

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND THE CHURCH

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The spiritual formation movement has provided a healthy resurgence in the theory and practice of the spiritual life, or the *transformative* process of being and becoming faithful and fruitful—even healthy—disciples of Jesus Christ. Rather than a fad, this movement has been viewed by some as a God-ordained and Spirit-empowered response to a crisis of the lack of spiritual formation, especially in Western culture, where a more holistic approach to following Christ is needed.² The movement is tied to a shift in thinking about the nature of catechesis—a shift from “in-formation” to “formation,” reflected in both the church and the academy.³

It is not easy to define “spiritual formation,” however, and there are several reasons that can be offered as an explanation. First, although this movement is new,⁴ its methods are often borrowing and adapting very old Christian practices, maybe especially the influence of Catholic monastic writings and practices. Second, and related to the first, the spiritual formation movement is a collection of practitioners from different traditions within Christianity and with very different theological bents regarding Christian spirituality and the nature of the spiritual life. Finally, even if we try to address “spiritual formation,” we are speaking of a movement that is made up of a complex matrix of principles, postures, and procedures that cannot easily be defined as a collection, let alone equally or uniformly applied.

These difficulties, however, do not prohibit a general definition of the spiritual formation movement, since there are several commonly articulated

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² David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 21, 28.

³ Paul Bramer, “Christian Formation: Tweaking the Paradigm,” *Christian Education Journal* 4, no. 2 (2007): 352-63.

⁴ “New” needs to be qualified. In one sense, it is *not* new at all, for what some over the last decade or so have branded as “spiritual formation” is actually what the church has long been doing and what the Bible has always commanded: discipleship and sanctification. But in another sense, the spiritual formation movement *is* new in that it is arguably a rejuvenating approach to the nature of discipleship and the process of sanctification. It is also new in that it serves as a corrective to poorly done discipleship or poorly conceived sanctification.

values and intentions that have become recognized and practiced, at least as it is addressed in the academy. For our purposes, we will offer a one-sentence definition of spiritual formation that contains six primary components:

Spiritual formation is (1) the process of being formed as a person (2) through various spiritual postures and practices (3) by the power of the Spirit (4) and in the context of community (5) in order to be united to Christ (6) for a life of mission and blessing.

Some might argue that there are other primary components that should be included, and certainly some of the components are stated so generically that a much fuller description might be deemed necessary, but these six components summarize the way spiritual formation is being defined in theoretical and practical resources for more than two decades.⁵

The spiritual formation movement has not been immune to questions and criticism. In one of the earliest volumes of the *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, Steve Porter addressed what he called “evangelical anxieties” over spiritual formation, and explained that the movement can simply be understood to be a fresh way of addressing what the church has long referred to as sanctification—“the nature and dynamics of growth in Christian holiness.”⁶ Clearly Porter was more serving as an apologist for the movement, offering context, correction, or nuance to common objections and concerns. A few years later and in the same journal, Rick Langer presented what he called “points of unease” with the spiritual formation movement.⁷ Langer, an outsider to the movement proper, began with what he called some “virtues” of the movement, before offering “a few cautionary

⁵ Some of the primary voices in the spiritual formation movement, whose definitions fit the six-part definition provided above, include the following: M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 12; Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22; Paul Pettit, “Introduction,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 24; Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 268; Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 24; and Richella Parham, *A Spiritual Formation Primer* (Englewood, CO: Renovaré, 2013), 6.

⁶ Steve L. Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key: Relieving Evangelical Anxieties over Spiritual Formation,” *JFSFC* 1, no. 2 (2008): 129–48 (130). Porter’s eight common objections to spiritual formation include (1) it is just another passing fad; (2) it is Catholic; (3) it is New Age; (4) it is contrary to the sufficiency of Scripture; (5) it complicates and confuses good old-fashioned obedience; (6) it encourages works righteousness; (7) it is overly experiential; and (8) it neglects missions/evangelism.

⁷ Rick Langer, “Points of Unease with the Spiritual Formation Movement,” *JFSFC* 5, no. 2 (2012): 182–206.

words” that addressed concern with “current tendencies.”⁸ Both Porter and Langer addressed the profitability of raising such concerns, with Porter suggesting that “concerns are often rooted in some helpful corrective.”⁹

The essays by Porter and Langer reflect the intention and approach of this essay—or more loosely, its genre.¹⁰ The overall goal of this essay is to examine the fourth component listed in the definition above: “in the context of community.” More specifically, this essay would like to explore how the spiritual formation movement understands the role and ministry of the church in the process and purpose of spiritual formation. The motivation behind this essay is “unease” with the loss of the church, both doctrinally and practically, in the contemporary spiritual formation movement. We will attempt neither a full assessment nor solution to the spiritual formation movement’s practice of “community” or theology of the church. Our goal is more basic: to explore this movement’s understanding of the church with the aim of helping Christians (and their local churches) think more critically about the identity and purpose of the church in their spiritual life and formation.

I. SPIRITUAL FORMATION “IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY”

The spiritual formation movement is in part a critical reaction to the failures of the church to perform its duties. The general consensus of the spiritual formation movement is that the church has failed to be properly *concerned with* or a meaningful *context for* Christian spiritual formation. In his introductory guide to spiritual formation, Evan Howard claims that “times are changing. People are asking questions about church and about formation,” and more specifically, about the relation between them.¹¹

⁸ Langer, “Points of Unease,” 187. Langer lists six virtues of spiritual formation: (1) it has helped restore a “thicker” notion of salvation; (2) it offers a corrective to spiritual cognitivism; (3) it invites expectant engagement with the Spirit; (4) it is a corrective to hyper-activity and hyper-consumerism of modern American life; (5) it links body and soul as partners, not aliens or enemies; and (6) it places the sword of the Spirit back in the hands of the Spirit. But Langer lists five “points of unease” with spiritual formation: (1) unease about the dualistic tendency to value spirituality at the expense of the material world; (2) unease with devotional practices grown in the soil of monastic Catholicism; (3) unease with a rhetorical strategy that sharply distinguishes between being and doing; (4) unease with devotional practices that fail the “soccer mom” test; and (5) unease with certain ways of using Scripture which are devotionally fruitful but hermeneutically questionable.

⁹ Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key,” 148.

¹⁰ While this author is not an insider in the spiritual formation movement, he served for nearly a decade on the same theological faculty with major proponents of the movement (John Coe, Judy TenElshof, and Steve Porter), and within ear shot of and in regular participation with the Institute for Spiritual Formation at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. With this authorial context, any “anxiety” or “unease” stemming from this essay is raised with a collegial spirit and an equal desire to make disciples who grow in Christian holiness.

¹¹ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spirituality: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 9.

Howard goes on to say that “Every aspect of church life is currently being reexamined with an eye toward formation.”¹² A survey of recent literature from the spiritual formation movement reveals two failures of “the church.”

First, *the church has failed to adequately form the spiritual lives of people*. Dallas Willard believes the contemporary church has not successfully aimed its sights at its actual mission: “spiritual formation in Christlikeness [is] the exclusive primary goal of the local congregation.”¹³ The root of this failure, according to Willard, is distraction. The church is simply failing to focus on what the Bible makes clear is the primary thing—spiritually forming our people. But for Willard, the issue is not simply naivete, but a misplaced purpose. When thinking about the role of the church, Willard challenges a philosophy of ministry that posits the institutional church as a light to the world. For Willard, that is not the task of the church but of Christians; the task of the church is to spiritually form Christians into faithful and fruitful disciples of Jesus. According to Willard, “the most successful work of *outreach* would be the work of *inreach* that turns people, wherever they are, into lights in the darkened world.”¹⁴ Such a statement may turn on its head the way churches—and Christians—think about what they do, and offers content to the kind of “reexamination” Howard mentioned above.

Willard and Howard are not alone in their critique and concerns of the failure of the church to form disciples. In a recent essay, several leaders in the spiritual formation movement addressed the nature and need of spiritual formation in the church.¹⁵ All of the contributors echo the sentiments of Willard regarding the primary focus of the church, but they were even more specific with their criticisms of the church: “the church is in crisis . . . has lost her spiritual moorings” (Chandler); even churches where spiritual formation is occurring “seem more to have stumbled into spiritual formation more than intentionally chosen it” (Wilhoit); “The church has chosen another way . . . the evangelical church has leaned heavily on teaching and understanding the text of God’s word and far less on what is being experienced of God’s word in the heart and emotions” (TenElshof); “[Numerical] growth without

¹² Howard, *Guide to Christian Spirituality*, 10. Howard goes on to add that “the notion of spiritual formation” is also “being reexamined in light of a rich theology and the practice of the church.” The goal of this essay is to participate in this reexamination.

¹³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 235.

¹⁴ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 235 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *et al.*, “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” *JFSFC* 7, no. 2 (2014): 292–311. The topics addressed include the following: (1) What is the role of the church when it comes to spiritual formation in Christ? (2) To what degree should the local church be focused on the spiritual formation of its members and why should it be so focused? (3) What is your sense of how the local church is doing when it comes to facilitating spiritual formation? (4) What do you think are the biggest obstacles to spiritual formation in the local church? (5) What are some of the best practices when it comes to implementing spiritual formation in the local church? (6) If a leader could only do one thing [related to spiritual formation] in their local church community, what would you recommend?

depth. No doubt God is not pleased with superficial discipleship¹⁶ (Tan); “churches in general are struggling for clarity about what spiritual formation is and how it happens in the life of [a] person. There is still a bias toward assuming that if one is attending church services regularly, participating in a small group, serving with one’s gifts, and tithing faithfully they are transforming. This is decidedly not the case” (Barton).¹⁷

Interestingly, when those spiritual formation leaders were asked how churches could implement spiritual formation in their local congregations, the answer had little to do with the traditional “marks” of the church and more to do with personal and relational practices: “a deeper journey with God and each other” (TenElshof); “a personal devotional life... a welcoming atmosphere of grace” (Chandler); “being involved in a small group of a few people who meet regularly to share and pray together and practice spiritual disciplines in their lives, and doing some spiritual reading or Bible study together but with a focus on application and obedience with the help of the Holy Spirit and God’s grace” (Tan); “Help people get in touch with their spiritual desire and then guide them in crafting a rule of life of ‘sacred rhythms’ that correspond to their hearts’ deepest desire” (Barton).¹⁸ Some of these leaders did understand and even try to coalesce spiritual formation practices and principles with the traditional aspects of the church, but generally not without a strong and primary sense of correction.

These constructive criticisms point to the second failure of “the church:” *the church has failed to provide a proper context in which spiritual formation can occur.* More specifically, the movement has found the formal practices of “the church” to be lacking the kind of life-engagement and life-propelling aspects necessary for the formation of disciples. In response, the movement has presented what they deem to be a more holistic and interpenetrating category for the context in which Christian spiritual formation is best accomplished: “community.” Community that is Christian (biblically- and Jesus-based) and authentic (relational- and life-based) exerts proper pressures on a person so that their life is properly formed (inward—in identity and character) and oriented (outward—to God and others). Since this is the goal of every Christian, this should also be the goal of any ministry (church or otherwise) in Christian discipleship.

While the term “community” gets placed in prime position in most spiritual formation definitions, it often is used with little specification. In general, however, spiritual formation literature does provide some basic

¹⁶ Tan quotes from the opening address given by John Stott at the First International Consultation on Discipleship held in September 1999 in England, cited in S. Y. Tan, *Full Service: Moving from Self-Serve Christianity to Total Servanthood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 135.

¹⁷ Haley, et. al., “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” 298-301.

¹⁸ Haley, et. al., “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” 304-308. See also the fuller work by Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

tenets for the proper practice and place of “community.” A clear summary of what many seem to be thinking when using the term is given by Paul Pettit, who defines how spiritual formation is intended to take place: “the change or transformation that occurs in the believers’ life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented toward God and others.”¹⁹ Note the two necessary or “best” components: (1) an authentic, Christian community to *form* a person’s life and (2) a proper orientation (to God and others) to *direct* a person’s life.

It is important to note the implications of this understanding of a spiritually-forming “community.” First, rather than using the traditional marks of the church as the agents of spiritual formation, all that is needed is what James Wilhoit calls an “intentional communal process.”²⁰ While this does not exclude the church and its traditional means of grace, it certainly does not necessitate it. What is necessary is an “intentional process” through which the personal nature of God forms a Christian through personal relationships in a forming and directing “communal context.” If the church matters, it is only in a functional or utilitarian sense. The functional forces of the church, apparently empowered by the Spirit, are what truly matters. Togetherness, with all of its intentionality and productivity, becomes the sacramental means of grace.

A further implication is that the church has no special claim as a context for spiritual formation. Wilhoit actually suggests that the spiritual formation of a person—in an intentional communal process—“must extend beyond the individual to the church, the family, and society.”²¹ In this sense, the church becomes one of many possible formative groups, or simply a subset of a larger group in which spiritual formation takes place. All that is needed is an intentional “community,” a term which now must carry not only all the life situations of human relationships, but also all the theological force of God’s personal, Spirit-empowered work in the formation of Christians. The thrust of Wilhoit’s argument for this extended communal context is based on the belief that “all true formation has its origins in God.”²² For Wilhoit the implications of this doctrinal truth are clear: Christians “may avail themselves of avenues of change that promote the presence of gospel virtues. *Our change does not come in two forms: good Christian church-based change and ordinary change.* All true formation has its origin in God, and we must humbly receive it as a gift.”²³ But what makes something an “avenue of change?” And is there nothing unique about the church’s role in the work of God and the life of the believer? By Wilhoit’s own logic, God may or may not choose to use the church, for all things can become God-utilized

¹⁹ Pettit, “Introduction,” 19.

²⁰ James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

²¹ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation*, 23.

²² Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation*, 36.

²³ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation*, 36 (emphasis added).

avenues of change. Even if Wilhoit would never say such words, by implication the church does not necessarily matter—something his title suggests. What seems essential, however, is “community,” of whatever sort, as long as it has intentionally forming and directing capabilities that provide an “avenue of change.”

The general consensus within the spiritual formation movement seems to be that the church is more disappointment than discipleship, and strongly missing the mark when it comes to spiritually forming Christians. Some actually frame the church as a potential handicap. Diane Chandler warns that Christians who place too much reliance on the church may actually hinder their spiritual growth. In her words: “If spiritual input occurs only on Sunday mornings, then *believers risk becoming overly dependent on the church for spiritual formation.*”²⁴ To be fair, in the larger context Chandler was trying to explain the importance of Christians having and adopting personal spiritual formation practices. Yet such a statement runs the risk of presenting and facilitating a kind of spiritual-formation Gnosticism, where the Christian is expected (at least the mature ones!) to be spiritually formed without the church, or at least partially independent, as if the church is spiritual milk and not the source and sustenance of the Spirit-directed feast of the Christian’s spiritual life and maturity.

Even more extreme is the position of Kelly Bean, representing what are called “non-goers,” those who do Christian “community” but not “the church” (the “unchurched” or “dechurched”). While Bean is not a voice in the spiritual formation movement, her position is growing in popularity and has many resonances with the role of “community” in the spiritual formation movement. Bean appropriates many biblical terms and images regarding the church and applies them directly to a church-free context:

As a person who led and served in church for more than two decades, I know the importance of gathering together as the visible body of Christ and encouraging each other to practice love and do good deeds. Now, as a non-goer and cultivator in an ever-evolving Christian community, I also believe there are healthy, visible, doable alternatives to the traditional church. Becoming a non-goer does not have to lead to a waning faith or cynicism but instead can lead to a life-giving, world-changing, growth-inducing community-building way of being.²⁵

Ironically, for Bean, the act of “gathering together” actually requires one to be a “non-goer.” This truly is an alternative to the classic doctrine and practices of the church. Rather than meeting in the sacred gathering of corporate worship and feeding on Christ in the sacrament, Bean’s practices on a Sunday morning involve being “curled up in my cushy orange chair,

²⁴ Haley, et. al., “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” 306 (emphasis added).

²⁵ Kelly Bean, *How to Be a Christian Without Going to Church: The Unofficial Guide to Alternative Forms of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 13.

sipping tea and loving Jesus.”²⁶ Although Bean offers more protest than principle, even in the spiritual formation movement it can seem as if the key ingredient is this often nebulous but functional concept of “community” and some abstract work of formation.

II. THE DOCTRINAL FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The spiritual formation movement’s assessed failure of the church to form its people spiritually has led to the creation of a modified or expanded understanding of the context needed to foster Christian spiritual formation. The question needs to be asked: Can intentionally-forming and God-directing “community” replace “the church?” The answer to this question must be sought in the doctrines of God and the church

Since spiritual formation is the process of being formed into the person and work of Christ, we must first make clear the necessary connection between the Lord Jesus Christ and his Body, the church. This connection is the theological grounds upon which any understanding of spiritual formation in the church must stand. This is because the church and its power or ability to achieve Christian formation has a necessarily derivative character. John Webster explains the church’s derivativeness this way: “its ecclesial character derives solely from and is wholly dependent upon the gospel’s manifestation of God’s sovereign purpose for his creatures. The church is because God is and acts *thus*.”²⁷ This order is essential: “the church is not constituted by human intentions, activities and institutional or structural forms, but by the action of the triune God, realized in Son and Spirit.”²⁸ Already doctrine is offering a caution: to speak of “community” without the “triune community” is, quite simply, to misspeak. Since, “[t]he doctrine of the church is only as good as the doctrine of God which underlies it,” all Christian teaching must be properly ordered by the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁹

The ordered connection between the person and the body of Christ already makes one thing clear: no matter how authentic and intentional, *we cannot think of “community” as a self-existing, self-facilitating entity through which spiritual formation happens*. If the people of God are rooted in the person and work of God made known through Jesus Christ, then “the gathering” of God is an entirely unique “community,” driven and directed by something outside itself. The church is a new covenant community between God and humanity “which is grounded in the self-offering of

²⁶ Bean, *How to Be a Christian Without Going to Church*, 10.

²⁷ John Webster, “The Church and the Perfection of God,” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 75-95 (76).

²⁸ John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 195.

²⁹ Webster, “The Church and the Perfection of God,” 78.

Jesus Christ.”³⁰ All of this is to say that all such language about authentic, properly-oriented Christian “community,” or even language in regard to the church, must be properly situated on the doctrine of the triune God. And the doctrine of the triune God makes three things clear about the gathering community of God, each of which will help us more accurately understand and define the context of spiritual formation.

First, the gathering community of God can only be “from the Father.” The church’s derivativeness means that it can claim nothing for itself, for it exists only by the will of God. The relation between God and his people is asymmetrical; they are distinguished because one gives and the other receives. This is where the community called “the church” must begin, for this is required for right relation. The church is “from God,” and must function as having a divine “from-ness” reflected in its posture to all things. To say that the church is “from the Father” is to say that the church is “by the initiative of the Father.”³¹ It is God alone who determines the task and content of the church’s work and the community’s life.

The spiritual formation movement walks on thin ice when it rebukes or reorganizes the church’s efforts of formation in any way that denies or delimits the transformative design of God. When suggestions are offered that lack the asymmetrical character of the God-human relation or assimilate the individualism and voluntarism of more modern political and philosophical culture,³² then the “community” in view is not properly from God, and therefore, not spiritually formed enough. Spiritual formation is ultimately rooted in the will of the Father, who creates and wills creatures for fellowship with him. It is not a formula but a fact, like gravity, that simply is and can only be obeyed. “All God’s creatures are moved [formed] by God to their fulfillment in him.”³³

Second, the gathering community of God can only be “in the Son.” The church’s derivativeness means it can accomplish nothing by itself, for it exists only by the work of God. The Father chose the Son to be the source, savior, and sovereign of the church. This truth about God also reveals a truth about humanity’s absolute need of Christ: “condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we should seek righteousness, liberation, life, and salvation in him.”³⁴ To say that the church is “through the Son” is to say that the church finds its life in him—in Christ alone. It is Christ alone who resources the

³⁰ Douglas Farrow, “Doctrine of the Church,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 115-19 (116).

³¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2:215.

³² Webster, “The Church and the Perfection of God,” 77.

³³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:172.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.16.1.

church's existence and life. The church is the Body of Christ, which means that in actuality "the church is Christ's."³⁵

The spiritual formation movement must guard against positing any method or means as the facilitating resource for spiritual formation and communal life. The doctrinal foundations above that make clear the asymmetrical relations between God and humanity will not allow the church's ministry to be viewed as a cooperative effort between divine and human agency. Webster explains it well:

Jesus Christ is not inert, but present with force, active as prophet, priest and king. The task of ministry is thus not to complete that which he has done, or to accomplish that which Christ himself does not do now, but rather to indicate or attest his work both past and present. That to which the ministerial action of the church is ordered is the 'showing' of Jesus Christ's self-proclamation in word, baptism, and the Lord's supper.³⁶

Thus, the church truly is "the body" of Christ, the one *in whom* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and *through whom* "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:19-20). And the church's ministry is most accurately depicted as "a responsive movement to the dynamic force of the Word of God."³⁷

Third, the gathering community of God can only be "through the Holy Spirit." The church's derivativeness means it can empower nothing for itself, for it exists only by the ways of God. The church has no gathering or forming power outside of the Holy Spirit. The church is a "responsive movement" in Christ and through the Spirit. It is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that the church is and becomes a gathering of God—the *ecclesia*. In short, formation is the Spirit's job—it is "Spirit formation" or "formation by the Spirit."

The office of the Holy Spirit is...to apply to creatures the benefits of salvation, in the sense of making actual in creaturely time and space that for which creatures have been reconciled—fellowship with God and with one another. In perfecting creatures, sanctifying them so that they come to take the form purposed by the Father and achieved for them by the Son, the Spirit is... 'the giver of life...'³⁸

Just as the church finds its origin in the will of the Father, and the mediation through the Son, so also the church works, ministers, and lives "in the

³⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:212.

³⁶ Webster, *Word and Church*, 201-202.

³⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: Conversations with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 120.

³⁸ John Webster, "'The Visible Attests the Invisible,'" in *Community of the Word*, 96-113 (101).

freedom reign of the Spirit, the material determinant of what generally can be and cannot be.”³⁹

The spiritual formation movement can focus so strongly on the functional nature of the church that it fails to understand correctly its ontological nature. The danger with such leanings is that the asymmetrical nature of the God-human relation is imbalanced. It is actually the Spirit “who brings to completion the work of reconciliation by generating and sustaining... so that they attain that for which they were created.”⁴⁰ And as Christ announced, this work of the Spirit is assigned to take place in the church! This doctrinal alignment is important because it ensures that true spiritual formation, which is really the work of the Spirit, is as much a divine work as the Father’s initiated purpose and the Son’s accomplished work.⁴¹

There can be no sense in which, whilst God’s first and second works are pure grace, his third work involves some kind of coordination of divine and creaturely elements. The history of...the church...is the history of the new creation, the history of the resurrection of the dead...[The church] is what it is because in the Holy Spirit God has completed the circle of his electing and reconciling work, and consummated his purpose of gathering the church to himself.⁴²

In this way, every work or aspect of the church’s life is empowered, directed, and obtained by the Holy Spirit through the life in word and deed of the communion of saints. The Spirit is not used for spiritual formation but the first and final forming agent.

In summary, any talk of “a deeper journey with God,” “a welcoming atmosphere of grace,” “the practice of spiritual disciplines,” and even “helping people get in touch with their spiritual desire” can be highly misleading or misappropriated if not firmly defined and directed not by techniques or methods but by the triune God and his new covenant community, the church. The church’s existence begins in the eternal purpose of the Father, is established through the Son’s reconciling mercy and love, and is formed by the Spirit’s life-giving power. For this reason, any strategy that assumes a symmetrical work between God and humanity—whether individualism, utilitarianism, voluntarism, or social-psychology—is itself misaligned from the Way, Truth, and Life of the work of the triune God in the church.

III. THEOLOGICAL SCAFFOLDING AND PASTORING FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

To evaluate practices and their assumptions about the church is ultimately to expose theological scaffolding. Our examination of the context

³⁹ Jensen, *Systematic Theology*, 2:215.

⁴⁰ Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 101.

⁴¹ Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 102.

⁴² Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 102.

for spiritual formation in the spiritual formation movement is no exception. Cultural forces in every generation can pressure and warp the beliefs and values of Christians. Even in our own churches, forged in a modern, western culture that is drenched with democratic, egalitarian, and free-enterprise models of community, and dictated by forces of consumer preferences and demographic affinities, beliefs about the church and its ministry can crumble beneath the pressure. These pressures, however, are more implicit than explicit.

There are also explicit beliefs about the nature of faith and the work of God in us that go a long way to define how we speak of church and the context (common or special) in which spiritual formation is practiced. Michel Horton offers a brief but helpful summary of different systems for understanding the means and contexts through which God works:

...it is of decisive importance whether one thinks that faith is assent to everything the magisterium teaches (as in Roman Catholic teaching), a personal choice that the individual makes to become born again (as in evangelical Arminianism), or the gift that the Spirit gives from the Father, in the Son, because the triune God choose us, redeemed us, and now calls us effectually to Christ [as in Reformed theology?].⁴³

Each of these approaches or traditions, even if described in simple terms, reveals not only the theological scaffolding behind approaches and methods for doing ministry, but also the significance of contexts where ministry happens. The place of ministry is connected, as we discussed above, to the personal ministry of God in the world and, therefore, the way he extends himself to us. What kind of context of God's work do each of these positions produce? Horton suggests that the first view will "generate hierarchical models" and the second "a more egalitarian and individualistic approach."⁴⁴ The third view, however, produces something of a hybrid approach: "...the Spirit unites us to Christ and makes us grow more and more into Christ (and therefore into communion with each other) through creaturely means."⁴⁵ Notice how this definition of the church directly addresses spiritual formation and the context in which it is actualized—an asymmetrical work of God in Christians *through creaturely means*. The first two views have very different emphases regarding the relation between God's work and "the creaturely means." In the first view (Roman Catholicism), the work of God is *identical* with the context so that the church's actions actually cause grace to grow. In the second view (evangelical Arminianism), the work of God is *separated* from the context so that the Spirit's work is "reduced to immediate and private operations within individuals without

⁴³ Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 388.

⁴⁴ Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 388.

⁴⁵ Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 389.

any mediated and public ministry.⁴⁶ In a sense, the first and second views lack a proper asymmetrical balance. Only in the third view (Reformed theology) does God become the primary worker and yet use “creaturely means” with both purpose and power.

All of this scaffolding talk was simply to show how this discussion is strongly directed from the outside, pressured by larger theological forces that give definition to the common terms we use like church, Spirit, formation, and specifically the phrase, “in the context of community.” For the second view, one in which the work of God is separated from the context, the community “exists because of the inner experience of individuals whose gathering together is primarily a means of fellowship, sharing each other’s experiences of personal transformation.”⁴⁷ This seems to be the theological scaffolding behind much of the spiritual formation movement. Statements like “the practice of spiritual disciplines,” and “helping people get in touch with their spiritual desire” can stand outside any church talk and yet meet the context criterion—not by means of an authoritative community, but an instructive, therapeutic, and advisory one.

We would like to conclude this essay by offering some pastoral prescriptions from the perspective of the third view, rooted in Reformed theology (or at least a baptistic, congregational, free-church kind of Reformed theology). By showing our scaffolding, we may distance ourselves from those who adopt the other views, but we also offer an exercise in connecting principles with practices. In one sense, our concern with the spiritual formation movement may simply be the theological scaffolding used to construct it. But at the level of ministry, our concern is that true spiritual formation is not misaligned from how God works (in a triune way) and where God works (in the local church). We will offer in brief three suggestions for spiritual formation “in the context of community,” and three prescriptions for spiritual formation in the church.

A. SUGGESTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION “IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY”

First, *the category of “community” is not distinct or unique enough for Christian spiritual formation.* While “community” language may appear to penetrate more deeply and address more naturally the various aspects of human relations as a significant context for formation, it fails to adequately ground formation in the context of the triune God. It fails to explain both “the what” (context) and “the how” (content) of God’s work. The context (the what) in which God works is not just any gathering but “the Gathering” (i.e., the church), which is what God himself calls it because he created it

⁴⁶ Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 389. Regarding this view, Horton adds: “At most, that public ministry of preaching, sacrament, and discipline can be only instructive, therapeutic, and advisory, but not authoritative in any sense. In such a view, public ministry is merely the ministry of human beings, not the ministry of Christ.”

⁴⁷ Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 389.

and cares for it. The content (the how) through which God works is not simply common means and relationships, but through the special grace means of the church and its marks—word, sacraments, and authority. God works through “creaturely means,” but very specific ones—local churches.

Second, *the activity of a “community,” even when authentic and intentional, cannot replace the work of the Spirit.* As much as most definitions of the task of spiritual formation speak of the power of the Spirit, too often the force behind formative life change is the community itself and not the Spirit, who is the true giver of life. Personal and relational practices—always with the Spirit assumed—are often prescribed as if the practices themselves accomplish the task. Not only does this treat the Spirit like an “app” to be downloaded or a medicinal salve to be applied as necessary, but it also puts the burden of formation on the relational dynamics of the community. It is almost as if the relational dynamic of permeation and pressure does the work of uniting, molding, and developing that are doctrinally credited to the Spirit. It is the Spirit who applies the work initiated by the Father and made possible by the Son, and is alone responsible for the gathering (church) itself.⁴⁸

Third, *practices, procedures, and even language that fail to express the proper relation between God and humanity in the work of spiritual formation need to be revised.* Admittedly, this suggestion is rooted in a more particular theological scaffolding, but doctrinal alignment is itself a part of spiritual formation. An example of concerning language is the following from Dallas Willard:

We know, as Jesus says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). And I think everyone here will agree with that. It is the initiative of God and the presence of God without which all of our efforts are in vain—whether it is in justification or sanctification or in the realm of the exercise of power, all our efforts will be in vain if God does not act. But we had better believe that the back side of that verse reads: “If you do nothing it will be without me.” And this is the part we have the hardest time hearing.⁴⁹

Besides exegetical problems with his explanation of John 15:5,⁵⁰ Willard’s exhortation is lacking in theological precision, positing such a cooperative work that the actual asymmetrical relation between God and humanity is lost. Such language may hope to motivate human work, but it strongly misses (at least in the third view) the way God is already working. This is not to say that all the theories or techniques of the spiritual

⁴⁸ See Webster, “The Visible Attests the Invisible,” 102.

⁴⁹ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done,” <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done> (accessed June 21, 2019).

⁵⁰ See Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 652: “To separate the Christian from Jesus, even for the purpose of explaining more responsibility ... is to make a category mistake.”

formation movement lack the gravity of the doctrine of God and its correlation to the doctrine of the church, but far too often the language used and practices employed by the spiritual formation movement are not appropriately grounded.

B. PRESCRIPTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE CHURCH

First, *the church offers a sacred, special-grace community that is distinct from other, common-grace communities.* God can and does offer all people common graces, some of which include significant communities like families, friends, and other supportive groups. The church is not, however, a mere common grace, like sun and rain which falls on the righteous and the unrighteousness (Matt. 5:45). Rather, the church is “the Gathering” or *ecclesia*, created and called by God alone. “Thus the church exists in the midst of the world with an origin, essence, activity, and purpose of its own.”⁵¹ Not any community can be the church or perform the church’s duties, for the church is entirely unique, other-worldly and not from this world (John 15:19; 17:16; 18:36), and therefore a sacred, special-grace “gathering.” The church is so connected to who God is and what God is doing, that movement away from formal church is, in the words of Calvin, a movement away from God: “separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ.”⁵² The church is the prescribed “creaturely means” through which God has chosen to minister in and to the world. Spiritual formation is to happen “in the context of the church.”

Second, *what the church has confessed as “the marks of the church” are the God-designed, biblically-prescribed means of grace for the formation of Christians.* The church has been instituted by God as a ministering agent of God. Calvin offers helpful commentary of the church’s role in our spiritual formation:

...the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith. ‘For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder,’ so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother. And this is so not only under the law but also after Christ’s coming, as Paul testifies when he teaches that we are the children of the new and heavenly Jerusalem.⁵³

In this one statement, which summarizes all of book four in his *Institutes*, Calvin locates the church as the mother of God’s people. The church’s

⁵¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:435.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.10.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.1.

mothering happens through creaturely “aids” so that God “may provide for our weakness.” These aids or marks, which demarcate the ministry of the true church, include the ministry of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments of God, and the oversight of the authority of God. In a real sense, the mediation of the Son and the empowerment of the Spirit are made manifest among the children of the New Jerusalem through these creaturely means.

Third, a *properly theological account of the church is able to handle the formal and informal aspects of Christian spiritual formation*. One of the primary critiques of the church given by the spiritual formation movement is that the formal practices of “the church” have been lacking the kind of life-engagement and life-propelling (informal) aspects necessary for the formation of disciples in the real world. While some of these concerns likely spring from a different theological scaffolding, specifically the Spirit’s completing work of sanctification, it may have also led to the pragmatic expansion of “community,” so that the sacred ministry of the church has been transferred to any and all gatherings, as long as they are properly spiritually forming.

While doctrinal convictions should maintain a distinction between the special-grace gathering of the church and all other, good-intentioned gatherings, there might be a way to facilitate their proper relation using Kuyper’s distinction between church as “institute” and church as “organism.” In trying to keep distinct the church and the state, yet maintain a real engagement between the two, Kuyper presented a two-fold understanding of the church.⁵⁴ The church as institute refers to “Christians gathered institutionally” in worship and sacred community; whereas the church as organism refers to “Christians scattered organically” throughout the world in their various public or common roles.⁵⁵ The former is responsible for internal, institutional activities, particularly on Sunday (word and sacraments, discipline, catechesis, and the communal life of the church), and the latter is responsible for external and organic of the church in the world, primarily on Monday–Saturday (working, volunteering, evangelizing, serving the poor, raising families, and engaging in civic life). As much as the relationship between the two was one of distinction, for Kuyper the two needed one another: without the institute of the church, the organism would drift aimlessly into the world, and without the organism of the church, the institute would have no connection in the world. The relation

⁵⁴ Cf. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity, 2017), 161–89, especially 173–77. For a critical analysis of Kuyper’s larger proposal regarding a public theology, see Daniel Strange, “Rooted and Grounded? The Legitimacy of Abraham Kuyper’s Distinction between Church as Institute and Church as Organism, and Its Usefulness in Constructing an Evangelical Public Theology,” *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 429–44.

⁵⁵ Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 141–42.

is both biblical and created: formal to informal, conscious to instinctive, and structural to natural.⁵⁶ While the “institution positions itself between us and the world, in order to protect the uniqueness of our life,”⁵⁷ the organism positions the life of the church to “penetrate into the world’s joints.”⁵⁸ With the conceptual assistance of Kuyper, the spiritual formation movement can maintain its desire for authentic, deeply-relational, porous communities that are “rooted” in the world that is and yet be firmly “grounded” in the world to come through the institutional church.

IV. CONCLUSION: RE-“INSTITUTING” THE CHURCH IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

This essay was written with a posture of appreciation for the spiritual formation movement and the healthy resurgence it has brought to the theory and practice of the spiritual life. And with the advice of Porter, we hope our “concerns are...rooted in some helpful corrective.”⁵⁹ Our concern, stated simply, is that the language of “community” fails to make enough space—in theory and practice—for the essential ministry of the church—the local church. Our goal has been to help Christians (and their local churches) think more critically about the identity and purpose of the church in their spiritual life and formation. Our desire is not the end of spiritual formation as a movement (in the words of the apostle Paul: “May it never be!”), but the inclusion of spiritual formation into the framework and cooperation of an ecclesial formation, so that, with Kuyper, all Christians may be both “rooted and grounded” (Eph. 3:17) in every way.

⁵⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), 50, provided his own explanatory metaphor: “The church of the lord is one loaf, dough that rises according to its nature [organism] but nevertheless is kneaded with human hands and baked as bread [institute].”

⁵⁷ Kuyper, *On the Church*, 57.

⁵⁸ Kuyper, *On the Church*, 53.

⁵⁹ Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key,” 148.