

What is Christian Spirituality and Spiritual Formation?

Christian spirituality encompasses the entirety of the Christian life. A holistic approach to faith, it includes our beliefs and practices, as well as the way we live our everyday lives.

As believers, our friendships, our acts of kindness, and our inner thoughts and attitudes reflect our spiritual well-being and contribute to our formation as much as our spiritual disciplines, corporate worship, and active evangelism. Christian spirituality is the character of our actual, lived relationship with God through the Spirit of Christ, as describing our practice of relationship with Christ (Howard, 16).

A certain caution should be used, however, when employing the term spirituality, since it finds wide usage today, often carrying overtones of New Age thought, Eastern religion, and/or nature worship. When assessing spirituality, we must see if what is being purported is genuine Christianity, rooted in Scripture and centered on Christ as fully God and fully man.

Christian Spiritual Formation

Often used synonymously with Christian spirituality, the term “spiritual formation” is valuable because it highlights the process of growth in the life of a believer. The life of faith was never meant to be static — conversion is the starting line, not the place to set up camp for the remainder of our time on earth! We indeed are on a pilgrimage.

John Bunyan’s famous work, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, is a classic devotional work on the process of spiritual growth. In his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo masterfully describes the inner journey he took from unbelief to faith in Christ, and then his growth in faith toward intimacy with God. *The Spiritual Espousals* by John Ruysbroeck (Ruusbroec) is a lesser known classic that systematically and insightfully depicts states of Christian growth. Perhaps the best recent discussion of the process of formation is M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*.

God Initiates: We respond

God designed us to mature spiritually. We cannot cause our own growth or transform ourselves — no matter how hard we try — any more than we can save ourselves. Rather, the Lord is the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2), and the One who began a good work in us will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1: 6).

God works in us “to will and to do his good pleasure,” states Philippians 2:13. Nevertheless, as verse 12 asserts, we have a role to play: we must “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” While God is the one who forms us, we must respond to the divine initiative. We have the responsibility of acting in obedience to the Lord’s commands.

The very terms “spiritual formation” and “spirituality” imply the role of God’s Spirit in our growth. While prayer and Scripture study, spiritual direction and the practice of various

disciplines, may all be part of our journey, it is the Holy Spirit who works in our lives to convict of sin, to transform us, and to bear fruit in our lives (Gal 5:22 - 23). Our role is to “live in accordance with the Spirit” and allow ourselves to be “controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit” (Rom 8:1 - 17). We must “keep in step with the Spirit” — walking by the Holy Spirit, and being led by God’s Spirit (Gal 5:16 - 25).

Spiritual formation, then, is the study or the science of our responding to what the Lord is doing in our lives. It looks at the process of spiritual growth and what our role is in that process. That role includes intentional rhythms of prayer, solitude, Scripture, worship and other spiritual disciplines. It involves our response to trials and the unexpected circumstances of life. Our task entails the cultivation of godly friendships and self-sacrificial service to others.

The study of spiritual formation also looks at the various stages of growth along the journey. Because most believers progress through similar steps in their maturation process, it is valuable to explore the dynamics of those common experiences in our pilgrimage. While not trying to fit everyone into the same mold, the discipline of spiritual formation seeks to offer insights, encouragement, and direction, especially during dark and dry times of life.

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