

# Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation is the process of apparent spiritual development through engaging in a set of behaviors, termed *disciplines*. Advocates believe these disciplines help shape the character of the practitioner into the likeness of Christ.

Though superficially similar to discipleship, spiritual formation is not merely concerned with biblical exhortation and instruction in orthodox doctrine, but also with the teaching of “many practices that opened [the believer] to the presence and direction of God, and nurtured the character traits of Christ into fruition”.[1](#)

The *Renovaré* website states:

Spiritual formation is a process, but it is also a journey through which we open our hearts to a deeper connection with God. We are not bystanders in our spiritual lives, we are active participants with God, who is ever inviting us into relationship with him.[2](#)

## History

1974

William Menninger discovers the book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

In 1974, Father William Meninger, a Trappist monk and retreat master at St. Josephs Abbey in Spencer, Mass. found a dusty little book in the abbey library, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As he read it he was delighted to discover that this anonymous 14th century book presented contemplative meditation as a teachable, spiritual process enabling the ordinary person to enter and receive a direct experience of union with God.[3](#)

Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington and others who were students of Menninger disseminate these teachings.[4](#)

1978

Richard Foster writes *The Celebration of Discipline*.

This book launched spiritual formation into mainstream evangelicalism, and continues to be used today.

In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Foster shares the practices of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches that originated with the Desert Mothers and Fathers.

*The Celebration of Discipline* presents spiritual formation as attainable through the “spiritual disciplines.”

These disciplines are seen as a means of growing in spiritual maturity and depth. “In fact, the implication was that without the use of these ancient contemplative methods true ‘spiritual formation’ was not possible.”[5](#)

1988

Dallas Willard, a close associate of Richard Foster, writes *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. This book “reveals how the key to self-transformation resides in the practice of the spiritual disciplines, and how their practice affirms human life to the fullest.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Spirit of the Disciplines* is based on Willard’s understanding of [Matt. 11:29–30](#). Willard teaches that the “yoke” spoken of by Jesus in this passage is to attempt to emulate the life of Christ in every way possible. Willard teaches that this emulation occurs through the practice of the disciplines.<sup>7</sup> (For a comprehensive teaching on this passage in Matthew, read or listen to Dr. John MacArthur’s sermon, [Jesus’ Personal Invitation, Part 2](#).)

Richard Foster founds *Renovaré*. This organization seeks “to resource, fuel, model, and advocate more intentional living and spiritual formation among Christians and those wanting a deeper connection with God. A foundational presence in the spiritual formation movement for over 20 years, *Renovaré* is Christian in commitment, ecumenical in breadth, and international in scope.”<sup>8</sup>

Present

The ideas presented by Foster and Willard continue to be propagated through the works and teachings of others.

Spiritual formation is a primary teaching found in what has come to be known as the emerging church. Brian McLaren, a key leader in that movement, has acknowledged that both Foster and Willard are considered “key mentors for the emerging church.”<sup>9</sup>

## Spiritual disciplines

According to proponents of spiritual formation, various “spiritual disciplines” must be practiced in order to experience true spiritual growth:

Christian spiritual formation is a God-ordained process that shapes our entire person so that we take on the character and being of Christ himself.

Properly employed...these disciplines help us attain increasing levels of spiritual maturity so that we respond to our life circumstances with the mind of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, as well as on his *Renovaré* website, Richard Foster lists these disciplines as:<sup>11</sup>

meditation

Entering into a “listening silence” in order to “hear God’s voice.” Similar to the meditation of Eastern religions.

prayer

An “interactive conversation” with God. Practiced as contemplative prayer.

fasting

“The voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.”

study

“The mind taking on an order conforming to the order of whatever we concentrate upon.”

simplicity

“The joyful unconcern for possessions we experience as we truly ‘seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ ([Matt 6:33](#)).”

solitude

A “state of mind” for one to be “found by God and freed from competing loyalties.”

submission

Letting “go of the burden of always needing to get our own way.”

service

“A pattern of service as a lifestyle...At the center is found a contentment in hiddenness, indiscriminancy.”

confession

Confession of sin to other professing believers.

worship

“Entering into the supra-natural experience of the Shekanyah, or glory, of God.”

guidance

Learning to “heed the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Jesus.” “It is the perception that we have heard the Kol Yahweh, the voice of God.”

celebration

Celebrating God in all facets of life.

Since the disciplines are not defined in Scripture, no concrete, definitive list is available. Consequently, Willard notes that we should not “assume that our particular list will be right for others.”<sup>12</sup> This confirms the subjective nature of these practices.

## Dangers

### Unbiblical origins

Despite assertions that the spiritual disciplines are “God-ordained,”<sup>13</sup> they are in fact derived from the practices of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics.<sup>14</sup> These practices are contrary to the biblical theology fought for in the Reformation.

Gary Gilley asks:

Do we, as believers in Sola Scriptura, take our marching orders from the written Word, or do we look to the ‘white spaces’ in Scripture to determine how we live?<sup>15</sup>

In other words, are we to turn to mystical, subjective ascetic practices, or do we rely upon the objective truth of God’s Word?

Bob DeWaay contends:

The Bible nowhere describes an inward journey to explore the realm of the spirit. God chose to reveal the truth about spiritual reality through His ordained, Spirit-inspired, biblical writers.<sup>16</sup>

### Unbiblical view of man’s condition

Spiritual formation teaches that man possesses innate goodness, but that his fallen state of sin is a result of “deprivation” or “spiritual starvation.” Thus, the disciplines help to feed, mature and grow man’s spirituality. In his *Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard states:

The evil that we do in our present condition is a reflection of a weakness caused by spiritual starvation. When Jesus prayed on the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” he was not just being generous to his killers; he was expressing the facts of the case. They really did not know what they were doing. As St. Augustine so clearly saw, the deranged condition of humankind is not, at bottom, a positive fact, but a deprivation. It is one that results in vast positive evils, of course, yet depravity is no less a horror because it stems from a deficiency, and people are no less responsible for it and its consequences.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than having an innate ability for good, Scripture teaches that, due to the Fall, man is innately depraved ([Rom. 3:11–18](#), [23](#), [5:8](#); [Eph. 2:1](#)) and his heart is wicked ([Jer. 17:9](#)).

## **Invented practices made binding upon Christians**

Spiritual disciplines are not commanded in Scripture. To impose practices not commanded in Scripture as necessary for spiritual maturity is to undermine and deny the sufficiency of Scripture ([2 Tim. 3:16–17](#)).

In spite of the absence of an explicit command in Scripture to practice these disciplines, leaders like Dallas Willard continue to assert their necessity:

The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order. They enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself, as we “yield ourselves to God, as those that are alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God,” as [Romans 6:13](#) puts it.

The necessity for such disciplines comes from the very nature of the self in the image of God, discussed earlier. Once the individual has through divine initiative become alive to God and his Kingdom, the extent of integration of his or her *total* being into that Kingdom order significantly depends upon the individual’s initiative.<sup>18</sup>

Though Dallas Willard admits that the Bible does not command that these disciplines be followed, he nevertheless argues that they were practiced among members of the early church. Bob DeWaay summarizes Willard’s argument regarding Paul’s silence as being that he “did not write about the spiritual disciplines because everyone was practicing them.”<sup>19</sup> He further states:

Spiritual disciplines are man-made, amorphous, and not revealed in the Bible; they assume that one is saved by grace and perfected by works.”<sup>20</sup>

The Apostle Paul writes against such ascetic practices. In [Col. 2:20–23](#), Paul rebukes the idea of relying on fleshly practices to grow in holiness. [Gal. 3:3](#) reads: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected in the flesh?”

Though proponents like Richard Foster and Dallas Willard claim that spiritual formation has been practiced since the early days of the church, Foster admits that the term “spiritual formation” did not appear in evangelical vocabulary until he ushered it into the mainstream in the 1970s with *The Celebration of Discipline*:

By now enough water has gone under the Christian Spiritual Formation bridge that we can give some assessment of where we have come and what yet needs to be done. When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term “Spiritual Formation” was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction. And more.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Possibility of real spiritual experiences not from God**

Richard Foster himself has offered warnings when it comes to practicing some of the disciplines. In regard to the practice of contemplative prayer, which is a type of meditation, Foster, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, writes:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as a supernatural guidance. While the Bible does not give us a lot of information on that, there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way!....

...But for now I want to encourage you to learn and practice prayers of protection.[22](#)

When seeking to “hear from God,” there is no biblical guidance as to how one may determine exactly who or what is communicating. Foster himself notes that not only could one be deceived by Satan, but one may also mistake one’s own imagination or “human voices” for the voice of God.

Learning to distinguish the voice of God...from just human voices within us...comes in much the same way that we learn any other voice. Satan pushes and condemns. God draws and encourages. And we can know the difference.[23](#)

Though Foster provides criteria for determining just who or what is speaking, there is no biblical support for the specifications he provides. He implies that God will always speak in a positive manner, yet there are multiple instances in Scripture when God speaks negatively to His people. About Foster’s comments in the above-referenced *Be Still* DVD, Pastor Larry DeBruyn writes:

Assuming that God speaks Soul to soul today, what if Foster’s paradigm for determining “the voice” were reversed; that the negative voice is God’s, and the positive is Satan’s? It happened that way in the Garden. God warned Adam and Eve that for disobedience to God, “you shall surely die” ([Genesis 2:17](#)), but Satan reassuringly told Adam and Eve, “You surely shall not die!” ([Genesis 3:4](#)). The point is that when engaging meditative spirituality, the contemplator can never be certain who will speak, and as a consequence, the experience can become the spawning ground for myriads of flashy ideas based solely upon, “he heard this,” or “she heard that.” And at that juncture, Christians and the church will have turned aside “to myths” ([2 Timothy 4:4](#)).[24](#)

Deception is rampant, and unbiblical, mystical practices may offer people an actual spiritual experience, though not one that originates from the true and living God. To ignore the boundaries of Scripture is to open oneself up to danger.

## Footnotes

1. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (NavPress, 1999), 24.
2. <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/WhyBecomeLikeJesus/Whattisspiritualformation/tabid/2572/Default.aspx>, accessed 16 May 2012.
3. [ContemplativePrayer.net](#).
4. Gary Gilley, *Spiritual Formation*. Dr. Gary Gilley is pastor of [Southern View Chapel](#) in Springfield, IL.
5. Gary Gilley, *Spiritual Formation*.

6. <http://store.renovare.us/p-27-the-spirit-of-the-disciplines.aspx>, accessed 16 May 2012.
7. Bob DeWaay, [\*The Dangers of Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciplines\*](#). Bob DeWaay is a Christian apologist and founder of [\*Critical Issues Commentary\*](#).
8. <http://www.renovare.us/WHOWEARE/WhatisRenovaré/tabid/2475/Default.aspx>, accessed 16 May 2012.
9. Brian McLaren, "[\*The Emergent Mystique\*](#)," *Christianity Today*, November 2004.
10. Richard J. Foster and Gayle D. Beebe, *Longing for God: Seven Paths of Christian Devotion* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15, 16.
11. All quotations within these definitions are from <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/PracticingLikeJesus/WhyPracticeLikeJesus/tabid/2518/Default.aspx> and linked pages, accessed 16 May 2012.
12. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 157.
13. Richard Foster, *Renovaré Newsletter*, <http://www.renovare.us/ViewNewsLetter/tabid/2404/Default.aspx?ID=71>, May 2003.
14. Gary Gilley, [\*Spiritual Formation\*](#).
15. Gary Gilley, [\*Spiritual Formation\*](#).
16. Bob DeWaay, [\*Richard Foster – Celebration of Deception\*](#).
17. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 63–64.
18. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 68.
19. Bob DeWaay, [\*The Dangers of Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciplines\*](#).
20. Bob DeWaay, [\*The Dangers of Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciplines\*](#).
21. Richard Foster, [\*Spiritual Formation: A Pastoral Letter\*](#).

22. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperCollins, 1992),

157.

23. Richard Foster, *Be Still, Fear of Silence* (DVD © Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC, 2006). Transcript courtesy of Larry DeBruyn, [Who Goes](#)

[There?](#)

24. Larry DeBruyn, [Who Goes There?](#)