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*from the foreword by Dr. Rick Warren*

the  
KINGDOM  
LIFE

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY  
of DISCIPLESHIP and  
SPIRITUAL FORMATION



*With contributions from*

DALLAS WILLARD

BRUCE DEMAREST

BILL HULL

*and others*

ALAN ANDREWS,  
*General Editor*

“This challenging book pushes us to think more deeply about God’s great overarching purpose for our lives: transformation into the likeness of Christ. As the writers examine this great subject from different perspectives, shafts of light break through like rays reflected in the facets of a diamond, at times piercing in their illumination.”

—MIKE TRENEER, international president, The Navigators

“What a wonderful resource for those seriously interested in personal or community spiritual formation. This diverse team of experts who lived in spiritual community with each other as a preface for writing this book provides a unique and meaningful integration of the practical and theoretical foundation for spiritual formation.”

—G. CRAIG WILLIFORD, PhD, president, Trinity International University

“Christian discipleship in the American church is in crisis. The church is ready for a sober reevaluation. This is why I am thankful for *The Kingdom Life*. It is not another book on how to do discipleship as a program; rather, it reexamines the theology and practice of discipleship in light of the lordship of Christ and the life we have in His kingdom. In putting forth this project, Alan Andrews has assembled an extraordinary team of thinkers and practitioners to address an extraordinary need for these most critical of times.”

—DAVID FITCH, Lindner chair of evangelical theology, Northern Seminary



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ALAN ANDREWS,  
*General Editor*

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*The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*

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# FOREWORD

*I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me.*

—LUKE 22:29

The kingdom of God was the major theme of Jesus' ministry and His favorite description of what God is doing in the world. Jesus often began His parables by saying, "The kingdom of God is like . . ." In fact, the word *kingdom* is used more than 150 times in the New Testament.

As disciples of Jesus, we regularly pray "Thy kingdom come" and quote Matthew 6:33—"Seek ye first the kingdom of God" (KJV)—but most people really have no idea what that means. Particularly in democracies, people have a difficult time understanding the full implications of living under the rule and reign of Jesus Christ.

*Where is the kingdom of God?* Comprehensive theological studies have debated the complexities of this question for centuries, but let me suggest a simplified answer from Scripture: **The kingdom of God is wherever Jesus is king!** If Jesus is king *in your heart*, then the kingdom of God is within you (see Luke 17:21). Because Jesus is king *in heaven*, then the kingdom of God is also in heaven (see Psalm 103:19). While Jesus walked the earth, He used miracles to announce that the kingdom of God was with them (see Luke 11:20), and when the reign of Christ is fully realized on earth, then the kingdom of God is on earth (see Revelation 5:10).

*What is the kingdom of God?* **It is the rule and reign of God!** When we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we are praying a redundant statement. Whenever God's will is done, the kingdom has come. The two phrases say the same thing. The reason we pray "Thy kingdom

come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, KJV) is because God’s will is done *perfectly* in heaven but imperfectly on earth.

How do I live in the kingdom of God? That’s what this brilliant and practical book is all about. For six years a group of friends have been seeking biblical answers to that question, and this book is the result of all that hard work. It is a book that is desperately needed today.

One of the great problems in churches today is the perpetual immaturity of the members. Too many Christians grow old without growing up. It is possible to attend church your entire life and never grow into Christlike maturity. It takes far more than sermons to produce a disciple. For thirty years at Saddleback Church we’ve used an intentional biblical and sequential “catechism of life” to move people from immaturity to maturity, from “come and see” to “come and die” as Jesus did.

To live a kingdom life, we must love the Lord with all our heart (emotion), all our soul (volition), all our mind (intellect), and all our strength (physical body). We must grow in knowledge and perspective (knowing), conviction and character (being), and skills (doing).

This journey of spiritual formation is neither quick nor easy. It takes time, the Word, intentionality, discipline, community, and opportunities for ministry and mission. In *The Purpose Driven Life* I showed how it takes a balance of all five of God’s eternal purposes to grow to maturity: worship experiences, fellowship experiences, discipleship experiences, service experiences, and evangelistic sharing experiences. *The Kingdom Life* takes these truths and drills them down deeper by explaining the habits and relationships we all must have to live lives of purpose for the global glory of God.

I am so proud of my friends for this significant work. *The Kingdom Life* will be required reading for all who serve on P.E.A.C.E. teams in nations around the world. Get ready to grow as you read this!

—DR. RICK WARREN  
Saddleback Church  
*The Purpose Driven Life*  
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# THE JOURNEY OF TACT

*Alan Andrews with Christopher Morton*

Spiritual formation creates music in the ears of a growing number of people in the body of Christ. For others, it is a topic of concern. Donald Bloesch's book *Spirituality Old and New*<sup>1</sup> emphasizes some of the blessings of the spiritual-formation movement as well as some of Dr. Bloesch's cautions. He specifically warned that classical Christian mysticism and new forms of spirituality may find their way into solid and traditional forms of maturing in Christ.

James Wilhoit, in his book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*,<sup>2</sup> affirmed the spiritual-formation movement but emphasized the important place of community in the lives of those who are being formed. While few who have taught spiritual formation would object to Wilhoit's emphasis, it is clear that he would give community a very high priority in pursuit of spiritual formation.

For many, the term "spiritual formation" simply means we must give more attention to how people are formed in Christ. But for others, the topic conjures up multiple models of legalistic approaches to becoming more spiritual. Some see the subject as an attack on the fundamental tenet of the Reformation: justification by faith. Others even see spiritual formation as a backdoor code word for New Age infiltration into the church. Finally, many feel that the current interest in spiritual formation

is merely a new and unnecessary term for what we have traditionally called “discipleship.” As someone who has spent a lifetime working with a parachurch organization that takes both orthodoxy and discipleship very seriously, I understand these concerns and have had them myself from time to time.

Several years ago, a group of men and women, not preoccupied with many of the above concerns but deeply grieved by the spiritual condition of the church in America, came together and opened a dialogue concerning American culture, the church, and spiritual formation. Our hearts were drawn to the need for churches to focus on helping people in their congregations be formed in Christ. The feeling of the group was that the church in the United States has focused on a consumer mentality more than on the spiritual formation of its people. Programs and techniques have overwhelmed the natural processes that people need in order to be healthily formed in Christ.

We all recognized that programs are necessary and that relevance to the culture is very important. Some in the group have given their lives to trying to figure out how to get the gospel of the kingdom into American culture in sensitive and appropriate ways. However, we also realized that programs and relevance may come at the expense of people being carefully nurtured in Christ.

Our group is made up of theologians, cultural thinkers, and spiritual-formation practitioners. We have been careful to ensure that pastors or former pastors make up a healthy percentage of the group. Men, women, ethnic communities, and generations are all represented in the hope that we might receive a cross section of broad and diverse input.

One of our primary goals is to help churches that are reaching their spheres of influence in mission become spiritual-formation churches. With the full recognition and understanding that it is God alone who saves through the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, we believe that spiritual formation is an outcome of three vital factors: sound personal spiritual growth, healthy formation of community, and participation in strong mission. We will explain this in greater detail in the epilogue to give clarification of these three factors.

But the point I want to address right now is that the key to these three factors is a vital and dynamic understanding of the gospel of Jesus and His kingdom. Our first priority must be entrance into the kingdom of God by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may vitally follow Jesus into this kingdom that gives fire and energy to our personal walks, our communities, and the mission God has given.

Jesus told us that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He then called us to repent, believe His good news, and follow Him. The gospel of the kingdom is both complex and amazingly simple. The complexity is found in the mysteries of the kingdom of God with all of its glory and beauty. The simplicity is found in the way we discover the kingdom—by putting our hand in Jesus’ hand and following Him. We are formed in Christ as we become His faithful apprentices.

## THE SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY OF WALKING WITH JESUS

I have a little eight-year-old grandson with special needs. All of the complexities of the kingdom of God will probably be hard for him to grasp; however, following Jesus is something that he already understands more clearly than most of us do. His simple childlike faith is a remarkable witness to the simplicity of the gospel. The depth of his prayer around the dinner table amazes us.

We all begin this process like my grandson. I remember being a young man at Marshall University in the sixties and wanting to grow in Christ. I was confused and conflicted in many ways, not knowing where I was headed. Who was I and what was my purpose in life? Did the gospel have answers to these questions? How could I find my way in a world where professing to be a Christian and truly following Jesus were not necessarily the same? I yearned for direction and guidance.

I cannot help but wonder where I would be today if a young pastor had not befriended me during my college days. His friendship and personal commitment to me kept me journeying with Jesus, even through some pretty low days. Similarly, a banker with a deep walk with God

made the choice to travel sixty miles between Charleston, West Virginia, and Huntington, West Virginia, each week to help me get more firmly grounded in my walk with God. Two men, both with deep personal walks with God, chose to personally invest their lives in me. And in so doing, they showed me that, yes, the gospel of Jesus Christ did indeed have real answers to what life was meant to be.

The legacy of these men has lived on through me for the past forty years as I have invested my life in helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ. The journey has been fascinating and fulfilling. It has also held its surprises with incredible highs and some very painful lows. One thing is certain: If not for these men long ago, I would certainly not have been able to journey in God's calling. I stand on their shoulders, and I am so humbled and grateful for every moment of love and sacrifice they chose to show me so many years ago.

My story is not unique. Many similar stories of investing in lives and seeing the love of Jesus Christ lived out are the backdrop of those people who make up what is known as the Theological and Cultural Thinkers (TACT) group. This common thread draws us together despite our varied life experiences, different cultural backgrounds, and unique callings. The commonality of deep relationships in Christ is what has led us to devote our lives to helping people not only come to know Christ but also to grow into His likeness. So in that same spirit of passing Christ's love along to the next generation, the question comes: How can we help people in the twenty-first century put their hand in Jesus' hand and follow Him as His apprentices?

## SEEING PROBLEMS, MOVING FORWARD

From the time of TACT's earliest meetings, we looked at data coming in from Gallup, Barna, and other researchers that confirmed what many Christian leaders and committed followers of Jesus had felt for some time. Despite great efforts and countless amazing programs of the American church, transformed and changed lives were not the norm. We began to feel strongly that we in the American church have

developed a reduced gospel that falls far short of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom. Instead we have focused on a "repent and receive" gospel that may give people a ticket to heaven, but it merely helps them manage their own sin until they see Jesus. As we studied the Scriptures, we all felt that the gospel of the kingdom calls us to far more than that.

Our hearts hungered for a more complete expression of the good news of Jesus. While we knew we would not develop a complete understanding of all the dimensions of spiritual transformation, we were aware that we had to go deeper into the greatness and depth of our formation in Christ. We wanted to determine the crucial elements—the key concepts—that have to be present in our personal lives, our communities, and our God-given mission if real transformation is going to take place.

TACT was officially formed in September 2002. We knew our common concerns, but we could never have dreamed where God was leading us. This was not a gathering, a movement, or any such grand idea. We were simply men and women who were passionate about growing in Christ.

Prior to attending the first TACT meeting, each participant was asked to write an introductory paper outlining what he or she felt was involved in being formed in Christ. Everyone submitted a paper for review. Upon arriving at the meeting, our first activity was sharing our personal stories of being helped to grow in Christ. What became immediately apparent to us was that our personal spiritual journeys did not reflect our individual theologies of how we are formed in Christ. What we found in reality was that individual investment—such as, for me, the pastor and banker in West Virginia—had contributed most to our personal formation. Recollection of these personal as well as community relationships—always centered in Christ and deeply rooted in His Scriptures—formed the first big learning moment for us in TACT.

There was, however, another important learning activity that opened our eyes in a different, tangible way. A pastor, who also served as a sensei at a local karate school, took us through the patterns and practices for earning a white belt. Though they were downright embarrassing and very

humorous, we learned very quickly that after years of doing things “our own way,” it was truly difficult to learn new patterns and practices. As we repeated the different patterns, it struck us that while some patterns came easily, others were not quite so natural. As we reflected on our experience, we realized that there was a direct application to our understanding of spiritual transformation.

We discovered that formation in Christ is undeniably rooted in our personal walks, community, and mission. But it is also a process of unlearning old patterns and relearning new patterns. Our hearts, wills, minds, and bodies have to be retrained in new patterns of thought and behavior. Romans 12:1-2 took on new meaning:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Dallas Willard’s famous quote on grace also came into much sharper focus: “God is not opposed to effort but to *earning*.”<sup>3</sup> We all realized that many new patterns of thought, emotion, and ways of acting might require much more effort than we initially realized.

For virtually all of us, TACT has been an incredible learning community. We have had the opportunity to sharpen our thinking and understanding. What we have experienced most is the transforming power of lives shaping one another as we live and minister together. We have become friends and are in the process of learning to be more and more like Jesus. We have sharpened one another in life-on-life relationships. Learning to love each other in the midst of some pretty big differences has been our greatest challenge. Conflicts have emerged in TACT that created great tensions and, regrettably, considerable heartache.

## LEARNING AND GROWING THROUGH CONFLICT

The first conflict arose regarding the term “spiritual formation.” To some, it meant contemplative lifestyles, a leaving behind of the hustle and bustle that marks our twenty-first-century world. For others, it meant embracing the disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, Scripture memory, and the like, and allowing such practices to renew their minds, hearts, and bodily responses. For still others, it meant following the ancients, learning from the likes of Thomas à Kempis and St. Anthony.

All of these streams of formation have contributed to the work that God has done in lives throughout the centuries. However, we were committed not to emphasize one stream over another but to focus on the broader overview of what it means to be developed as followers of Jesus. For some, this created personal tension as they sensed the very real disconnect between emphasizing a broader perspective over a particular stream of formation. We encouraged those who felt this tension to pursue their particular calling. Again, we already knew that we were not going to provide all the answers to the problems of spiritual formation, so we welcomed people to pursue other callings in order to provide additional light on the same subjects we were wrestling with when coming together. We remain in close contact with most of these individuals and have tried to learn from what they have discovered.

There was still a second conflict regarding the process of how to disseminate the things that we were learning together. Some desired to have conferences right away and act as a catalyst to a spiritual-formation movement that was already springing up all around us in the body of Christ. They wanted to fan the movement that God had already created. Most of us in TACT affirmed that such a movement did exist and that it needed to be fanned. We encouraged those who felt strongly about this existing movement to move ahead with what they felt God had for them. We continue to support their desires, and many in TACT do participate in that movement. But TACT remained a think tank to provide clarity for believers in the area of spiritual formation.

These first two conflicts helped to prepare us for yet another significant challenge. From the earliest days of TACT, we had been committed to reflecting a broad cross section of the body of Christ. By “cross section” we meant to include differences in ethnicity, generations, ministry focus, gender, and temperament (we have a surprising number of noncontemplative people for a group committed to spiritual formation). Many of our early gatherings did indeed look like a good cross section of the body of Christ. We were not seeking diversity for diversity’s sake but knew that if we were to tap into what God was telling us about spiritual formation, it would be something that would connect with His whole body, not merely small demographic strands of it.

For various reasons (some that were the fault of my own blind spots), we began to lose that diversity over the next few years. Sometimes it was merely the pressure to keep moving on, to “produce,” that allowed me and the rest of the group simply to miss that we were becoming more and more homogeneous. By the time we gathered in September 2005, believing we were empowered to begin publishing what you now hold in your hands, we were stopped dead in our tracks.

As I have said, the environment we sought to create was one where people could risk in relationship—including saying things that were neither popular nor easy. At that meeting the environment was put to the test as Paula Fuller (whose bio you can read at the end of this book) stepped forward and told us that our group was entirely directed toward writing to white baby-boomer males.

Now, of course, white baby-boomer males are not a bad group, but they are hardly representative of the whole of the body of Christ. As we looked around, we found that, with the exception of Paula and two others, this described the attendees at our gathering. Clearly, that was not an easy thing for Paula to point out, but it was equally hard to hear.

We each individually and as a group stopped and reflected on where we were and what we should do going forward. Each of us had invested countless hours in TACT. Each of us was very busy. Did we want to throw away all the work we had done? Did we want to press on

knowing that we had not stuck to the values of spiritual formation that we believed marked our group? Did we want to face up to our failures, or did we want to press on?

After some very painful tears and repentance, we faced our failures. It was not an easy time. In the end, though, we chose to humble ourselves and go back to those who had dropped out and apologize for mistakes we had made that had narrowed our group. We opened ourselves and our community to new people with vastly different backgrounds. We made the decision to become who we hoped we would be.

Saying it was not easy is an understatement. Creating community that is committed to mission and transformation for more than one slice of America and to advancing a whole gospel to the whole person is in many ways an incredibly difficult task. We are still learning and still making mistakes. Had it not been for Paula and the leading of the Spirit back in September 2005, we would never have embraced the challenge of living out who we hoped we would become.

## REFORMING AND HEARING FROM GOD

The good news for all of us is that we did not stop. TACT moved forward. We met together in different locations. First we went to the inner city of Phoenix to see if what we were talking about was relevant to the poor. We met with pastors in Minneapolis to see if the Spirit was speaking to them as He was to us. We met in Los Angeles to see if an individual like Dallas Willard, who had dedicated his life to spiritual formation, was hearing from God as we were. We wrote; we battled with one another; we stayed in community; and we stayed committed.

What you are holding in your hands is not an “end product.” We started out to see what the Holy Spirit was telling us as a diverse and committed community about how to tap into the dynamic of the gospel of the kingdom and be formed in Christ. We are still learning and still meeting. We have much more we would like to say, but we feel that what we are communicating here is most important for the body of Christ at this time. Our focus has been centered on key elements of spiritual

formation rather than specializing on a particular dimension of spiritual transformation.

We have broken the elements of spiritual formation into two categories: process elements and theological elements. Process elements are those elements that have more to do with our practice of ongoing formation. The theological elements have to do with the major foundational biblical pillars of our being transformed into the image of Christ. Both categories overlap, but the broad outline is helpful in understanding the basic structure or design of the book.

Each chapter is built around one of these key concepts or elements. We list that element at the head of the chapter with a brief overview or summary of the content of that section of the book. The purpose in listing the element and the summary is to give you a sense of the relationship of that chapter to the other chapters. While the sequence of the elements is not intended to be linear, the elements are intended to be related. It is important to have an overview of the chapters before you begin. Therefore, I list them for you in this introduction in order to give you a sense of where you will be heading as you read.

### **Process Elements of Spiritual Formation**

**ELEMENT 1:** The gospel of the kingdom is the realm of God’s active goodness in forming us in Christ as we follow Him. The kingdom of God is grand, majestic, and full of beauty. We come to understand the kingdom by repenting and simply becoming apprentices of Jesus in His kingdom.

*Description:* Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15, NASB). God invites us to repent, believe, and follow Him in discovering the beauty of His kingdom. We are privileged to step into eternal life as we enter the kingdom of God (see John 17:3).

The apostle Paul said, “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14, NASB). The kingdom of God is the realm of God’s action, His resurrection life,

and His mission. We are invited to be His followers and learn from Him as He is active in us and around us. We are called to enter into eternal life that begins the moment we enter the kingdom through Christ to be conformed to His image. We are His apprentices.

In Him are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). The complexity of the kingdom is the vastness and infinite beauty of God’s realm that we will be discovering for all of eternity. The simplicity is that we discover all of the complexity of the kingdom by simply following Jesus. As we follow Him, we are also formed in Him.

**ELEMENT 2:** Spiritual formation is rooted in relationship with God and one another. Communities of grace and trust help us discover and define who we are and how we shall live in trust, love, grace, humility, dignity, and justice. Communities of grace and trust open the door to gaining permission to share truth among fellow believers and the unbelieving world.

*Description:* Those who receive this invitation will incorporate into their relationships with God and others the principles of grace that characterize the life of the Trinity. Safe communities of grace will be both the by-product of those who experience and live out these principles and the invitation for others to experience and live them out. The process of experiencing grace with God and others validates who I am, matures who I am becoming, and therefore is defining the way I should live.

**ELEMENT 3:** Spiritual formation into Christlikeness involves an intentional public, personal, and communal commitment to living as Jesus’ disciples who are being transformed into His image in all aspects of our lives as we learn to obey His commands.

*Description:* Discipleship to Jesus Christ is a transformational process that begins with regenerated life as a person becomes Jesus’ disciple, identifies with the community of faith, and engages in a purposeful pattern of life in which he or she learns to obey all that He commanded (see Titus 3:3-7). Transformation continues as the disciple intentionally

pursues being conformed to Jesus' image, which is carried out in our everyday world of personal, public, community, and family life (see 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Ephesians 5:21–6:9). As we align our lives with Jesus' example and commit ourselves to the purposeful pattern of life in which we learn to obey all that He commanded, all aspects of our lives are brought into conformity to Christ (see Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:29).

**ELEMENT 4:** Spiritual formation is a lifelong pursuit of being conformed to the image of Christ from the inside out and not a matter of external activity alone.

*Description:* Spiritual formation involves a radical internal change in which the spiritual heart directs the transformation of the entire person to reflect Jesus Christ (see Matthew 5:20; 15:18-20; Romans 6:17-19). This means developing congruency between inward transformation and external activity so that the entire person is obedient to Jesus (see Galatians 4:19; Romans 6:12-14; Ephesians 4:22-24). This kind of obedience intends to please God, not humans. Scripture extols effort but opposes forms of legalism that earn favor with God (see Matthew 6:1-18). Inside-out transformation is a lifelong process; while the outer person decays, renewal of the inner person continues throughout one's lifetime (see 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). This lifelong process requires tools and assistance in accomplishing holistic transformation into the image of Christ through every phase of life.

**ELEMENT 5:** Spiritual formation is a continual process of transforming the whole person, including the healing of woundedness and rebellion, by the power of God, not to be confused with mere technique or program.

*Description:* People have been created in the image and likeness of God. The Fall marred every part of that image and likeness and brought struggle and corruption into our experience so that we are deeply rebellious, alienated from God and one another, troubled, wounded, and our souls are in ruin.

The journey of the human life is a process of experiencing lifelong changes in our relationships, our physical maturation, our sufferings, and our goals, desires, and hopes. The Bible's primary metaphors for spiritual development likewise focus on long-duration concepts of growth: training for a race, wandering in the wilderness, and healing of woundedness and rebellion. In contrast to this, our culture's primary metaphors are those of quick fixes based on proper techniques, tools, and programs. Against this the Scriptures point us to the lifelong goal of transformation into the likeness of Christ using in the process techniques, programs, and life circumstances.

**ELEMENT 6:** Spiritual formation occurs when God, in His grace, invades the destructiveness of suffering that results from the fall of man and uses the pain of suffering for His redemptive purposes in His people. There is also a unique suffering that shapes the formation of believers as they enter into the call to love a lost world and the inevitable suffering that results from that love.

*Description:* For the follower of Jesus, no suffering is without meaning in our formation in Christ. All humanity suffers as a result of the Fall, but in the believer's journey of following Jesus, suffering takes on formational meaning when God, in His grace, enters into the pain of suffering to comfort and shape us into the image of Christ. Beyond suffering that is common to all men, followers of Jesus Christ are called to a particular kind of suffering as they embrace and live out God's love in the world and experience the inevitable suffering that results from that love (see John 15:18-20). This unique suffering opens the door to enter into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and we fill up what is lacking in Christ's suffering (see Colossians 1:24).

**ELEMENT 7:** Spiritual formation in Christ is a process of growing in kingdom living and participating in God's mission. This begins with our personal reconciliation with God and results in an irrepressible manifestation of God's good news. Disciples of the kingdom labor in community for reconciliation with God and one another as a

central priority of mission. They also pursue justice and compassion for all people and work to correct institutional sin inherent in human structures.

*Description:* The kingdom of God is the reality of God's transforming presence, power, and goodness manifested in the community of Jesus' disciples (see Matthew 5:13-16). This community witnesses to the reality of the presence of the kingdom throughout this age (see Ephesians 2:1-21). Spiritual formation is not the end itself but is always pursued through and focused on the advancement of Christ's kingdom. We are God's chosen strategy for the world. The Spirit-energized community of Jesus' disciples is God's agency of reconciliation in this world as it calls all people to be reconciled to each other across divisions of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality as they are reconciled to God (see Matthew 5:24; 9:35-38; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Witness comes both through the declaration of the gospel message and through the example of living out the gospel message as a family of faith characterized by humility, purity, accountability, discipline, reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness (see Matthew 18:1-22). The task is profoundly beyond us, but God's invitation is to take what He gives and return it to Him in simple obedience. As we follow Him in His risky and costly call, we become the aroma of His life to a broken and needy world—and God works a miracle.

### **Theological Elements of Spiritual Formation**

**ELEMENT 8:** The theology of spiritual transformation emerges from the Trinitarian nature of God—relational, loving, gracious, mutually submissive, and unified in will.

*Description:* This is the cornerstone statement. Everything that follows regarding spiritual formation flows from who God is. The God who is revealed in Scripture and who lived among us in Jesus Christ exists as a loving community of grace in three persons. From eternity past to eternity future, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other with grace, love, mutual submission, and unity of heart and by honoring their roles practicing functional submission—the Holy Spirit to the

Son and the Father, and the Son to the Father. Marvelously, this triune God has invited us, in relationship with Himself, to participate in this culture of grace.

**ELEMENT 9:** Spiritual formation takes place by the direct work of the Holy Spirit, regenerating and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ as the Spirit indwells, fills, guides, gifts, and empowers people for life in the community of faith and in the world.

*Description:* The best place to start in defining and understanding biblical formation is with Scripture passages about the Holy Spirit forming and transforming believers (see Romans 8:26-29). The Holy Spirit is at work to regenerate us and to progressively conform us to the image of Jesus Christ—reflecting purity, passion, and sacrifice and empowering us to live as salt and light in the world (see Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19; Matthew 5:13,16). The Holy Spirit indwells and fills (see Ephesians 5:18) us as believers and communities of believers in order to guide us into all truth (see Romans 8:14; John 16:13), bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (see Galatians 5:22-23), and gifts us for ministry in the church and in the world (see 1 Corinthians 12).

**ELEMENT 10:** Spiritual formation is based upon the Bible as God's reliable and authoritative revelation. The Bible, our primary source of truth, guides and informs the use of spiritual disciplines and models of spirituality as they have emerged worldwide and throughout time.

*Description:* The Bible is God's special revelation, so we need to rely on it and align with it as we study, practice, and teach spiritual formation (see Ezra 7:10; 2 Timothy 3:15-17). The Scriptures are living and active in penetrating, exposing, and transforming our hearts and lives as the Holy Spirit brings to bear upon us individually and together (see Hebrews 4:12-13). The Bible calls us to, and illustrates the use of, spiritual disciplines as invitations to grace and ways and means of living well in the kingdom and in the world (see Joshua 1:8; Matthew 11:28-30). The historical and contemporary models of spirituality from various traditions and ethnic contexts can be valuable sources for stimulating

thought and progress in spiritual formation as they correspond to the teachings of Scripture.

## AN INVITATION TO THE ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Each member of TACT would say that these elements are vital to our lives in Christ. We believe that members of the body of Christ can safely follow the direction of these elements into healthy spiritual formation. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but a collection of those key concepts we feel have universal application to formation in the life of any individual and in the formation of any spiritual-formation church.

We have chosen people from TACT who we feel are uniquely qualified to write on each particular element. As you read, keep in mind that all members of TACT are firmly agreed on each element, but as each author writes, he or she may express mildly different points of view on the actual implementation of the elements. We have not tried to push our unity to the point of uniformity but rather have allowed for individual expression. Although we have worked on this project as a group, we have not sought to be absolutely consistent in our views on spiritual formation. What we have sought to achieve is an overview of the important elements of formation without trying to be too insistent on conformity in the details.

Thank you for joining us on the journey of moving toward healthy spiritual formation. As you read this book and reflect on its content, consider yourself part of our TACT community.

The body of Christ in America has many strengths, but we must move from our consumer mentality to a more integrated and organic approach of spiritual formation. Best techniques and quickest results are not necessarily consistent with what is involved in being formed in Christ.

The apostle Paul made it clear that the objective of his ministry was to see those who had come to Christ also be formed in Christ: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you”

(Galatians 4:19, NASB). He said the same thing in a different way in Colossians 1:28-29: “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (NASB).

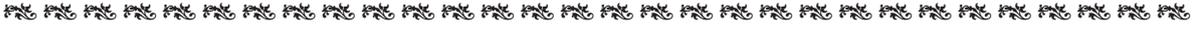
We need a whole gospel for the whole person to the whole world. We need the fullness of the gospel of the kingdom! Do we have the courage to live it out?

### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What barriers have you experienced in your desire to see spiritual-formation communities coming into existence?
2. What are your primary motivations for being concerned about spiritual formation? Are they externals (the culture), internals (the health of your ministry), or biblical (response to the Scriptures)?
3. What are the outcomes you expect as a result of a formed life and community?
4. As you read the elements of spiritual formation presented in this chapter, which ones were the biggest surprise? Which ones will be the most challenging to implement in your ministry context?



Part 1



PROCESS  
ELEMENTS OF  
SPIRITUAL  
FORMATION



THE GOSPEL OF  
THE KINGDOM AND  
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

*Dallas Willard*<sup>1</sup>

**ELEMENT 1:** The gospel of the kingdom is the realm of God’s active goodness in forming us in Christ as we follow Him. The kingdom of God is grand, majestic, and full of beauty. We come to understand the kingdom by repenting and simply becoming apprentices of Jesus in His kingdom.

*Description:* Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15, NASB). God invites us to repent, believe, and follow Him in discovering the beauty of His kingdom. We are privileged to step into eternal life as we enter the kingdom of God (see John 17:3).

The apostle Paul said, “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14, NASB). The kingdom of God is the realm of God’s action, His resurrection life, and His mission. We are invited to be His followers and learn from Him

as He is active in us and around us. We are called to enter into eternal life that begins the moment we enter the kingdom through Christ to be conformed to His image. We are His apprentices.

In Him are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). The complexity of the kingdom is the vastness and infinite beauty of God’s realm that we will be discovering for all of eternity. The simplicity is that we discover all of the complexity of the kingdom by simply following Jesus. As we follow Him, we are also formed in Him.



*There is a deep longing among Christians and non-Christians alike for the personal purity and power to live as our hearts tell us we should. What we need is a deeper insight into our practical relationship with God in redemption. We need an understanding that can guide us into constant interaction with the Kingdom of God as a real part of our daily lives. —Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines**

To enter into the fullness of human life as God intended it—and thus become the kind of persons we would expect from looking at Jesus and His teachings—requires us to live our lives in the kingdom of God. Constant and whole-life interaction with the kingdom of God is the *spiritual atmosphere* of steady progression in Christlikeness. The New Birth—the birth “from above”—is precisely birth *into* the kingdom of God (see John 3:5). The apostle Paul described it as being “rescued . . . from the domain of darkness, and transferred . . . to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13, NASB).

That is the *beginning* of new life in Christ. At that point we are *in* the kingdom. It has claimed us, but it is not yet in much of what we are. That is where spiritual growth or formation comes in. Jesus therefore directed us continually to seek the kingdom—which can be thought of as God in action, more than anything else—and to seek the kind

of rightness or goodness characteristic of that kingdom. That is, we are called to intensely look for it everywhere. Then, Jesus said, everything else that we need will be provided (see Matthew 6:33).

You will notice that the emphasis here is upon what *we are to do*. Like many other key passages in the New Testament, we are called to *well-informed action in the process of our own spiritual growth*. The agencies of the kingdom — especially of the Word and of the Holy Spirit — are also essential. But we can trust them to do their part. What we must attend to is *our* part. The chapters that follow are designed to help us do that. They help us understand the relationship between living in the kingdom of God and spiritual formation. They help us understand what Christian spiritual formation is and how it develops. What is the nature of the changes involved, and what brings them about? In this first chapter, I want to pay special attention to several points about the kingdom of God that we must get right in order for spiritual transformation toward full Christlikeness to progress as it should.

Let us begin by noting that if we do not preach *the gospel of the kingdom of God* as Jesus did but preach some other gospel — of which there now are several — we cannot truly progress in the formation of character into Christlikeness. That is because *the message preached will have no essential connection with constant spiritual growth*. We need to announce (preach), teach, and manifest the good news that Jesus Himself announced. That good news is of *the availability of life now in the kingdom of God by placing our confidence in Jesus as the Lord of all* (see Matthew 4:17,23; 9:35; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; Romans 10:9-10; 14:17). Unfortunately, this is not the gospel generally given out by Christians today, and that is one reason why spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is *not* the routine or normal course of Christian life.

Here is an actual statement about what it means to trust Christ, by one of the most well-known evangelical ministers of our day:

When you trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, here is what you did. You placed your trust in Jesus' death at Calvary, who bore your sin and your iniquity and your wickedness and

your vileness on the cross, and as a result God punished Him for your sinfulness and made it possible for you to be forgiven because He is your substitute.

That is all. This very fine and influential Christian minister then proceeded to try to elaborate his view of atonement and of what it means to trust Jesus Christ into an account of our identification with Christ that *would* include a transformation into actual Christlikeness. But the facts of Christian living today simply do not bear out the connection he wished to make. Transformation through identification with Christ is not forthcoming for any but a vanishingly small percentage of those who have “placed their trust in Jesus’ death at Calvary.” Or else we must say that they did not *actually* so place their trust—an alternative that almost no one would be prepared to take.

## WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

The deeper cause of the obvious fact that transformation into Christlikeness is not the routine or normal course of Christian life is our failure to understand *what the kingdom of God is and what it is like to live in it*. If we are to seek it in all we do, what exactly are we seeking for? What would it be like to find it in what is around us and in all we are doing? In order to answer these questions we have to return to the *source* of the idea of the kingdom of God, which is the historical experience of the Jewish people, recorded in the Old Testament. What the kingdom of God is stands out most strongly and clearly in the Psalms.

Psalm 145:8-13 gives us some helpful perspective:

*The LORD is gracious and merciful;  
Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.  
The LORD is good to all,  
And His mercies are over all His works.  
All Your works shall give thanks to You, O LORD,  
And Your godly ones shall bless You.*

*They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom  
 And talk of Your power;  
 To make known to the sons of men Your mighty acts  
 And the glory of the majesty of Your kingdom.  
 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
 And Your dominion endures throughout all generations.* (NASB)

The basic teaching about God in the Old Testament is His dominion over *all* creation forever and *His immediate presence to all who call upon Him*. Of course, this is a vast subject that had to be worked out in detail through a slow historical process, and there were many misunderstandings that had to be resolved. But at least within the covenant community of Israel, the idea arose that God's knowledge and power are immediately available to those who call upon Him. The theological doctrines of the omnipresence and omniscience of God translate into real life—a reality you see constantly throughout the Psalms and other parts of the Old Testament. Consider that marvelous verse, 2 Chronicles 16:9: “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show Himself strong in behalf of those whose hearts are blameless toward Him” (AMP). There you have both omniscience and omnipresence.

We also see this in the Twenty-third Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (verse 1, NASB). Psalm 23 is a kingdom psalm; it's about what life is like in the kingdom of God. But the reality of the kingdom of God is His presence to all—to everyone and everything on earth immersed in His loving care. We can think of many wonderful verses, such as Psalm 55:22: “Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (NASB). Peter picked this up in 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Psalm 34:15 says that “the eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry” (NASB). In Psalm 73:28 we read, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works” (NASB).

## A GOD OF ACTIVE CARE

At the center of biblical teaching, then, is the idea of an all-loving and all-powerful God who is *in action*, for us and with us. He is not passive. He is not distant. He is not indifferent. “He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber” (Psalm 121:3, NASB). All of these teachings are about the nature of a God who is in action. If you compare the pagan classical thought of Aristotle, Lucretius, and others, you will find variants of God in which He is aloof or He doesn’t care or He can’t act because He’s limited. It is characteristic of the biblical teaching about God to fly in the face of such views—no doubt because of the experiences of God’s ancient people—and to portray an active God who is not only at work in the universe but is always moving toward those who are open to receive Him.

Now the Jews had many problems in coming to understand all of this. When we look at their history not as a series of accidents but as planned out by God—from the Exodus to the wilderness wandering to the period of the judges to the assumption of the monarchy (which God said He didn’t want in the first place) to all of the difficulties that the kings went through and the nation experienced and then finally to the Exile—we get a sense of their great discovery (especially in the exile from Jerusalem) that God is still God no matter what happens to you, and that *wherever* you are, God rules from the heavens. The idea of a “God of heaven” emerges in Daniel, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. You get from those Scriptures the notion of the “kingdom of the heavens,” and after a few centuries, the fruit of this idea is harvested in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew used that phrase—“the kingdom of the heavens”—over and over to express the fact of the direct, immediate *availability* of God to those who call upon Him and especially, of course, to His covenant people. It is the favored way in Matthew of expressing the message of Jesus—the good news.

The idea that God is God of the “heavens”—that is, *of the surrounding atmosphere*—is a primary part of the revelation of Jehovah to His select people, from Abraham on. The texts of Genesis and

following make this clear. For example, even those who from afar knew of Israel's experience with God understood this. Rahab told the spies sent into Jericho how she and her people had heard of them and how "our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Joshua 2:11, NASB). What God had done in Egypt and in the wilderness was widely known. In the final song of Moses he said, "There is none like the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to your help, and through the skies in His majesty. The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:26-27, NASB). That was a vital part of God's revelation: not just to Israel but to the whole world. But it took the harrowing events of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile to bring to the Jews an understanding that God was not bound to a special place (Jerusalem, cp. John 4:21) and that He was still present and in action where there were no visible manifestations in the surrounding heavens. That is the lesson of the interbiblical period, which ripens in meaning until it comes out of the mouth of John the baptizer.

### THINK ABOUT YOUR THINKING

Now, a problem arises in how to move our understanding of the kingdom of God *beyond* the covenant people and deal with the kind of ethnocentricity that comes from being publically marked out as God's special people on earth. Being chosen by God is a huge burden to carry. One reason the world is chronically angry with the Jewish people is that they are God's chosen people. They *are* the chosen people, and they stand in the midst of the earth *as* a chosen people. Those not chosen have trouble getting over that fact. They resent it and resent the Jews. But God's intention with Israel *always* lay beyond Israel, for He said, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6, NASB). This calling lies in God's word to Abraham: "In you all the

families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3, NASB). Israel is not for the sake of Israel, but for the sake of the world, as today the church is not for the church, but for the world.

We must come back to this outward movement of the kingdom of the heavens, but for now we must be clear that Jesus emerged into world history from among this chosen people of God. He didn’t come to the Greeks or to the Egyptians. He came to a people that had been prepared *by their experience* to understand what the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom of God are all about. As we have seen, if you read the Psalms with an eye to the kingdom, you’ll see they invariably are testimonies to the nature and reality of the kingdom. They are excerpts from the lives of people who loved that kingdom, though often in misguided ways. At the center of the Psalms, you see the beauty of kingdom life. Jesus came after a period of time when all this had been slowly developing. The interbiblical period plays a crucial role in driving home the message that there is always a kingdom of the heavens, even in the absence of a place and a political kingdom through which it rules.

There *is* a kingdom of the heavens, a present governance by God, and understanding of it had matured to a high point (with still a ways to go) when John the baptizer came to speak in Matthew 3. His message was “Repent” (verse 2, NASB). One can hardly say that word today because of misunderstandings and false images. When we hear the word, we are apt to think of some man walking back and forth on the sidewalk with a placard that reads, “The end is near.” But biblical repentance is a very important and instructive concept, and we cannot let it go. I like to translate *metanoete* this way: “Think about how you have been thinking.” Or “Get a thought about your thoughts, a thought beyond your thoughts.” Think in the light of the fact of God’s immediate presence and availability through Christ, so that you can *now live in the kingdom of the heavens*. Psalm 23 can be your daily existence. And that is open to everyone. “Whosoever will may come.” Reconsider your way of thinking about your life—your plans, your fears, your hopes—in the light of that.

## OPENING THE DOORS OF THE KINGDOM

The great change that Jesus brought in His person and His gospel was *the openness* of the kingdom to everyone, and first of all to those who were the rejected, the unacceptable, *within* Israel. That is the heart of His gospel. Jesus was bringing the kingdom of God to those whom the authorities—the religious leaders, scribes, and Pharisees—thought were hopeless and should be shut out. And so on page after page of the Gospels, we find Jesus sitting down with publicans and sinners, fellowshiping with them, and offending the authorities (see Luke 15:1-2).

With the doors of the kingdom wide open, the gospel of the kingdom of God came as a power into the world and began to do what Daniel said was going to happen. You will remember that in Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a great idol or statue. At its top was a golden head (Babylon) and at the bottom clay and iron for the feet and toes (the Roman Empire). And then, all of a sudden, a stone cut “without hands” struck the idol (verse 34, NASB). It smashed the idol, became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. It was a kingdom that would “endure forever” (verse 44, NASB). That stone, Daniel told the king, was the kingdom of God. “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom” (verse 44, NASB). That was the vision of the kingdom of God that came to Daniel even in exile. There the Israelites had begun to understand the true nature of the kingdom of God—“cut out without hands” (verse 34, NASB). It is independent of all human government or arrangement.

## SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM

As we have noted, the kingdom of God is just God in action. Theological books like to use the word *reign* for it and that is fitting, but *reign* doesn't mean very much to ordinary people. *Rule* might be a substitute, but it is more informative to say that the kingdom is *God in action*. The kingdom of God is where what God wants done is done. In order to achieve that, He doesn't always have to be micromanaging it. Consider, for example, the *laws* of God—the order He has established in reality

and in human life. They too are what God wants done. They are a power that, especially in the natural world, accomplishes what God wants. And the moral law—that also is what He wants done. To seek the kingdom of God is to seek to know and conform to the laws that God has established for nature and for human living.

For this reason, we must take seriously verses like Joshua 1:8: “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (NASB). When you line up with the laws of God, you are lining up with what God Himself is doing. The laws of God express the character of God in His kingdom. When Jesus said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33, KJV), we might ask, “How do you do that?” One way is to find and follow the laws of God. We need plenty of help to follow those laws, and the help is actually available. God’s laws were never imposed without the supply of His grace for us to follow them.

Notice that there are many instrumentalities of the kingdom of God. There is God Himself. There are the Son of God and the Spirit of God. There is the Word of God. There are the people of God. There are God’s acts in history. All that is a part of the kingdom of God. But what is the central reality of the kingdom of God? Once again, the kingdom of God is *God in action*. That’s why the kingdom of God has been around forever and will always exist, because God has always been and will always be acting. Some people wonder what God was doing before He created the world—as if He didn’t have anything to do. I often get asked that question on college campuses. I always reply, “He was enjoying themselves.” People seem to think that the physical universe dwarfs God. But no. We don’t have a big physical universe with a little God flitting around here and there. We have a physical universe that fits on the little finger of a great big God who has been here always and will be here forever.

## OUR GOD REIGNS

But this great God has to deal with the problem of the *mediation* of His presence to free persons whom He has made and who have nevertheless adopted a posture of hostility and rejection toward Him. His response to that situation is, roughly, human history, with Christ at the center. When Jesus came, He announced the availability of God's kingdom and made it present in a gentle way. It was not, strictly speaking, a new message, but it had some new implications. Most of us are familiar with the praise song that says: "Our God reigns." That's from Isaiah 52:7, the same passage that contains the phrase, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the gospel of peace" (PAR). And what is the gospel of peace? Our God reigns. Of course, in that verse Zion is looking for deliverance and the reigning of God. But God has something much larger in mind—humanity and the physical cosmos. This expansiveness comes out in many wonderful passages from the prophet Isaiah, who had a great vision of the kingdom of God. Though this passage from Isaiah 52 says, "Say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (verse 7), it applies far beyond Zion. We here today aren't Zion. We are something more. The call to Zion was not just to be a light upon Zion but also upon the whole world, even the whole universe.

So, we see the breaking out *within* Israel of the gospel of the kingdom. But when Jesus said in Matthew 4:17 and elsewhere, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (NASB), He was announcing the availability of the kingdom of God *beyond all existing assumptions*. Paul called this worldwide availability a "mystery which has been hidden from the past ages" (Colossians 1:26, NASB). And this hiddenness was necessary because the kingdom of God had been committed, in a special way, to the people of Israel. Others did not share in it prior to Jesus' announcement. The people of Israel had been appointed to be what you might call the "street address" of the kingdom of God on earth. God was always beyond Israel, of course, but they had a special calling, and anyone who wanted to find God could find Him through coming to Israel. God intended to bring the kingdom to earth through the people of Israel. And He did just that!

## BLESSED ARE THE POOR? WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

The great change that came with Jesus—the “good news,” according to Him—had to do with *its availability*. It first reached out to those *within* Israel who were ordinarily understood *not* to be blessed. You see this constantly in the gospel stories, and it is systematically driven home in the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5 and Luke 6) and in the Woe Bes (see Luke 6). There we see the great kingdom inversion of who is blessed and who is not. And that inversion is always tied to the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are poor,” Luke 6:20 says, “for yours is the kingdom of God” (NASB). This is a proclamation of the gospel as well as a teaching about what the kingdom of God is like. It doesn’t tell anyone to become poor in order to be blessed. It doesn’t suggest that there is anything especially good about poverty. “Blessed are you who weep” (verse 21, NASB) doesn’t tell anyone to go and weep. The Beatitudes just announce and explain, “You over here who are (on the human scale) normally thought *not* to be blessed *are* blessed anyway as you live in the kingdom of God—in spite of all humanly deplorable conditions.” The gospel of Jesus is the good news of the availability of the kingdom of God to everyone—to Romans, to people who are unclean because of disease, to the poor who are thought to be cursed.

This remarkable shift in the *availability* of life in the kingdom is driven home by the poignant scene from Matthew 11 where John the baptizer, who first began to preach Jesus’ message of kingdom availability (see Matthew 3:2), is in prison facing death. He is there coming to grips with the fact that what the availability of the kingdom meant is not what he thought. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are You really the One? I thought You were, but things aren’t looking so good for this kingdom.” Jesus returned a message. And if we look at that message, we see it is precisely a message of the availability of the kingdom of God to people who were not thought to be included. Jesus’ answer is, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear” (Matthew 11:4-5,

NASB). What is that? That's the power of God available to needy people, those of no qualifications. It is God in action. Jesus added, "The poor have the gospel preached to them" (verse 5, NASB). But it was a kingdom that John the baptizer never understood. And that's why Jesus, continuing His discussion of John, said, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (verse 11, NASB).

### PEOPLE OF VIOLENCE?

Jesus gave the poor some good news for a change. That was indeed a great sign of the kingdom, perhaps even greater than healings and other miracles, certainly greater than a government takeover by the Jewish people. But it really hit the Israelites hard in their theology. You may recall Jesus' discussion about riches and poverty after the incident with the rich young ruler. It's crucial to understand that discussion correctly because it is integral to the major change that emerges in Matthew 11:12 (see also Luke 16:16). Listen to this: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force" (NASB). This is not what some liberation theologians took it to mean. It's not talking about taking up arms and reversing the cultural standards, exalting and empowering the poor over the rich. It is talking about something you see on every page of the Gospels—namely, access to the kingdom of God by people who do not do what is proper, who do not stand on proprieties in dealing with the kingdom, especially the Jewish proprieties.

It is talking about a little leper who came to Jesus (see Matthew 8:1-4). Lepers were not supposed to be coming to people. But no doubt, he had heard Jesus speak and watched Him heal. Finally, the leper got up his nerve, came to Jesus, and said, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean" (verse 2, NASB). And Jesus said what? "I am willing" (verse 3, NASB). The kingdom reached out in Jesus, who not only spoke to that man but also *touched* him. And if you understand what

that would mean to a leper and what it would mean to those standing around watching Jesus, you begin to get the idea of what violence is in this verse. Violence means you don't stand on the proprieties, whatever they may be. You just come to Jesus, and He brings the kingdom of God to bear on you whether you are unclean by disease or by being a Gentile. He brings it to bear on anyone, whether the person is a tax collector, a woman of the street, a Roman centurion, or whatever. Those are the people of violence. They didn't take the proper path to relationship with God; they just came to Jesus as they were.

You must update that for our world because we have our proprieties too. And they routinely stand in people's minds as barriers to life in the kingdom. Always, if you watch, you will see Jesus breaking through those proprieties and doing something that people *within* their proprieties—the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees—don't understand. Matthew 21:43 emphasizes the abrupt departure that is occurring around Jesus. There were some harsh encounters between Him and the people in charge (or who thought they were in charge). Jesus said, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it” (NASB). Jesus was announcing the great movement to come right after His death. Jesus had developed a small group of people who could carry the kingdom to the ends of the earth. They bore the kingdom in themselves (see Luke 10:9,11) to the rest of the world. And it was not just the word *about* the kingdom that they brought, but the reality of the kingdom itself. “The kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20, NASB). However, what set Jesus against the religious leaders of His time was that they did not adopt this non-Jewish, worldwide missional emphasis of the kingdom. They thought only of themselves and their positions. In Matthew 23:13, Jesus spoke about Israel's spiritual leaders who had shut up the kingdom of heaven: “You do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (NASB).

## CAUGHT UP IN GOD'S LIFE

The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:20 illumine the condition of those leaders: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (NASB). Jesus was not talking here about “going to heaven” after death, about who will get in and who won’t. He was talking about a present relationship, about entering into a real life now—a life with God in the present, this God who is in action spreading His kingdom among humanity. Jesus was saying that if you stay at the level of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not interactively engage the yeastlike spread of the rule of God. Your life will be limited to what you think is proper and to what you can accomplish by your own powers. And that is not very much.

Jesus now stands in the midst of the world. The King is saying, “Whosoever will may come.” There is no preexisting condition that eliminates you from this policy. None. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got leprosy or AIDS, whether of the soul or of the body. It doesn’t matter what your race or your gender is or your economic condition. You can come. You’re rich? You can come, too. But you’re going to need more than your riches. They are not your blessing. You’re poor? You can come, too. And you’ll have everything you need. Your life becomes caught up in God’s life, and that makes your life an *eternal* life. As Jesus said in John 17:3, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (NASB). That is eternal life—an active relationship with Jesus, eternal living.

## PAUL AND THE KINGDOM

Let’s look now at the kingdom of God in the apostle Paul’s thinking as he moved out into the Gentile world. It is often thought that Paul preached a different gospel than Jesus did. But we have already noted how, in Colossians 1:13, Paul spoke of our being “transferred,” in the birth from above, out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love. Kingdom language is Paul’s language. And

Paul's gospel is centered on spiritual formation, just as Jesus' was. If you grow into doing what Paul said, you will take the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount at a walk.

Colossians 1:9-12 contains a profound prayer for what Paul longed to see in the lives of the Colossians:

That you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. (NASB)

This, of course, is nothing but the result of spiritual formation or growth in grace. It lay at the heart of Paul's intentions, for himself and for those he taught.

This prayer is based upon the reality of Christ the King:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things in earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:15-20, NASB)

Once you get Paul's meaning, it enables you to see the scope of God's plan, and after these words about who Jesus really is in the cosmos, there comes the glory of our lives now in Christ: "If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3, NASB). This and the following verses are *pure spiritual-formation* verses. But notice how being risen with Christ beyond death is the assumption of it all. This is the kingdom as it expresses itself in Christ and, above all, in the resurrection. Remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:17: "If Christ has not been raised . . . you are still in your sins" (NASB). Well, what about the Cross? The Cross must never be presented without Resurrection. We must have both Cross *and* Resurrection, or we do not have a kingdom or the Christ of the kingdom, and then we will also have a mistaken view of salvation — one that does *not* relate to the present spiritual life of the believer, which is to be precisely a resurrection life. Spiritual formation or continual growth in grace is not part of such salvation.

## RESURRECTION LIFE

To truly engage in the spiritual life, then, we have to get past a view of atonement in which *all that matters* in salvation is Jesus taking the punishment for our sins. The problem with such a reductionistic view is that once salvation is taken care of and heaven after death is assured, that is the end of it—period. It's all done *for* us, and it's all over and done with. So, what are we going to do now? What about discipleship? Not required, and not even natural to the "saved" condition. "Saved" in the reductionist view just means my sins are forgiven. Let me assure you, lest you misunderstand me, it certainly means that. It certainly means your sins are forgiven, but remember that the basic act of salvation from God's point of view is *the impartation of life*. It is regeneration. And that life imparted is resurrection life, an ongoing, developing reality.

So, let's go back to Colossians 3:1-4:

If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above [there's that word again—*above*], where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.  
(NASB)

Glorious! The theme of *who we are becoming* appears over and over in the New Testament. Remember what John said in his first letter:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. . . . Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.  
(1 John 3:1-3, NASB)

That great theme—that we are becoming like Christ—makes plain the glorious life we are entering into now. *We are purifying ourselves as He is pure—a precise description of spiritual formation.*

Thus the apostle Peter wrote, “According to His great mercy [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3, NASB). If we don't get the vision for this kind of life *as* salvation, spiritual formation will appear as something odd and basically irrelevant—which is precisely how it does appear to most professed Christians today—because spiritual formation is precisely formation *in* this life and *of* this life from above. The gospel of the kingdom opens us to progressive *transformation* in this life.

## THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

Though spiritual formation is a natural part of salvation in Christ, correctly understood, we would make a mistake if we thought there was no battle involved in our transformation. Ephesians 2 gives us a full picture of what's at stake. And it's not a very encouraging picture, to tell the truth. It starts off, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world" (verses 1-2, NASB). There you find the first member of the trinity of evil: *the world*. Then we read, ". . . according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (verse 2, NASB). There is the second member: *the Devil*. Then, "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (verse 3, NASB). That's number three: *the flesh*. If you've ever wondered where that expression comes from — "the world, the flesh, and the Devil" — here is Paul's statement.

So, you've got all these factors working against you: the world, the flesh, and the Devil. What are they? You have the social and historical organization of evil in the midst of which you must live: that's the world. You have the personal spiritual power behind that: the one who is the prince of this world, the one who in a certain manner governs it. He came to Jesus in the great struggle before His crucifixion. Jesus said at the end of John 14, "I will not speak much more with you, for *the ruler of the world* is coming" (verse 30, NASB, emphasis added). The world is one of the elements that is generally missing in our understanding of the whole story of redemption and spiritual formation. And then there is the flesh. The flesh is primarily to be identified with the natural desires of human beings, and the flesh within the human being wars with the human spirit. The human spirit is the *will*, and the will, if not totally enslaved by desire, is always contemplating alternatives, seeking *what is best*. But desire does not contemplate alternatives. It says things like, "I've just got to have a doughnut." No, you don't have to have a doughnut. But your desire for a doughnut says, "Forget about your blood sugar.

Forget about your weight. Forget about the fact that you're addicted to this junk. *You want a doughnut!*" That's the flesh speaking.

Paul said in Galatians 5 that the flesh wars against the spirit, and the spirit wars against the flesh. That's the natural condition because flesh gives rise to desire, and desire has the power to obsess you. Again, *desire does not contemplate alternatives*. It simply says, "I want that!" And if you sign over your will to desire, then you will become an addict. An addict is a person who has basically resigned his spirit and his will to a desire. He has said, "Yes, I must have this!" Whereas actually he doesn't have to have it. There are some things you have to have, but they are very few and often we don't pay very much attention to them. Spiritual formation is a matter of ordering desires and putting them in their place with reference to what is good under God.

## POWERS, IDEAS, AND IMAGES

The apostle Paul warned us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12, NASB). These higher-level powers and forces are spiritual agencies that *primarily work within the idea systems of our culture*.

Idea systems are commonly held assumptions about reality. They are patterns of thinking and interpretation, historically developed and socially shared. Examples of ideas are freedom, education, happiness, the American dream, science, progress, death, home, the feminine or masculine, religion, church, democracy, fairness, justice, family, evolution, God, and the secular. Ideas such as these are so pervasive and essential to how we approach life that we often do not even know they are there or understand how they work. Our particular idea system is a cultural artifact, growing up with us from earliest childhood out of the teachings, expectations, and observable behaviors of family and community. These idea systems can be manipulated by evil forces; they are, in fact, evil's main tool for dominating humanity.

By contrast, we who have been rescued “from the power of darkness and transferred . . . into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13, NRSV) are to “let this mind be in [us], which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5, KJV). This is an essential way of describing the substance, the underlying reality, of Christian spiritual formation. We are, in Paul’s familiar language, transformed precisely by the “renewing of [our] mind” (Romans 12:2, NASB).

Closely associated with these idea systems are *images* that occupy our minds. Images are always concrete and specific, as opposed to the abstractness of ideas, and they are heavily laden with feeling. They frequently have a powerful emotional and sensuous linkage to governing idea systems. For example, hair (long, short, skinhead, green, orange, or purple), body piercings, tattoos, flags (and their desecration), and clothing styles have provided powerful images and symbols for conflicting idea systems. These images are often adopted by one generation, ethnic group, or locale to set itself off from another.

Of course, Jesus understood the great significance of images. He carefully selected an image that brilliantly conveys Himself and His message: the Cross. The Cross represents the lostness of man as well as the sacrifice of God and the abandonment to God that brings redemption. No doubt it is the all-time most powerful image and symbol of human history. Need we say He knew what He was doing in selecting it? He is the master of images. For their own benefit, His followers need to keep the image of the Cross vividly present in their minds. In fact, learning to keep the Cross constantly in mind is a major factor in spiritual growth and maturity.

Ideas and images are the primary focus of Satan’s efforts to defeat God’s purposes for humankind. They form the primary arena of the battle of spiritual formation. When we are subject to Satan’s chosen ideas and images, he can take a holiday. When he undertook to draw Eve away from God, he did not hit her with a stick, but with an idea. It was with the idea that God could not be trusted and that she must act on her own to secure her own well-being.

## THE IDEA BEHIND ALL TEMPTATION

Here is the basic idea behind all temptation: God is presented to our minds as depriving us of what is good (or at least of what we want) by His commands, so we think we must take matters into our own hands. This image of God leads to our pushing Him out of our thoughts and putting ourselves on the throne of the universe. We can see that the single most important thing in our minds is our idea of God. The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing our destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus Himself. We thereby come increasingly to see “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NRSV).

An illustration of the great difference of outlook in the Christ-formed mind is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. There he contrasted the way of earth, or the flesh, with the way of the new person. The human way is one of anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, and lying (see Colossians 3:8-9). Think for a moment how true this is to human life. But Paul said, “Lie no more, since you have stripped off the old self and its characteristic behavior and put on the new self, which sees things as they really are in God’s view” (verses 9-10, PAR). In that view, the usual human distinctions (between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free person, and so on) do not matter in how we relate to people, because Christ is (or can be) in all alike (see verses 10-11).

What is more *unlike* humans than to *treat all kinds of people with equal truth and love*? Imagine the difference it would make as you go through just one day. In a significant manner, the antidiscrimination of which we now hear so much is a profound truth of kingdom living. The ideas and images that govern unredeemed humanity make it impossible, except in highly selective circumstances and in very recent societies strongly influenced by Jesus and His followers. Paul knew we can only escape being conformed to a fallen humanity by receiving the mind of Christ Himself (see 1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5). Spiritual

formation in Christ moves toward a total interchange of *our* ideas and images for *His*.

How is this to come about? This question is answered when we see how grace and human initiative work together to break the power of the toxic system of ideas and images that makes us dead to God. After God has implanted new life from above in us by word and Spirit, we can begin to take initiative in progressively retaking the whole of our thought lives for God's kingdom. That is a major part of what it means to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33, NASB). God's grace will accompany us every step of the way, but it will never permit us to be merely passive in our spiritual formation in Christ.

## THE WORK OF GRACE

The context of the battle of spiritual formation is resurrection grace. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5, NASB). The context of our struggle is *grace*. What makes us alive? Grace. What is grace? *Grace is God acting in our lives to accomplish what we can't accomplish on our own.* Is it unmerited favor? Of course it is. But if that's all we know about grace, we still have problems. I have heard distinguished Christian speakers say, "Grace is only for guilt." A candid search of the Scriptures would never teach you that. Grace is also for life. That's why you can grow in grace without growing in guilt. Grace is for life. *We would still have needed grace if we had never sinned.* You will understand that once you realize that grace is God acting in your life to accomplish what you can't accomplish on your own. We find the kingdom as we experience this action with us in life. We were created by grace for grace.

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION REQUIRES OUR INITIATIVE

God's plan allows for a kingdom of darkness to exist. Paul indicated in Colossians 1:13 that we were in "the domain of darkness" before being brought into "the kingdom of His beloved Son" (NASB). We were dead in the kingdom of darkness—not alive to God. This means that our basic nature was not working. We had to have the birth from above to reestablish contact with the kingdom of light. After that we have choices about how we move within that kingdom of light. This is crucial to the details of spiritual formation, because this transformation is not a passive process. It is a process in which we continue to make choices and our character develops, and sometimes the experience is hard.

St. Anthony, when he went into the desert, had some horrendous nights in which Satan approached him in all kinds of visible and auditory forms. He held on and resisted and would not give in. Finally, Jesus came to him. (I'll leave you to figure out what this means. I'm inclined to be pretty literal about it.) The first question St. Anthony asked Jesus was, "Why didn't You come sooner?" And Jesus replied, "I wanted to see how you would do."<sup>2</sup> Now, actually, that is a biblical theme. God did it with Abraham (see Genesis 22:12) and with the Israelites in the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 8:2), for example. Jesus did this with the disciples (see Mark 6:37,48-51). You can be sure He will do it with you and me. It is indispensable to our growth in grace.

This throws light upon the course of our own spiritual development. God will make the darkness praise Him, but we often don't experience that at the moment. We're in a world in which people make choices, and they often make wrong choices. And there is an enemy of God who fought with God and couldn't win. So now he focuses on one of God's major projects: humanity—namely, you and me. We struggle on in a world of darkness, and some of that darkness is in us. We are in the process of spiritual formation, which a disciple of Jesus goes through to progressively remove the darkness within us and around us. Remember how much is made of light and children of light in the Scriptures. It is

our destiny to be children of light and live fully in the light. Consider this statement from Ephesians 5:8-9: “You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth)” (NASB). We know what importance the apostle John gave to light in his writings and how crucial for him light was in spiritual formation. To move out of darkness, we need to move out of places where we hide and away from activities we do not want to be known for.

### SATAN IS UNDER GOD’S CONTROL

The kingdom of God allows space for a lot of things that God wouldn’t have preferred. He permitted—as I’ve already mentioned—the monarchy in Israel. That’s an illustration of something God did not want but He permitted. And in that sense, it was with His approval. But He said to Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me” (1 Samuel 8:7, NASB). That is one of the most instructive verses in the Bible for understanding what the kingdom of God is like—what God blesses and what God permits and uses may radically differ. What are the things in my life that God permits but does not want? That is one of the most important questions to keep before us in spiritual formation. Does God actually approve of everything He permits? I think the answer is obviously no, He doesn’t. But everything God permits, can He use it? Yes, He certainly can, and He will for those who continually seek the kingdom.

### THE LIFE OF FAITH

As we live in the experience of the new life from above, we begin to see regeneration in a different light. We understand, for example, from 1 Corinthians 12:3 that no man can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit. There are problems with metaphors, but in a similar way birth is not something that I do. Birth is something that is done to me, and the birth from above is entrance into a new realm. Abraham believed God

and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. If I can paraphrase what's going on there, I believe that God looked at Abraham's faith, which no doubt was dependent on God as well as on Abraham (Abraham at least had to be willing), and said, "I would rather have this trust in Me than perfect obedience. I would rather have the confidence that this man has in Me than some kind of legal conformity." And we must recall that the confidence in question had no fancy theological garments on it. Abraham's confidence was that God would give him a male heir. That's the faith that God looked at and accepted as righteousness. That's the life of faith. That's counting on God for life. That's the kind of faith—Abraham's kind—that Paul spoke of in Romans 4. This awakening of faith—which, by the way, need not be just a moment but can also be a process—is, in fact, regeneration. In regeneration and the impartation of new life, forgiveness is one essential part of the grace of God moving toward us.

## THE GOSPEL IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Let me now call attention to how the gospel looked in the early church. One of the best places to do this is with Philip in Acts 8:12: "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike" (NASB). Now, wait a moment. Here is something new. Philip was preaching the good news about "the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus." What's that? The gospel is about the name of Jesus? Actually, when you begin to study this in the New Testament, you find that there are a lot of different ways of putting the gospel. Here we see the relationship of the disciple to Christ and His kingdom through "the name of Jesus." The very name of Jesus is "good news." One finds the kingdom of God by acting *with* the name of Jesus (see John 14:13-14).

Now, think about this: If you have a Christ without a kingdom, you don't have a Christ. And if you have a kingdom without Christ, you don't have a kingdom of God. You have to keep those two together. How they came together for Jesus' early disciples and their disciples is

made plain by the book of Acts. Jesus put a face on the kingdom of God. But the phrase “the kingdom of God” went wild in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I don’t just mean in a theological context but in the political as well. The great threat, especially among the more liberal-leaning branches of the church and of Western society, is to forget about Jesus. Then you will have a kingdom of man parading itself as the kingdom of God. But we can’t really forget about Him. He won’t go off the page. Consider John 12:32: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (NASB). You can’t get rid of that. Pull that out and history disappears. Jesus and His teachings are the focus of the Western world. We are in a tragic experiment with regard to Jesus in our culture in America today. We’re trying to put something in the place of Jesus: the empty shell we call secularism.

Still, here is the gospel: the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus. What is the name of Jesus? It is access to the kingdom of God. Jesus taught His disciples how to act in His name. It is in His name that we overcome the darkness and its prince.

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR DISCIPLES OF JESUS

If we were to move carefully through the book of Acts, we would see that the kingdom of God stays right there, from beginning all the way to the end. It shows up in wonderful passages, like Paul’s parting from the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. And when we come to the end of Acts, we have “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (Acts 28:31, NASB). That’s the last verse of the book of Acts. This passage is about Paul in Rome, and, symbolically at least, this is the fulfillment of Matthew 21:43 where “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it” (NASB).

In the light of all this, what is spiritual formation? Spiritual formation is the training process that occurs for those who are disciples of Jesus. Spiritual formation and discipleship are all about development of the life in the kingdom of God that comes to us through the risen

Christ. As a disciple of Jesus, I am living with Him, learning to live in the kingdom of God as He lived in the kingdom of God. Spiritual formation is taking the explicit statements of Jesus and learning how to live this way. Jesus did tell us, did He not, that we should make disciples, submerging them in Trinitarian reality? Baptizing them in the Trinitarian name doesn't just mean saying the names "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" over them while you get them wet. The name in biblical understanding is reality, and to baptize them is to submerge them in the Trinitarian reality. We must understand the relevance of the Trinity to the gospel! The gospel is about life with the Trinity.

### ENTERING THE KINGDOM

Perhaps now we have a deeper understanding of Matthew 5:20. Jesus said, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees [and you can insert here your own particular variety of goodness], you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (NASB). Now when you read the statements about entering the kingdom of heaven, perhaps you will think in this way: *Maybe they are not talking about going to heaven after I die. Maybe this is a reference to this life.* There you have it. But if you are living in the kingdom of heaven—living it in a moment-to-moment experience—you can forget any concerns you may have for what happens *after* this life. They will be taken care of.

We have, then, moved *beyond* the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. That means we've stopped thinking in terms of what we do or don't do and started thinking about *who we are*. Our identity and nature are provided by a life that is given to us in the kingdom of God. Spiritual formation shines all through the Sermon on the Mount. How do I manage not to be an angry, contemptuous person? That's spiritual formation. The scribe or Pharisee will say, "I didn't kill anybody." Or "I didn't commit adultery." But the issue is: What kind of person am I? Can I come to the place where I love people so much—for example, I love the women I see, meet, and deal with so much—that I would not use them to excite my lusting or in any other way? Because the

real issue is: How do you think about people? It is not: Did I have sex with somebody or did I kill somebody? Instead, it is: How do I actually think about people? Where do they stand in my heart and mind? That is where spiritual formation really takes hold. It's not about external proprieties or improprieties but about the development of the inner person in Christlikeness.

## THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The gospel of the kingdom is the availability of life from above through reliance upon Jesus, the Living One, the Master of the Universe. Those who receive this gospel, throwing themselves upon the mercy of the risen Christ, *live* in God's action—which is grace moving in them. In John 1:12 we read, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right [or the authority, if you wish (the Greek is *exousia*)] to become children of God" (NASB). John continued, ". . . even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh [natural abilities] nor of the will of man, but of God" (verses 12-13, NASB).

That impartation of kingdom life is the open door to spiritual formation. But today we often bring people into the church on a nondiscipleship basis and without natural entry into a life of spiritual formation. Then, if we try to bring up the subject, they are thinking bait and switch because what they were told coming in the door had nothing to do with this new idea. Many—most, I find—just turn off or get mad or get going. They were perhaps asked something like, "Don't you feel a need for Jesus?" And they would be fools not to, wouldn't they? But what exactly is the need they feel? Unless you understand the gospel as I've explained it here, on the basis of the New Testament, that "need" may be any one of many different things, perhaps not even a need for forgiveness. But the authentic gospel of Jesus says, "I offer you life, but you have to give up yours. Yes, that life you think you're in charge of—the one you complain so much about—you have to give it up." Our task then is to present Jesus in such a way that people are ready to seize *Him* as their

constant companion, Lord, teacher, mediator. We must present Him not just as the person who died on the cross, but also as the person who lives beyond the cross. He is the One who comes to reconcile us to God so we can begin a new life in God's close company, with an unending destiny in His cosmic future—call that heaven.

In presenting this gospel we have to remember that the mind of the flesh is hostile to God. Human beings, right down to their muscles and bones, do not like God. That is something only a new life can redeem them from. It can bring them out of the grip of sin and the world, the flesh, and the Devil and replace their hostility to God with agape love—again, down to their muscles and bones. We do not simply wait for that new life to act in people. Through the Word, the Spirit, our own lives, and the lives of the church, we bring fruit and faith and repentance to their minds and their hearts. *Spiritual formation and discipleship then become natural responses to the gift of life in the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ.* The kingdom of God becomes the texture and the energy of our spiritual formation in Christ.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In your own experience, why would you say that an understanding of the gospel of the kingdom is foundational to formation into the image of Jesus?
2. How would you characterize the gospel of the kingdom as opposed to a gospel directed primarily at assuring the afterlife?
3. Reflect on the current model(s) of ministry that you are using or engaged in. How central is the gospel of the kingdom of God to its ethos and manner of ministry?
4. Given the values of the kingdom of God, what would a formational ministry based on this do differently? Do the same? What part of the gospel of the kingdom represents the most radical challenge for your ministry and the people involved?

### FOR FURTHER READING

Bright, John. *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church*. Louisville, KY: Abingdon, 1957. (Bright takes a later turn toward theological liberalism, but it is still the best book on the biblical elements of the kingdom.)

Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, and Christopher Catherwood. *The Kingdom of God*. Chicago: Crossway, 1992.

Wakabayashi, Allen Mitsuo. *Kingdom Come: How Jesus Wants to Change the World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998.