whom God’s cruciform love becomes incarnate in relationships with others and in one’s participation in the created order.

⁶ Bernardo Olivera, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 2558), in *The Sun at Midnight: Monastic Experience of the Christian Mystery*, vol. 29 of Monastic Wisdom Series, trans. Augustine Roberts (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Kindle Edition), 26. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows* (Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6), ed. Patrick O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), Kindle Edition, Locations 1656–1659.

⁸ Cf. Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, and, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*; Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, for full treatments of this understanding of God.

THE OTHERS CONTEXT

The others context is crucial. As noted above,⁹ every human being is in mission. The essence of that mission in the Christian context is being God's person with others in the world God has created and is redeeming. Most persons, even many Christians, are involved in a negative mission, failing to be persons in God's image, failing to be "Christ" for others. The idea of being "Christ" for others may sound strange,¹⁰ but it was certainly understood by Paul:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and establishing in us the message of reconciliation. For Christ we are ambassadors, since God is making his appeal through us; for Christ¹¹ we entreat you, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–20).

. . . always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:10–11).

. . . since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me (2 Cor. 13:3).

It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me . . . (Gal. 2:20).

And by Jesus:

"Just as¹² you have sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

"Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16).

⁹ Supra, 2.

¹⁰ Although it should not: the word Christian (Χριστιανός) is a diminutive term in Greek, meaning "little Christ."

¹¹ Translating ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ consistent with its use at the beginning of the verse. An "ambassador" did not merely represent another, but was the presence of the other in their place.

¹² Greek καθώς, an intensified adverb indicating "in exactly the same way."

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt. 10:19–20)

Genuine spiritual formation is a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of the world.¹³ For too many Christians, the Christian life is little more than believing a specific set of doctrines, observing a particular set of behaviors, participating in a certain community of faith with the assurance that they will have eternal life when they die. In such a context, what passes for spiritual formation aims to firmly ground the doctrines, enhance the behaviors, and confirm the community in its beliefs and practices. However, being Christ for others is the essential purpose of the Christian life, not the special responsibility of a spiritual elite.

The manifestation of God's cruciform love for all creation, the incarnation of Christlikeness in human lives, naturally takes a multitude of forms. Our being in the image of God is manifested in our "doings." Our "being" and our "doing" cannot be separated. While there are a multitude of services to which individuals are called by God, each service is simply the context for which God equips, in which God empowers, by which each one fulfills his or her mission with God in the world. These services are the means through which God enacts God's redemptive purpose for all creation.

Jesus provides a stark illustration of the problem of "doing" without "being" at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'" (Matt. 7:22). These people were, obviously, "doing" God things and having effective missions since Jesus does not contradict them. Their problem emerges when Jesus replies, "Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'" (Matt. 7:22–23). Their "doing" was not the incarnation of their "being" in relationship with Jesus! In fact "doing" that is not an incarnation of "being" is, according to Jesus, "evil doing." The things they were doing were certainly not "evil." The manner in which they were doing them was the problem. They were trying to "breathe out" without first "breathing in."

Many in the Christian tradition have engaged in what appear to be effective missions and for many the Christian life is a matter of observing a list of "do's" and "don'ts," ascribing to a particular doctrine, affirming a particular theology without any concomitant transformation of their being toward Christlikeness. It is to such as these Jesus speaks in his warning to the Pharisees: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on

¹³ For a fuller development of this understanding, cf. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:27–29). When the Christian life and mission is reduced to "doing" without either the necessity for or interest in a transformation of being, then Christian spirituality has been subverted and Christian mission becomes "evil doing."

It seems rather clear that a spirituality that nurtures one in cruciform love (Christlikeness) is not only the core reality of being Christian, but also the source from which all genuine "doing" (mission) flows. Every advance in being formed in the image of Christ¹⁴ becomes incarnate in and is confirmed by a corresponding advance in the Christlikeness of doing.

To think of Christian spirituality and "mission" as separate and discrete aspects of the Christian life is a great mistake. They are the inseparable symbiosis of "breathing in" (spiritual formation) and "breathing out" (mission).

THE CREATION CONTEXT

The creation context is essential. It is not God's intention only to form persons in Christlikeness for the sake of others. This is an inseparable part of God's greater purpose for the redemption of all creation. In John's vision God says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The phrase "all things" has a particular significance in the Jewish pool of images John utilizes to convey his visionary experience. It is used to describe God as the creator of all things,¹⁵ in other words "all things" is a cipher for "creation." John's vision is portraying the renewal of creation, not simply the renewal of believers as many interpret this passage.

John's vision is supported by other passages in the New Testament:

"... he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time,¹⁶ to gather up *all things* in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9–10).

"... in him (Christ) *all things* in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, ... *all things* have been created through him and for him. He himself is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to

¹⁴ Romans 8:29; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:13, 15.

¹⁵ Cf. Is. 44:24; Jer. 10:16, 51:19; John 1:3; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6, 11:12; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3, 2:10, 3:4; Rev. 4:11.

¹⁶ Note, this does not say "the end of time," but the "fullness" (τοῦ πληρώματος) of time.

dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, . . .” (Col. 1:16–20).

Consequently, creation cannot be lightly dismissed as incidental to spiritual formation and mission. Being formed in the image of Christ results in a re-ordering of our relationship to creation. Since all creation is God’s, then we have been entrusted with the stewardship of creation. Creation is not there for us to use and abuse for the advancement of our self-referenced purposes and desires. Our identity is not based on how much of creation we can amass or control for ourselves. Nor can we hide behind the mistaken belief that God is going to destroy creation therefore we need not be concerned about it.

Some might argue that the Scripture promises a “new heaven and a new earth,”¹⁷ and that the “first heaven and the first earth” are to pass away.¹⁸ It should be noted that there is no need for a “new heaven” if “heaven” is understood as God’s realm, the uncreated sphere of God’s being. The problem comes from the fact that in both Hebrew and Greek the word translated “heaven” is also the word for “sky.” It is in this context that in Scripture “heaven and earth” designate creation.¹⁹ Consequently the transition from the fallen creation to the redeemed creation is described as the passing away of the fallen and the advent of the new creation. Paul applies this same imagery to the redemption of human creation: “Even if our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).²⁰ This returns us to John’s vision where God does not say “I *will* make all things new,” some future event; but “I *am* making all things new,” an ongoing process of renewing creation.

Being formed in the image of Christ integrates believers into God’s mission for the redemption of all creation, not simply as a specific role in a particular mission, but as a life hid with Christ in God²¹ that incarnates God’s redemptive activity in the midst of the world as it is. Spiritual formation in Christ and mission with Christ are the inseparable components in our participation in God’s redemption of all creation.

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¹⁷ Is. 65:17–19, 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13.

¹⁸ Rev. 21:1.

¹⁹ Gen. 1:10; 2 Kings 19:15; Ps. 115:15, 121:2; Is. 37:16; *et. al.*

²⁰ Both here and in Rev. 21:5, the stem for “new/renew” is *καίνος*, indicating something that has been renewed, rather than something completely new (*νέος*).

²¹ Col. 3:3