

SANCTIFICATION IN A NEW KEY: RELIEVING EVANGELICAL ANXIETIES OVER SPIRITUAL FORMATION



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Abstract: This article is meant to be an apologetic for spiritual formation to those within the evangelical tradition who find themselves concerned about its emphases. Eight common objections to spiritual formation are presented with the twofold aim of recognizing any needed corrective and defusing the objection. While more must be said in response to each of these objections, it is hoped that enough will be said here to relieve much of the anxiety surrounding spiritual formation.

INTRODUCTION

I will begin by asserting that the topic of spiritual formation within evangelicalism is simply the Protestant doctrine of sanctification *in a new key*.¹ The Protestant theological category of “sanctification” has traditionally referred to the process of the believer being made holy, which is “to be conformed to the image of Christ” (Rom 8:29).² While there have been various conceptions of this sanctification process within Protestantism, the underlying unity to these divergent views has been the attempt to spell out the

¹ Due credit goes to C. Stephen Evans whose article entitled “Apologetics in a New Key: Relieving Protestant Anxieties over Natural Theology,” while much different in content, inspired the title and spirit of this present article. Evans’ article can be found in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. William Lane Craig and Mark S. McLeod (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 65–75.

² For example, Louis Berkhof defines sanctification as: “that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works.” See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 532.

nature and dynamics of growth in holiness (cf. 1 Pet 1:14–16).³ Partly due to distorted treatments of sanctification, alternative terms such as “spiritual formation,” “spiritual theology,” and “Christian spirituality” have become common within evangelical circles. While these terms and the plethora of viewpoints which accompany them often sound much different than typical evangelical presentations of sanctification, this should not detract us from the realization that what is being discussed under the heading of “spiritual formation” (at least within evangelical Protestantism) is none other than views regarding the nature and dynamics of growth in Christian holiness.

But even if it is correct to say that what goes by the name of “spiritual formation” is none other than theologizing about the doctrine of sanctification, there remains the concern that what is being proffered under the banner of spiritual formation departs in substantive and problematic ways from more traditional, evangelical conceptions of sanctification. For while very few would object to discussing the nature and dynamics of growth in holiness, there are nevertheless suspicions of “this” or “that” way of viewing the matter. Indeed, not many weeks go by in which I do not hear about a person who is questioning, a church who is in turmoil over, or a website that is criticizing some aspect of what is termed “spiritual formation.” So, in this paper I would like to surface eight notable objections to spiritual formation with the twofold aim of (1) recognizing needed correctives/cautions and (2) at least partially defusing the objection.

In this discussion I intend to use the phrase “spiritual formation” as a collective noun that might bring to mind a vague assortment of individuals, emphases, and practices. The individuals might include certain recognized leaders in the spiritual formation movement (e.g., Dallas Willard, Larry Crabb, Eugene Peterson, etc.) as well as some common emphases (e.g., the history of Christian spirituality, the importance of spiritual disciplines, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, etc.) as well as some typical practices (e.g., retreat, spiritual direction, contemplative prayer, etc.). I do not intend, nor do I wish, to defend everything that has been said, written, or practiced under the banner of spiritual formation, but I do think that there is a generally recognizable movement that is subject to some general critiques. This leaves “spiritual formation” as a target of critique rather ambiguous, but it seems that it is this ambiguous target that is liable to raise the greatest concern amongst evangelicals.⁴

³ For an overview of some theologies of sanctification, see Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

⁴ This document is, then, an apologetic for spiritual formation. But, once again, it is an apologetic for spiritual formation in an extremely general and vague sense. The next step in developing an apology for spiritual formation would be to present defenses of specified views and practices.

What follows are brief responses to eight general objections to spiritual formation which, if left unanswered, can understandably bring about anxiety when it comes to an emphasis on spiritual formation within an individual life or the common life of a church or para-church ministry. The hope is that in looking at these objections we can take care in those places where caution or corrective is required and at the same time answer some of the worries that often arise when it comes to spiritual formation.

1. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS JUST ANOTHER PASSING FAD.

This is the idea that the burgeoning interest in spiritual formation amongst evangelicals is the result of more general sociological forces that will soon pass.⁵ The concern here is that the evangelical community will have re-tooled its message and programs for the sake of what turns out to be just another passing fad. Evangelicalism has seen the discipleship movement, the quiet time movement, the accountability group movement, the Christian counseling movement, the men's movement, the twelve-step movement, the WWJD? movement, the purpose-driven life movement, and so on. On this view, spiritual formation is just the latest product for the evangelical consumer and before long it too will be chewed up and spit out becoming just a further attempt at a "solution" to spiritual growth in a long line of passé evangelical solutions. This is a serious worry about spiritual formation, for why would anyone want to hitch their wagon to a star that will soon fade and in the end leave many dissatisfied?

Of course, in one sense spiritual formation will be just another passing fad. In a consumer driven culture, the more something becomes packaged as a product for the consumer, the more the long-term interest in that something becomes threatened. If the product is of a high quality and if that quality can be retained in the packaging of it, then there is hope that the product will stand the test of time. But it will almost certainly be the case that eventually the language associated with spiritual formation will be commonplace, the appeal to the ancient traditions and practices of Christian spirituality will cease to be novel, the having of a Christian spiritual director will be as ordinary as having an accountability group, and various other emphases and practices associated with spiritual formation will lose their revolutionary appeal. When spiritual formation is no longer the "latest thing," interest will undoubtedly wane and some new movement will arise to add some neglected element to the mix.

⁵ For a discussion of the general societal trend towards "spirituality," see Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) and David Voas and Steve Bruce, "The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred," in Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 43–60.

And yet, it seems that this eventual shift of popular interest away from spiritual formation should not overly concern us for at least two reasons. First, like discipleship programs, 12-step groups, Christian counseling, and the like, spiritual formation will have made its own positive contribution to the evangelical community. That the teachings and practices of spiritual formation will become commonplace in the life of the church is a great good given the assumption that many of these teachings and practices are in accordance with the reality of biblical sanctification. Second, even if the current interest in spiritual formation wanes, the time and energy spent addressing this area will not have been wasted—for the nature and dynamics of spiritual formation is a legitimate and important area of Christian thought and practice in any period in church history. Indeed, the true concern is that as the sociological forces turn us to some new emphasis, movement, and terminology, we will once again allow the topic of spiritual growth to fall by the wayside and/or we will begin to treat it in a superficial manner. So whatever other concerns we may have about spiritual formation, the current interest in it should be harnessed to sharpen our understanding of the Christian life. For what is clear is that the church has a duty, whether in season or out, to offer a practical understanding of Christian growth in a clear, coherent, and comprehensive manner.

2. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS CATHOLIC.

But perhaps the real problem might be thought to be that spiritual formation is Catholic. Of course, spiritual formation *is* Catholic in the innocuous sense that all Protestant theology is historically rooted in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. That spiritual formation looks to the first fifteen centuries of church history for insights into spiritual maturation is no more problematic than looking to the first fifteen centuries of church history for insights into the nature of the Trinity, the incarnation, the doctrine of the church, and so on.⁶ Furthermore, while evangelical Protestantism disagrees with post-Reformation Roman Catholicism on some crucial points, there is nevertheless room for interaction on those points of disagreement as well as other substantial points of agreement when it

⁶ Some might not be aware how much Protestant evangelical thought stands on the shoulders of our Catholic (and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Orthodox) brothers and sisters. Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, Packer, and the rest did not create Protestant evangelical theology *ex nihilo* or even from “Scripture alone.” Rather, these and other pillars of the Protestant evangelical tradition stand in a long line of faithful students of Christ and the Scriptures. Consider, for instance, Calvin’s repeated, favorable references to Bernard of Clairveaux and other pre-Reformation figures. See Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 2007).

comes to spiritual formation.⁷ So the real worry here must be that spiritual formation is influenced by specific Roman Catholic doctrines and practices that are incompatible with evangelical theology. Whatever the particular problem cited, the concern is that spiritual formation has inappropriately borrowed from Roman Catholicism.

This is, no doubt, a valid concern. The first thing to be said in response is that we must be careful not to commit the genetic fallacy by faulting an idea or practice simply because of its origin—in this case, because of its Catholic origin. The charge that spiritual formation is Catholic must be directed at some particular problematic Catholic doctrine or practice that is embraced in the evangelical spiritual formation literature. For instance, perhaps the emphasis on spiritual disciplines smacks of justification by works. Or perhaps the practice of *lectio divina* tends to go against a literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic. Or perhaps spiritual direction is ultimately based in an ecclesiology that denies the priesthood of all believers. If specific problems such as these are cited, it behooves the evangelical proponent of spiritual formation to carefully consider the complaint and test the adopted idea or practice against sound evangelical theology. But we should also bear in mind that evangelical theology and practice are not immune from these very same kinds of errors. Many of our models of sanctification smack of works righteousness, many of our Bible study methods easily turn subjectivistic, and we have often produced “discipleship” relationships that are overly authoritarian. So the need to be on the look-out for unbiblical theology and practices cuts both ways.

It should also be noted that one reason spiritual formation has Catholic dialogue-partners is because the Catholic tradition had for centuries highlighted the topic of Christian growth whereas the Protestant movement was initially a theological response to doctrinal errors regarding the nature of salvation and the authority of Scripture. It would be foolish to ignore fifteen centuries of reflection on the nature of spiritual growth even if that history has had better and worse seasons. Nevertheless, it would also be incorrect to say that Protestant writers ignored the spiritual life. There is a rich heritage of writing on spirituality within Protestantism in such figures as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, William Law, John Owen, Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards, J. C. Ryle, A. W. Tozer, and numerous others.⁸

So while it can be alarming to see an explicit appreciation for both pre-Reformation and post-Reformation Catholic thought in spiritual formation literature and teaching, the real concern is not the influence of Catholicism

⁷ Needless to say, there has been much disagreement over just how much evangelical theology and Roman Catholic theology can find common ground. See Mark A. Noll for an assessment of this, *Is the Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁸ Along this vein, it is encouraging to see a recent series of books entitled *Classics of Reformed Spirituality* (Baker Academic).

per se, but rather the importation of ideas and practices (whether Catholic or not) that are biblically questionable. This is an important reminder for those leading and teaching in spiritual formation.

3. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS NEW AGE.

Similar in type to the concern that spiritual formation is Catholic is the claim that spiritual formation is New Age or involves other non-Christian religious principles and/or practices. As with the claim that spiritual formation is Catholic, it is essential to get clear on what particular teaching or practice is purported to be New Age, Buddhist, Sufi, etc. For one, some of what might be thought to be non-Christian in essence or origin may actually turn out to be Christian in essence and origin. For instance, the practice of silence and solitude is often developed more within contemporary New Age and Buddhist literature than contemporary Christian literature, even though silence and solitude *before the Lord* is a practice deeply rooted in biblical and historical Christianity.⁹ So the impression might be that a silence retreat is more New Age or Buddhist than Christian when there is in actual fact a rich, albeit neglected, biblical theology of practicing extended silence and solitude.

But are there not some instances where a clearly non-Christian principle and/or practice is being utilized within a supposedly Christian spirituality? Indeed, there are some obvious examples. For example, the use of ouija boards, drug use for spiritual purposes, spiritual principles that encourage the worship of self or nature, etc. are all in direct contradiction with biblical spirituality. These are obvious cases that, I assume, the majority of Christians will easily see-through. But there are more difficult cases. For example, the use of yoga, prayer labyrinths, breathing techniques, journaling, etc. are not obviously in direct contradiction with Scripture and yet they are not blatantly endorsed in Scripture and to varying degrees are associated with non-Christian spiritual traditions. It seems the best thing to do is to take these practices and/or principles on a case-by-case basis with something like the following criteria in mind as we look to the Spirit to help us discern their acceptability (cf. 1 Thess 5:21):

Criterion #1: Is the practice/principle *clearly supported* by well-grounded biblical teaching? If so, then accept the practice/principle. If not, then consider 2.

⁹ For a balanced biblical defense of these practices, see Robert L. Plummer, "Are the Disciplines of 'Silence and Solitude' Really Biblical?," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10:4 (2006), 4–13.

Criterion #2: Is the practice/principle *compatible* with well-grounded biblical teaching? If so, then consider 3. If not, then dismiss the practice/principle.

Criterion #3: Is there a biblical/theological *rationale* for the practice/principle? In other words, does a Christian understanding of human nature, sin, salvation, and sanctification make theological sense of and adequately support the practice/principle? If so, then hold the practice/principle tentatively and consider 4. If not, then hold the practice/principle with greater tentativeness and consider 4.

Criterion #4: Is there *extra-biblical support* of the practice/principle from the study of general revelation? In other words, do we have any evidence from the investigation of human persons and the natural order that would demonstrate the value of the practice/principle for the Christian life? If so, then hold the practice/principle tentatively and consider 5. If not, then hold the practice/principle with greater tentativeness and consider 5.

Criterion #5: Is there *widespread historical acceptance and endorsement* of the practice/principle within the history of the Christian church? If so, then hold the practice/principle tentatively and consider the following concluding principle. If not, then hold the practice/principle with greater tentativeness and consider the following concluding principle.

Concluding principle: If the practice/principle successfully met criteria 2–5, *provisionally* accept the practice/principle as having *potential value* for the Christian life. On the other hand, if the practice/principle met criterion 2 but did not successfully meet criteria 3–5, dismiss the practice/principle as most likely having no value for the Christian life. If the practice/principle successfully met some but not each of criteria 2–5, further consideration and counsel is required.

Perhaps running an example through these criteria will help break down the admittedly formal presentation. Let us consider the practice of journaling about one's Christian life. Journaling is not explicitly taught in Scripture, so it fails criterion #1. Even though we have biblical examples of persons writing about their own spiritual lives (e.g., Paul and the psalmists), there is no explicit biblical teaching encouraging believers to write in this manner. But journaling does seem compatible with what Scripture teaches—that is, there are no explicit condemnations of spiritual writing and we can even understand why such writing would not be encouraged in a time and culture in which literacy and writing materials were rare. So journaling meets the compatibility requirement of criterion #2. This alone should not lead to an endorsement of journaling in that many things are

compatible with Scripture that presumably have no immediate value for the Christian life (e.g., playing chess is compatible with Scripture).

So we then turn to criterion #3 which asks whether the practice/principle (journaling in this case) makes theological sense—that is, does something about our understanding of human nature, sin, and Christ’s salvific way provide a rationale for why journaling may be helpful? The answer in this case is fairly clear. Writing out one’s prayers or thoughts about one’s sanctification process seems to be supported by our theological understanding of, for instance, loving God with our minds and the importance of careful reflection on Scripture and one’s Christian experience.¹⁰ While the success of journaling in meeting this criterion is encouraging, even here, some caution seems right for the next two criteria offer important potential confirmation of the value of journaling.

Criterion #4 takes journaling to the bar of general revelation. Do we know anything from our study of human persons and the natural world that would provide further endorsement of journaling? Once again, in this case it seems we do have the support of general revelation. Whether through anecdotal evidence alone or more formal research and theorizing, the benefits of written language to comprehension, memorization, and conceptual clarity are evident. There is quite simply much thought that would not take place unless we had the ability to organize and trace our thought process through writing. As many will attest, journaling often brings us to new and deeper realizations about ourselves, others, and God.¹¹

While the practice of journaling is looking very good at this point, we still hold the practice tentatively as we look to criterion #5. This fifth criterion holds journaling accountable to church history. While a failure here would not necessarily be a deal breaker, it seems reasonable to expect that if a spiritual practice/principle is compatible with Scripture (criterion #2), makes theological sense (criterion #3), and is grounded in general revelation (criterion #4), then it would show up in the history of the church. Once again, in the case of journaling there are practical reasons why we may not see much of this practice in various times and places (e.g., illiteracy, lack of leisure time, the expense of writing materials). Nonetheless, something very much like journaling can be found throughout large segments of church history. For instance, Augustine’s *Confessions* is rightly identified as a paradigm example of self-reflective spiritual writing and other Christian figures are well known for both their practice and encouragement of journaling (e.g., John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards).

So, since journaling successfully meets criteria 2–5, it is recommended in the concluding principle that we “*provisionally* accept the practice/principle as having potential value for the Christian life.” The acceptance is

¹⁰ Consider Anne Broyles, “One More Door into God’s Presence: Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline,” *Weavings* 2 (May/June 1987), 32–39.

¹¹ For more on this, see Helen Cepero, *The Spiritual Practice of Journaling: Encountering God Through Attentive Writing* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

merely “provisional” because without explicit biblical commendation it is always possible that our opinion of the merits of journaling will change as we continue to study theology, general revelation, and church history. For instance, if a number of empirical studies of journaling Christians reveal that journaling actually hinders spiritual progress, we would need to rethink the practice. Further, the conclusion is only that journaling has “*potential* value for the Christian life” for, once again, without an explicit biblical commendation of journaling, we should not require that journaling is in any sense necessary for a fruitful Christian life or that Christians should be faulted for not practicing journaling.¹²

While I confess that spiritual journaling is not the most controversial example, I chose it partly because it demonstrates the acceptability of the above-stated criteria. A more complicated evaluation takes place when considering prayer labyrinths or meditative breathing techniques. While I will not take the space to offer my own assessment of how these and other more controversial practices measure up to the criteria, I do want to emphasize two important features of the decision-making procedure suggested by these criteria.

First, we must remember that part of the assessment of whether criterion 2 is successfully met (is the practice/principle compatible with Scripture?) should be determined by Paul’s teachings regarding the weaker brother/sister (1 Cor 8–10 and Rom 14–15). In these passages Paul maintains that Christians should refrain from otherwise permissible activities when practicing those activities may tempt other Christians to do what they believe to be wrong (Rom 14:21; 1 Cor 8:13).¹³ So, if there are otherwise permissible principles or practices that will cause another believer to fall into sin, it is better not to take part in those principles or practices.¹⁴

Second, we must not underestimate the value of general revelation. For instance, the Bible says little about nutrition, exercise, sleep, and so on, but we know from our own experience as well as various empirical studies that eating right, exercising regularly, and getting sufficient sleep impacts the whole of our existence, including our spiritual lives. If, as an example, common experience and empirical study shows that taking deep, abdominal

¹² The philosophically minded might wonder if criteria 1–5 and the concluding principle themselves live up to their own standards and/or from whence the justification of these criteria and principle proceed. While I will resist going into a full defense of the criteria and concluding principle, I think they can each be grounded in biblical teaching. In other words, criteria 2–5 and the concluding principle each successfully meet criterion 1. The defense of the importance of fulfilling criterion 1 must also be left for another day, but I assume most readers are ready to accept the value of this criterion.

¹³ For a brief summary of Paul’s discussion of the weaker brother/sister, see M. B. Thompson, “Strong and Weak” and “Stumbling Block” in Gerald Hawthorne et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 916–919.

¹⁴ Of course, we must also persist in educating the weaker Christian about what is truly good and evil.

breaths can have positive effects on one's concentration and overall physical health, then we should not be too quick to dismiss these insights gleaned from general revelation. Once again, we must not be too quick to make something like abdominal breathing essential or even central to the practice of Christian spirituality. If one is spending more time practicing breathing exercises than praying or meditating on Scripture, then something has gone amiss.

To sum up, the question of whether or not spiritual formation is New Age (or Buddhist, Hindu, etc.) depends on what practice and/or principle is being evaluated and the degree to which that practice/principle fails to meet criteria 1–5 (or some other such criteria). What should be our ultimate concern is not whether the principle or practice can be found within some non-Christian spirituality, but whether the principle or practice can be affirmed from God's general and special revelation.

4. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS CONTRARY TO THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE.

In the response to the previous objection it became clear that while spiritual formation must remain firmly rooted in Scripture, there are principles and practices for the Christian life that may be drawn from outside the biblical text. This ignites the concern that spiritual formation does not see Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. This worry is compounded by several factors. For one, spiritual formation has been heavily influenced by extra-biblical sources of insight—for instance, philosophy (Willard), psychology (Benner), and the history of Christian spirituality (Foster).¹⁵ The worry is that this openness to extra-biblical input is running the show at the expense of focusing on normative biblical principles of growth. Second, spiritual formation is often experientially driven in that it tends to focus on one's subjective experience of one's self and God (more on this concern below). Once again, while one's personal experience with Christ is important, the concern is that this subjective experience takes the place of submission to the authority of Scripture. And third, evangelicals who come to spiritual formation often come from a place of Bible boredom and burnout. They have drunk deeply of the waters of Word-centered spiritualities and finding these to be lacking they turn to other less-Word-centered spiritualities (e.g., Eastern Orthodoxy). Add to this the lack of

¹⁵ Dallas Willard brings a philosophical anthropology to bear on formation in his *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002); David Benner integrates a psychodynamic view of the person in his *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003); Richard Foster develops an understanding of formation through looking at major movements of the Spirit in church history in his, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

theologians and biblical scholars writing on formation, and we have a genuine worry about the biblical foundations of spiritual formation.¹⁶

But the sufficiency of Scripture objection goes even deeper than these potentially problematic factors. For on a traditional understanding of biblical sufficiency the idea is that the Bible is the sole authority for all matters of faith and practice.¹⁷ If this is the case, then spiritual formation appears to run amuck of biblical sufficiency when it looks for insights regarding spiritual maturation in psychology, church history, subjective experience, and philosophy, and encourages practices and/or principles that are not explicitly endorsed by the biblical text (e.g., spiritual direction, journaling, silent retreats).

By way of response, it is important to note that there are at least two ways one can take the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.¹⁸ The first way of understanding this doctrine puts the emphasis on Scripture as our *highest* authority for all matters of faith and practice. Scripture is God's word, and if we are confident in what God's word has to say about a matter, this should take precedence over and against any other putative source of information. This is a noteworthy reminder and spiritual formation must stand against the tendency to let other disciplines or personal experience trump biblical teaching. Nonetheless, on this understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture, as long as Scripture remains the controlling/regulating/governing force over and against the insights of other disciplines and personal experience, there is no objection to bringing in these extra-biblical sources as subservient to Scripture.

The second way of taking this doctrine emphasizes that Scripture is not only our highest authority, but is moreover our *only* authority in all matters of faith and practice. Here is where there appears to be a rub with some of what goes on in spiritual formation. For if Scripture is our *only* authority in all matters of faith and practice, then any meaningful interaction with extra-biblical sources of knowledge in developing our theology or practicing our Christian life is out-of-bounds. The problem with the view that Scripture is our only source of knowledge is that Scripture itself claims otherwise. For instance, in Philippians 3:17 Paul writes, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." This text not only points the Philippians to Paul's life as an example (in keeping with Paul's imitation theology—1 Cor 4:16; 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:9), but there is the additional commendation to "observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us" (NASB). This passage is an inspired, infallible, biblical commendation of a non-

¹⁶ Packer notes the evangelical brain drain when it comes to the doctrine of sanctification in his, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 100–101.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 125–137.

¹⁸ For a detailed treatment of the doctrine of sufficiency in Protestantism, see Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001).

inspired, fallible, extra-biblical source of knowledge—namely, the lives of Paul and these others Paul refers to. Of course, neither Paul's actual life nor the lives of the "others" are inspired or infallible. Rather, Paul is pointing to imperfect exemplars as sources of information of how it is that believers are to "put no confidence in the flesh" and "press on toward the goal" (3:3, 14). Gordon Fee comments on this passage, "The idea of 'imitating' a teacher had precedent in Paul's Jewish heritage, where a pupil learned not simply by receiving instruction but by 'putting into practice' the example of the teacher; the one who 'imitates' thus internalizes and lives out the model presented by the teacher."¹⁹ There is something about these living and walking examples (ESV) or patterns (NASB) that Paul sees as valuable and valid in terms of learning the way of Christ.

Of course, this is not the only place that Paul points to himself and others as models of Christian living. Notably, in 1 Corinthians 4:16–17 Paul writes, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in the church." In this text, it is Timothy who offers a living witness of the ways in Christ. Neither of these passages prescribe what it is about Paul's way and the way of the others that is to serve as an example. But this is exactly the point. It appears that Paul did not intend to delineate in writing but rather to demonstrate in living the details of this "pattern." Even if the text did put in words the pattern to be followed, there is something about seeing it in action that adds to the propositional description. Whatever the nature of the content, the church is to watch and learn from the individual and collective experience of Paul and these others (cf. Hebrews 13:7).

These Pauline passages constitute only one example of the biblical endorsement of extra-biblical resources that aid in our understanding of God and his ways. Others have noted that the Wisdom literature of Scripture offer a similar biblical commendation of extra-biblical observation and reflection. Edward Curtis writes:

Many of the proverbs articulate principles that can be identified by any insightful person who carefully observes the world around him, and it appears that Israel and her neighbors did, in fact, recognize many of the same principles that contribute to a person's success. It does not require direct revelation from God (what theologians have traditionally called special revelation) to realize the benefit of diligence and the way it contributes to a person's success; the same is true of the problems that a bad temper can generate for a person or the value of patience or the dangers involved in making rash judgments or commitments.²⁰

¹⁹ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 364.

²⁰ Edward Curtis, "Old Testament Wisdom: A Model for Faith-Learning Integration," *Christian Scholar's Review* XV (1986), 217.

So in these and many other places within Scripture we find an endorsement of knowledge to be gained outside of Scripture which is relevant to living the Christian life. Hence, the notion that Scripture is our *sole* authority appears best understood as the claim that Scripture is the believer's highest authority and the sole authority that *defines* what constitutes Christian belief and practice. It is sufficient in the sense that nothing else is to be added to Scripture (e.g., tradition) as an equally authoritative and constitutive authority. Extra-biblical sources of knowledge can aid in our understanding of what Scripture teaches as well as how to put into practice what Scripture teaches, but these sources are not superior in authority to Scripture nor do they define what constitutes normative Christian belief and practice. Rather, these disciplines (e.g., church history, psychology, philosophy) function as handmaids to theology as tools of clarification, confirmation, and explication.²¹

So, while there is certainly a need for spiritual formation to take care to remain grounded in a biblical understanding of growth, there is nothing about the doctrine of biblical sufficiency that hinders the integration of extra-biblical insights as long as Scripture retains its authoritative supremacy and constitutive role in this integration.

5. WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO GOOD OLD-FASHIONED OBEDIENCE?

With all the talk of spiritual disciplines, spiritual directors, silence retreats, Ignatian spirituality, and so on, it should come as no surprise that evangelicals would be drawn to simple obedience to the commands of Christ. Why all the curiosity and investigation into alternative models and means of spiritual maturation when we have at our disposal a simple, biblical, tried and true understanding of the Christian life? On this understanding the formula for Christian living is straightforward: trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, come under the teaching of His Word within the church, obey His commands, and seek to bring others into His Kingdom. We might think here of the old hymn chorus, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey."²² Given this clear and simple message, the attendant worry is that spiritual formation is an unnecessary complication and confusion of a long-standing and successful model of spiritual growth.

In response to this concern about spiritual formation, several things should be said. First off, the hymn is right—trusting Christ and obeying His

²¹ For a development of this type of integrative theological method, see Steve L. Porter, "Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32:3 (2004), 190–199.

²² Words by John H. Sammis.

commands should be at the heart of spiritual formation. As a case in point, Dallas Willard has written that the goal of Christian spiritual formation is “an obedience or conformity to Christ.”²³ So in many ways the spiritual formation movement and literature remains focused on good old-fashioned obedience. Perhaps what appears to complicate matters when it comes to spiritual formation is the often-found critique of an externalized understanding of obedience. That is, “obedience to Christ” can be easily reduced to a behaviorism in which the believer merely attempts to get his or her outward actions in line with the explicit commandments of Christ. The problem here, of course, is that outward obedience to Christ appears to be something that we can do in our own power—a cleaning of the outside of the cup (Mt 23:25–26).²⁴ Given this understanding of the Christian life, if the believer fails in his or her endeavor (as he or she no doubt will), the only help on offer is an exhortation to confess, repent, and try harder the next time. If nothing else, spiritual formation has attempted to express a firm corrective to this externalized conception of formation and in its place offer an analysis of the dynamics of inner heart change in and through relationship with God.²⁵ Hence, a central question that has been pushed in spiritual formation is: How do we become the kinds of persons who can consistently and joyfully obey Christ in all aspects of our lives? Here, as Eugene Peterson puts it, we do not simply want to do Jesus things, but we want to do Jesus things the Jesus way.²⁶ Once we open the door to the way of becoming a person who naturally and regularly obeys Christ *from the heart*, we have opened the door to a deeper and more complex discussion involving the agency of the Holy Spirit, the role of the human will, the place of the Word, the nature of the heart, the necessity of relationships with others, etc.

So, on the one hand, there is no need to worry about the loss of good old-fashioned obedience for it remains at the forefront of anything rightly called *Christian* spiritual formation. On the other hand, it may turn out to be the case that obedience to Christ is a bit more complex than the Christian behaviorism that can masquerade as obedience to Christ. Complex realities are not necessarily complicated or confusing, but they do demand a certain kind of sustained attention. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way . . .” becomes a much more profound lyric than most of us probably realized.

²³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 22.

²⁴ See John Coe’s analysis of this in his, “Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Opening to *Spiritual* Formation in the Cross and Spirit,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1:1 (2008), 54–78.

²⁵ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

²⁶ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1–18.

6. SPIRITUAL FORMATION ENCOURAGES WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

The sixth concern that we will address is the worry that spiritual formation encourages or inherently involves some form or another of works righteousness. Surely all of this talk of “our part in spiritual transformation” can appeal to one’s desire to take control of one’s spiritual life and work out one’s salvation in the power of the flesh. Rather than simply trusting in Christ’s imputed righteousness as the ground of our salvation and sanctification, we seek a righteousness of our own making apart from Christ (cf. Phil 3:9). Once within this mindset, many Christians see the disciplines, spiritual direction, and the like as further requirements to earn God’s approval.

Inasmuch as spiritual formation gives us something “to do” there is clearly a danger of works righteousness. For it seems that the default of fallen human nature is to strive for value, acceptance, love, growth, etc., in the power of the autonomous self. The warnings against this temptation abound in the spiritual formation literature.²⁷ All hands agree, it seems, that our efforts do not earn our standing with God nor do our efforts alone actually change us in a spiritually significant manner. Rather, our right standing with God is secured solely by the grace of God through Christ and the power of spiritual transformation is found solely through the Spirit of Christ’s mediation of that grace. And yet, there is, on most accounts, something we must do to avail ourselves of this transforming work of the Spirit. In the words of Frank Laubach, “I have done nothing but open windows—*God has done all the rest.*”²⁸ But even the simple act of opening windows to—that is, making intentional space for—God can become the entryway for works righteousness. Even if one holds that Christians should do nothing in their sanctification, there will remain the temptation that by my doing nothing I have earned approval and that I have transformed myself. It is just as easy for me to compare the way in which I do nothing to the way in which you do nothing as it is for me to compare my prayer life to your prayer life. And comparison is always a sign that we are attempting to earn in the confidence of the flesh (cf. 1 Cor 3). So works righteousness is a problem that is not unique to spiritual formation. Any model of sanctification that prescribes some response on the part of the believer to God’s sanctifying grace, however passive that response may be, becomes a target for works righteousness. This is because works righteousness has nothing to do with how much or how little is required in the formation process. Rather,

²⁷ For instance, see Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1978); Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1988); Siang-Yang Tan and Douglas H. Gregg, *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997); Benner, *Surrender to Love*.

²⁸ Frank C. Laubach, *Letters By a Modern Mystic* (Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1955). Emphasis in the original source.

works righteousness pertains to how what is required is taken on by the believer.

So, there does not appear to be anything peculiar to spiritual formation that entails a spirituality of works righteousness. Rather, works righteousness is a threat to any discussion of progress in holiness (cf. Gal 2:11–21).

7. SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS OVERLY EXPERIENTIAL.

The charge here is that spiritual formation tends to over-emphasize an experiential relationship with God. The concern seems to be that such a focus is too subjective and feeling-oriented so that one's experience of God begins to override the objective truth about who God is. Hence, it might be thought that spiritual formation encourages experiences with God at the expense of knowing God through the written Word, and this leads to an overly feeling-oriented spiritual life.²⁹

In terms of a response to this concern, we must begin by making clear what Scripture itself makes clear: believers in Christ are brought into a personal relationship with God *that has an experiential dimension*. While many passages could be proffered in support of this, one key text is John 14. Here Jesus is explaining to his disciples that while he will no longer be physically present with them (vs. 18–19), he will not abandon them but will manifest/disclose/show (*emphanizō*) himself to them (vs. 21). One of his disciples (the other Judas) asks how this non-physical manifestation will work (vs. 22). Jesus responds, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and *We will come to him and make Our abode with him*“ (vs. 23 Emphasis mine). This manifestation of Jesus (and the Father) in the believer's life is mediated by the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit (vs. 16–17). Reflecting on Jesus' teaching in this passage, D. A. Carson writes, “This must not be construed as merely creedal position. The Spirit is to be experienced; otherwise the promise . . . of relief from the sense of abandonment is empty.”³⁰ In other words, the personal presence of the Spirit in the believer's life is an experiential reality. Carson goes on to approvingly quote Schnackenburg: “In the twentieth century . . . consciousness of the presence of the Spirit has to . . . a very great extent disappeared, even in the believing community.”³¹ J. I. Packer agrees. In discussing the various aspects of the ministry of the Spirit, Packer writes:

²⁹ Donald Bloesch has a similar concern regarding “classical mysticism” in his, *Spirituality Old and New: Recovering Authentic Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 78. See also Bruce Demarest's criticism of Bloesch's point in Demarest's review of *Spirituality Old and New* in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1:1 (2008), 110–113.

³⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 500.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 500–501.

When, however, experiential aspects of life in the Spirit come up for treatment (as distinct from convictional, volitional, and disciplinary aspects) . . . Evangelicals for the most part seem to be at a loss. In this terrain of direct perceptions of God—perceptions of his greatness and goodness, his eternity and infinity, his truth, his love, and his glory, all as related to Christ and through Christ to us—understanding was once much richer than is commonly found today. This is a place where we have some relearning to do.³²

Now, how it is that we can best conceptualize the experiential reality of the Spirit of God as well as the degree to which Christians ought to expect a conscious awareness of that reality are important (and, often, largely undeveloped) theological matters. But we certainly must come to grips with the biblical message of an experiential dimension to our spiritual lives.³³ For instance, the apostle Paul prays that the Ephesian believers would be “*strengthened with power* through His Spirit in the inner being” (Eph 3:16 Emphasis mine; cf. Phil 4:13; 2 Tim 4:17). He assures the church in Rome that the “Spirit Himself *testifies* with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16 Emphasis mine; cf. Gal 4:6) and that “the love of God has been *poured out* within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:5 Emphasis mine). Providing a window into his own experience, Paul tells the Colossians that he struggles “with all [Christ’s] *energy* that He powerfully works within me” (Col 1:29 ESV Emphasis mine) and to Timothy that in a time when all others deserted him “the Lord *stood with me and strengthened me*” (2 Tim 4:17 Emphasis mine). In these and many other places the Pauline corpus makes it quite clear that the Spirit who is with and in the believer is a strengthening, testifying, loving, and energizing presence. It would be difficult in the extreme to make sense of Paul’s description of the Spirit’s ministry if one claimed that such language is *not* experiential. What would it mean, for example, that the Spirit *testifies* to our spirit if not that there is at some level of human experience a real event of personal communication taking place? Once again, the best way to conceptualize this experiential relationship and the degree to which believers are conscious of it is another matter, but our answers to those questions should not detract from the fundamental truth that life in the Spirit has an experiential dimension.³⁴

Once this experiential dimension is highlighted, it is somewhat difficult to see how one could *overly* emphasize it. Indeed, if Carson, Packer, and

³² Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 62. Packer has much of the “relearning” that is needed within the pages of his book.

³³ See Graham Cole’s discussion of this in his, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 259–277.

³⁴ As Carson notes, this is not a mere “creedal” point—that is, we do not merely *profess* that we *believe* (“have faith”) the Spirit is an experiential presence. We need to actually move into this experiential presence, which is what “faith” actually entails.

numerous others are right, the recent tendency amongst evangelicals (at least non-charismatic evangelicals) has been to downplay this type of experience.³⁵ If focusing on an experiential relationship with God is tantamount to focusing on the strengthening, testifying, loving, empowering work of the Spirit, then the more focus the better.³⁶ Of course, there can be an excessive seeking of certain types of manifestations of the Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor 12–14), but the spiritual formation movement, generally speaking, does not tend in this direction. It is also a valid concern that an experiential relationship with God may diminish relating with God through the written Word. But, once again, the vast majority of evangelical spiritual formation teaching and literature (of which I am aware) articulates quite unmistakably the primacy and centrality of Scripture for nourishing one's communion with God.³⁷ The Word of God is the primary means the Spirit utilizes to open the human heart to a richer experience of the love, grace, and truth of God. As A. W. Tozer puts the point:

Sound Bible exposition is an imperative *must* in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.³⁸

Finally, the worry that an experiential spirituality becomes a feeling-driven spirituality or problematically subjectivistic are legitimate and complex issues. But since an experiential dimension to relationship with God is

³⁵ Many theologians have noted the disappearance of pneumatology from evangelical theology. See, for example, F. LeRon Schults and Andrea Hollingsworth, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

³⁶ Such a focus would be to take seriously Paul's notion of "walking by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25).

³⁷ For instance, M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2001) and Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). More informally, Dallas Willard was asked what has helped him the most in his spiritual growth and he responded, "As far as I can tell, the thing that has helped me most is scripture memorization" (T.A.C.T. Conference, September 20, 2008, Torrance, CA).

³⁸ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1993), 9.

not optional, these types of concerns actually further validate the need and value of spiritual formation within the Christian community.

8. SPIRITUAL FORMATION NEGLECTS MISSIONS/EVANGELISM.

The last objection to spiritual formation that we will consider is the complaint that spiritual formation reflects and reinforces our narcissistic and self-centered age at the expense of the Great Commission mandate to reach the world for Christ (Mt 28:18–20). Since spiritual formation focuses on the growth of the believer, it can easily seem that less attention is paid to reaching the unbeliever and ministering to those in need.

Once again, this is an important and relevant concern. There has always been a tension between the life of ministry and the life of prayer within Christian spirituality.³⁹ And yet, it needs to be clearly communicated that true spiritual formation in Christ will never result in continuous navel-gazing, for true spiritual formation in Christ is growth in love, and love, by its very nature, reaches out (cf. Gal 5:20; 1 John 4:19). In the end, there is no such thing as the person who is so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. If this person has truly set their mind on things above where Christ is seated with the Father, they will become a force to be reckoned with in this present world (cf. Col 3:1–17). Indeed, it could easily be argued that the chief obstacle to missions is a lack of spiritual maturity amongst the body of Christ. Such common barriers to the mission endeavor as lack of financing, strained relations amongst ministry partners, moral and spiritual failure, hypocrisy, and the inadequate discipleship of new believers stem from issues of spiritual immaturity. Hence, rather than being a detraction from missions and evangelism, spiritual formation appears to be exactly what is required.

Francis Schaeffer convincingly argues from John 13:35 and 17:23 that after all the arguments for Christianity's truth claims have been presented, the final and ultimate apologetic to the unbeliever is the love and unity within the body of Christ.⁴⁰ Needless to say that this love and unity can only be brought about as we "remain in him" (John 15:1). As has been pointed out elsewhere, what we have come to call the Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) is in actual fact the call of Jesus to make disciples/students, not mere converts, as well as the call to "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." Surely this assumes that the ones heeding the call will have learned to observe all that Christ commanded (e.g., turning the

³⁹ For a discussion of some of the historical debates regarding the tension between the active and contemplative life, see Mary Elizabeth Mason, *Active Life and Contemplative Life: A Study of the Concepts from Plato to the Present* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961).

⁴⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970).

other cheek, going the extra mile, loving God and neighbor) and know how to train others in this kind of obedience. It appears that both Scripture and missiology tell us that the cause of Christ is ultimately served most effectively through well-formed Christian believers. J. C. Ryle aptly comments:

We must be holy, because this is the *most likely way to do good to others*. . . . [Our lives] are a silent sermon which all can read. . . . I believe that far more is done for Christ's kingdom by the holy living of believers than we are at all aware of. There is a reality about such living which makes men feel, and obliges them to think. It carries a weight and influence with it which nothing else can give. It makes religion beautiful, and draws men to consider it, like a lighthouse seen afar off. . . . You may talk to persons about the doctrines of the Gospels, and few will listen, and still fewer understand. But your life is an argument that none can escape. There is a meaning about holiness which not even the most unlearned can help taking in. They may not understand justification, but they can understand charity.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

Each of the eight issues addressed here obviously deserve further elaboration and there are numerous other concerns that could have been raised. So while this treatment is far from exhaustive, my hope is that enough has been said to allay at least some of the anxieties of evangelicals when it comes to the topic of spiritual formation. But whatever the case on that, it is a profitable exercise for proponents of spiritual formation to pay attention and attempt to address the concerns of those who tend to be a bit suspicious of spiritual formation, if for no other reason that these concerns are often rooted in some helpful corrective.

⁴¹ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1952), 42.

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