

## The Future of Spiritual Formation

Bill Miller (December 2022)

I have been a member of ESDA for several years and attended many online events. It has been encouraging to hear of the successes and struggles of other spiritual directors. Some churches have enthusiastically endorsed spiritual formation; others have resisted, or expressed interest and then backed away. This left me wondering what spiritual formation is and where it is headed.

Many of the books mentioned in these discussions I read during my two years of training to be a spiritual director; yet I was still wondering what we were talking about. The obvious definition of spiritual formation as a person growing to be more like Christ corresponds with old words like sanctification, but doesn't explain all that is happening today.

In December I took a day to fast and pray. This is my yearly habit as I review my life and seek God's guidance for the coming year. Also the Lord often directs my thoughts to another topic of his own choosing as well. This year I found myself thinking about the future of spiritual formation. I had several concerns. Many of the people whom I trained with are no longer providing spiritual direction. Some have even stopped attending church. At ESDA meetings I hear much discontent with how spiritual formation has been accepted by church leaders; and I hear the word "evangelical" used in a negative sense. Additionally I recently watched a video where the John Mark Comer laments that the interest in spiritual formation is declining – he said there has been no fourth wave of acceptance of spiritual formation in the larger church. So what is our direction? During my personal retreat in December I read through Ephesians and I Corinthians to get insight into this topic. Here is what I found.

One verse I noticed in Ephesians was this.

Ephesians 4:15 "Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church."

This is indeed the goal of spiritual formation and of all Christians in all ages.

The key to this growth is experiencing the love of Christ.

Ephesians 3:19 "May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."

In 2013 when I had been a Christian for many years, the Lord led me to experience the love of Christ in a new way. I was trapped in a bad depression and my counselor recommended I sit quietly for a while. He suggested I start modestly and remain four minutes sitting. During my first session I was surprised to find release from anxiety and to find a sense of peace. This was a marvelous breakthrough. I continued the practice, gradually adding more time and meditating on a Bible verse each day. It became a part of my regular morning prayer. Now at the beginning of my regular prayers, I sit quietly for twelve minutes and meditate on a Bible verse. The first verse I used for this was in Matthew.

Matthew 12:18 "Look at my servant, whom I have chosen. He is my Beloved, who pleases me."

I rested in God's love for Jesus, and Jesus' affection for his Father, the mutual love they had for each other and for the Holy Spirit. I relished that they liked each other. After some weeks I found I wanted to

participate in that love myself. I had been a Christian for many years. If you had asked me, I would have said “Yes, I know God loves me”. Now it became true for me at a deeper level.

I was excited about the peace that this twelve minutes of contemplative prayer brought into my life. It seemed that I had found the answer to the anxiety that pervades modern life. I saw that enjoying God’s presence is just as important as finding the right words in prayer. I told others about this experience and reviewed it with church leaders. I wrote a testimony about my prayer life. People agreed that it was good, but I couldn’t convince anyone to do it themselves. Finally I gave up pushing this experience with others. I decided that if meditation was really bringing peace and wholeness to my life, it would show in the way that I related to people, how I listened to them, and how I engaged with their lives. I wouldn’t have to talk much about my prayer technique. This is still my attitude today.

As I found this new depth in my spiritual life, I was led to a new church that had a different form of worship from what I had been used to. I have thrived in this church body. Nevertheless, I still appreciate the churches that ministered to me during my earlier periods as a Christian.

In the Critical Journey Janet Hagberg describes stages of spiritual growth. Stages 5 and 6 involve a deeper relationship with God, but as she points out, the earlier stages are also important. Some churches will be stronger in certain areas. We should respect churches that are ministering to stages other than our home stage. I am concerned about spiritual directors who disparage many churches and no longer attach themselves to any local body. ESDA should emphasize the importance of actively participating in a local body. Staying engaged is a high priority.

Ephesians 4:16 “He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”

Ephesians 6:18 “... be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.”

Many in our current generation find truth in story and personal experience. They deemphasize authority and logic. It is right for the church to adopt this style to communicate. Also it is valid to criticize much of the church that attempts to speak only through the language of authority and logic, which fails to communicate the love of Christ to our culture. Sometimes the “evangelical” church is blamed for this failure to communicate. However, someone who uses this criticism to justify separating from the church is going too far.

Promoting church involvement should be a priority for spiritual directors and for ESDA. We should avoid criticizing “evangelicals”. It is right that we promote heart understanding as well as head knowledge. But we should not allow discontent with the current church to lead us to break fellowship.

Furthermore, we should affirm the value of churches who are working primarily in Stages 1 through 3. Those churches are important for new Christians.

I Corinthians 4:5 “So don’t make judgements about anyone ahead of time – before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.”

I Corinthians 8:2 “Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much.”

I Corinthians 8:9 “But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble.”

Spiritual formation people have some heroes. When I first started meditating on scripture, my counselor recommended reading Thomas Merton. I found his book titled Spiritual Direction and Meditation. Merton says that meditation is a risky business, and that you should have a spiritual director for your protection. So I asked my pastor about a spiritual director, and he recommended our assistant pastor. That man and I have been meeting monthly for nine years now. It has been a fulfilling and important part of my life.

About that time I also read Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline. He makes the important and useful distinction that Eastern meditation seeks to empty the mind, whereas Christian mediation seeks to fill the mind with God. Also about that time, a Catholic friend recommended reading St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Both were a critical help to me. These and other spiritual formation authors do help people grow in their spiritual life. However, I am concerned that sometimes spiritual directors talk like these authors are more important than their own pastor. We should not boast of our favorite authors having all the answers.

I Corinthians 3:21 “So don’t boast about following a particular human leader....”

Many techniques of spiritual formation have been helpful to me. For example, when I first learned about *lectio divina* I was intrigued. My wife and I tried it together and found it fruitful. We still use this format for our daily Bible reading together. However, I notice with concern that sometimes spiritual directors mention *lectio divina* and other specialty words as as if there was a special power in the words themselves. These words become signals to show that we are the ones in the know. We should explain the concepts associated with these words but assume that pople will adapt them to their own circumstances.

I Corinthians 8:9-13 warns us that our superior knowledge could injure a weak believer.

In conclusion, we should promote spiritual directors being active in a local body. We should stop using buzz words like “lectio divina” to signal that we are part of the group that has special knowledge. Although we should affirm it is good to go deeper with God in Stages 5 and 6, we should also affirm that earlier stages are important. We should live so this deeper walk shows in our lives. Perhaps this means we talk about it less.

#### *Notes*

John Mark Comer’s talk about the fourth wave of spiritual formation in the church

[https://vimeo.com/754836818/68a35bf2d5?fbclid=IwAR3EKsU0SpxkA2ZfmMKcW6G\\_EFU3VYcmQYXAcJWi-xKnwQC8BJChkAtr1Mo](https://vimeo.com/754836818/68a35bf2d5?fbclid=IwAR3EKsU0SpxkA2ZfmMKcW6G_EFU3VYcmQYXAcJWi-xKnwQC8BJChkAtr1Mo)

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