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THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF ECCLESIAL LEADERS: INSIGHTS FROM A BURGEONING FIELD

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Christian spiritual formation is an all-inclusive process that integrates the ancient practices and disciplines of the Christian faith with the “everyday” life of the Christ-follower. Therefore, one could assume that spiritual formation informs the ecclesial leadership development process. This article presents an overview of spiritual formation and its connections with discipleship and ecclesial leadership development. The results of this review reveal a significant gap in the literature regarding how suffering and church planting may inform the spiritual formation process for ecclesial leaders.

I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars tend to agree that spiritual formation is a foundational purpose of the Church.¹ Thus, practices such as corporate and private worship, prayer, solitude, and scripture reading should stand as the pillars upon which ecclesial leadership is employed. However, spiritual formation is more than just the aforementioned practices. Spiritual formation is a lifelong process whereby one is transformed into the likeness of Christ.² Spiritual formation is not a *list* of spiritual *chores*; it is a way of life. Furthermore, spiritual formation may involve anything that spurs one toward Christ-likeness. Although there are volumes of published books and articles that address the various aspects of leadership development, one could argue that the current trends in ecclesial leadership seem to focus more on practical leadership development as opposed to the foundational elements of spiritual formation. This is not an attempt to downplay the importance of business management, staff development, financial planning, or effective communication in ecclesial contexts. However, it does seem that over the last 20 years of ecclesial leadership development, practitioners have emphasized the best practices

¹ Ruth Haley Barton et al. “Spiritual formation in the Church.” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 2 (2014): 292-296.

² Ibid. 294

of the “Fortune 500” to the detriment of developing long-suffering, integrous, and Christo-centric ecclesial leaders.³

Although the practices of spiritual formation are as ancient as the faith itself, the scholarly exploration and resurgence of Christian spiritual formation as a practice is relatively new. Likewise, the intentional study of ecclesial leadership within the broader framework of organizational leadership and leadership development is also relatively new. Therefore, before one attempts to address the spiritual development of ecclesial leaders, it seems prudent to first lay a scholarly, theological, and practical foundation for spiritual formation. After a summary of the current literature relating to Christian spiritual formation, this review identifies two interconnected gaps that may have implications for the future of ecclesial leadership development.

II. SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The term “spirituality” is often used as an *en vogue* reference to dogma-free religious expression.⁴ One could argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to define spiritual formation without first establishing what one means by *spiritual*. Thus, for the purposes of this review, *spiritual* refers to both the private (inner) and public (outward) expression of religious belief as manifested in Christian living. Chandler provides what is arguably one of the most robust definitions of Christian spiritual formation:

“Christian Spiritual formation is an interactive process by which God the Father fashions believers into the image of his Son, Jesus through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit by fostering development in seven primary dimensions (spirit, emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, physical health, and resource stewardship).”⁵

According to TenElshof, Christian spiritual formation should involve the integration of mind, body, soul, and will in deep connection with God and “others”.⁶ Tan argues that spiritual formation should lead the believer toward the fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-13: maturity or fullness in Christ.⁷ Contrary to popular belief, spiritual formation is not a process that takes place in a relational vacuum. According to Wilhoit, spiritual formation is an “intentional communal process” focused on God, driven by Christ-like desire, and led and orchestrated by the Holy Spirit.⁸ Simply put, Christian spiritual formation is the process of becoming like Christ within the context of

³ Carlo Serrano. “CEO No More: The Future of Church Leadership.” (presentation, Student Scholars Forum, Association for Biblical Higher Education 2015 Annual Meeting, Orlando, FL, Feb 18, 2015), 7-9.

⁴ Lucy Bregman. “Defining spirituality: multiple uses and murky meanings of an incredibly popular term.” *The Journal Of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 58, 3 (2004): 156.

⁵ Diane J. Chandler. *Christian spiritual formation: an integrated approach for personal and relational wholeness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), loc 173.

⁶ Ruth Haley Barton et al. “Spiritual formation in the Church.” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 2 (2014): 299.

⁷ Ibid, 293.

⁸ Jim Wilhoit, “Contemplative and centering prayer.” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 1 (2014): 107-117.

community.⁹ At its core, spiritual formation embodies the original call of Jesus toward His disciples: "Follow me!"¹⁰

While it seems as if no consensus exists regarding the specific practices that make up Christian spiritual formation, there are a few practices or disciplines that seem to show up with consistency throughout the literature. In fact, spiritual formation is more about maintaining a "rhythm of divine intimacy" than keeping up with a list of "dos" and "don'ts".¹¹ Paramount to this "rhythm of life" lays several intimacy-driven practices such as prayer, worship, and scriptural devotion.¹² In fact, one could argue that the process of becoming like Jesus through spiritual formation involves practicing the rhythms of Jesus such as prayer, solitude, silence, meditation, study, simplicity, fasting, worship, celebration, service, confession, and fellowship, all of which find their foundation in the Gospels.¹³ According to the literature, spiritual formation is synonymous with the Christian life.¹⁴ In this way, spiritual formation should happen wherever the Christian is, whoever the Christian is with, whatever the Christian does, and whenever the Christian purposes to redeem the moment for intimacy with God and transformation by the Holy Spirit. Table 1 offers a summary of Chandler's seven dimensions of spiritual formation with practical example

⁹ Beverly Vos. "The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, 2 (2012): 101.

¹⁰ Matt. 4:19; 16:24.

¹¹ Ruth Haley Barton et al. "Spiritual formation in the Church." *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 2 (2014): 309.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Beverly Vos. "The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, 2 (2012): 104-112.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Table 1: *Summary of Chandler's Seven Dimensions of Christian Spiritual Formation*

Dimension	Definition	Practical Examples
Spirit	"Ongoing and grace-based process of being conformed to the image of Christ in order to bear fruit that starts with salvation, hinges on sanctification, and finds completion in glorification." ¹⁵	Prayer, simplicity, solitude, fasting, chastity, study, worship, celebration, etc. ¹⁶
Emotions	"The ability to identify, express, understand, and reflect feelings in way that bring honor to God while promoting personal and communal emotional health." ¹⁷	Forgiveness, merciful behavior, loving speech, edification, proclaiming blessings, etc. ¹⁸
Relationships	The spiritual, emotional, and intellectual process of becoming like Jesus by interacting with others. ¹⁹	Ecclesial community life, family, marital covenant, posture toward strangers, enemies, and "aliens" ²⁰
Intellect	The process of loving God through learning, mental renewal, and redeeming one's mental capacity for the glory of God. ²¹	Biblical study, cultural exegesis, meditation, redeeming the scholastic "ology's (psychology, philosophy, anthropology, history, etc." ²²
Vocation	The process of reconciling who one "is" with what one "does". ²³	Employment of spiritual gifts, purpose-driven work life, ethical behavior on the job, deploying talents and abilities for the glory of God ²⁴
Physical Health and Wellness	The process of bringing glory to God via "temple stewardship". ²⁵	Healthy diet, exercise, sleep, stress relief, Sabbath, rest, sexual holiness, etc. ²⁶
Resource Stewardship	"The careful oversight of ALL that God entrusts into one's care."	Tithing, healthy debt management, caring for creation, generosity via offerings/alms, avoidance of hoarding or waste, etc.

¹⁵ Diane J. Chandler. *Christian spiritual formation: an integrated approach for personal and relational wholeness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), loc 1084.

¹⁶ Ibid, loc 1212-1247.

¹⁷ Ibid, loc 1351.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, loc 1777.

²⁰ Ibid, loc 1778-2082.

²¹ Ibid, loc 2216.

²² Ibid, loc 2364.

²³ Ibid, loc 2646.

²⁴ Ibid, loc 3061-3093.

²⁵ Ibid, loc 3182.

²⁶ Ibid.

Spiritual Formation and Discipleship

Spiritual formation and discipleship are closely related. One could argue that the former informs the process of the latter. The literature on spiritual formation suggests that the primary purpose of the Church is to lead believers into maturity in Christ.²⁷ Vos argues that *being* a disciple and making disciples is the “core business” of the church.²⁸ Furthermore, West and Noel suggest that the leadership model and spiritual development plan found in Ephesians 4:11-13 connect with the stages of situational leadership theory and several discipleship models.²⁹ For example:

- Evangelizing (Evangelist) = Telling (Situational Leadership 1)
- Establishing (Pastor) = Selling (Situational Leadership 2)
- Encouraging (Teacher) = Participating (Situational Leadership 3)
- Empowering (Apostle) = Delegating (Situational Leadership 4)³⁰

Understanding these stages of discipleship is important to ecclesial leadership because each *stage* may emphasize one particular element of spiritual formation over another.³¹ Furthermore, each of these stages is modeled in the life and leadership of Jesus. For example, Jesus models the telling/evangelizing phase in John 4:1-42 during his encounter with the Woman at the Well. He models the selling/establishing phase in John 10:1-18 during his Good Shepherd discourse. Furthermore, Jesus models the participating/teaching phase in multiple gospel passages.³² Finally, Jesus models the delegating/empowering phase in His initial call and in the Great commission:

“And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach... And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”³³

Barton argues that true spiritual leadership starts and ends with a leader’s ability to lead from a place of personal transformation.³⁴ Thus, if the purpose of the Church is to lead people into Christ-likeness, then it seems essential for ecclesial leaders to have a theoretical, practical, and experiential understanding of the Jesus practices as embodied in Christian spiritual formation. One could argue that any decline in Christian

²⁷ Ruth Haley Barton et al. “Spiritual formation in the Church.” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 2 (2014): 293

²⁸ Beverly Vos. “The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, 2 (2012): 100-101.

²⁹ Richard C. West, “Situational Discipleship: The five-fold ministry roles of Ephesians 4:11 and their relationship to the Situational Leadership model.” *Culture & Religion Review Journal* 3 (2013): 130.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Matt. 4:23; 5:2; 7:29.

³³ Mark 3:14; Matt. 28:19-20.

³⁴ Ruth Haley Barton. “It Begins with You! How the Spiritual Formation of the Pastor Effects the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation.” *Common Ground Journal* 7, 1 (2009): 26.

spiritual formation may find connection with the notion that discipleship and spiritual formation are mutually exclusive. The research suggests that the converse is true.

III. SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The development of effective leaders has been the focus of much research over the last 25 years.³⁵ In fact, *Leadership Quarterly*, one of the premiere scholarly journals in the field of organizational leadership, has explored leadership development from the angles of process, interpersonal and intrapersonal content, experience, 360-degree feedback, ethics, social mechanisms, and skills using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.³⁶ However, there are few if any articles within the 25-year history of *Leadership Quarterly* that address leadership development within the ecclesial framework.

Naidoo conducted an empirical study on the centrality of spiritual formation in ecclesial leadership development in South African theological institutions.³⁷ The results of this mixed methods study reveal a perceived intentionality from the students regarding spiritual formation at the university level.³⁸ Furthermore, Baptist, Charismatic, and Pentecostal institutions showed a high level of spiritual formation whereas Presbyterian institutions showed a 64% dissatisfaction rate regarding opportunities for spiritual growth.³⁹ A similar study conducted in Regent University's Psychology Doctoral Program also revealed the benefits of intentionally focusing on spiritual formation by integrating spiritual formation and direction with research work groups, hermeneutics courses, course work, and devotionals.⁴⁰ Thus, there exists some evidence that intentional spiritual formation at the university/institutional level aids in leadership development.

If the purpose of the church is to make disciples through the spiritual formation process, then it seems that spiritual formation should stand as the centerpiece of all ecclesial leadership development. This is especially true when it comes to starting new ecclesial communities through the church planting process. In this context, Spiritual formation may take place at a distance through online learning or leadership cohorts. Forrest argues that the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church in Rome provides the biblical foundation for mentoring and formation in new or young churches via long-distance relationship.⁴¹ Gresham argues that leadership development via spiritual formation is not so much a matter of proximity as it is a matter of intimacy and incarnation.⁴² Others argue that since God's written Word is His primary means for forming His people, then

³⁵ David V. Day et al. "Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory." *The Leadership Quarterly* 25,1 *Leadership Quarterly 25th Anniversary Issue* (2014): 63.

³⁶ Ibid, 78.

³⁷ Marilyn Naidoo. "An Empirical Study on Spiritual Formation at Protestant Theological Training Institutions in South Africa." *Religion & Theology* 18, 1/2 (2011): 118.

³⁸ Ibid, 135.

³⁹ Ibid, 136-137.

⁴⁰ Jennifer S. Ripley et al., "Spiritual Formation Training at Regent University's Psychology Doctoral Program." *Journal Of Psychology & Christianity* 32, 4 (Winter 2013 2013): 326-327.

⁴¹ Benjamin K. Forrest and Mark A. Lamport. "Modeling Spiritual Formation From a Distance: Paul's Formation Transactions With the Roman Christians." *Christian Education Journal* 10, 1 (2013): 110.

⁴² Ibid, 114.

spiritual formation and leadership development do not have to take place “face-to-face”.⁴³ Forrest argues that eight principles inform *distance* spiritual formation:

- The Gospel is the foundation of spiritual formation;
- Scripture is the authority for spiritual formation;
- Transparency is the force behind spiritual formation;
- Dialogue is the primary vehicle for spiritual formation and leadership development;
- Community is the location of spiritual formation;
- Encouragement provides the motivation for spiritual formation;
- Prayer is the basis for spiritual formation;
- Accountability is the means of assessment for spiritual formation.⁴⁴

However, others suggest that while distance-based spiritual formation and leadership development may have some value, biblically based mentoring may serve as a more effective means of ecclesial leadership development. For example, Davis states that effective and healthy mentoring, especially with church planters, must involve an intentional process that:

- Focuses on godliness;
- Happens in small-community;
- Involves reflection;
- Assumes relational longevity and a continual process;
- Emphasizes faithfulness and obedience over knowledge and skill.⁴⁵

Biblical examples of this type of leadership development include: Jethro and Moses, Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Barnabas and Paul, Paul and Timothy and Titus, and of course, Jesus and The Twelve Apostles as evident in the Gospels.⁴⁶ It is important to note that the spiritual formation in these relationships happened within the context of suffering and trials. However, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how suffering informs spiritual formation and leadership development. This is an interesting discovery since significant portions of the Gospel include either Jesus’ teaching on suffering or accounts of His literal suffering.

Ecclesial researchers are limited due to the relatively new field of ecclesial leadership and the *newness* of the 21st century church planting movement. However, a review of three active evangelical church planting agencies reveals an emphasis on practical ministry in leadership development as opposed to a focus on personal, lived-out spiritual formation as modeled by Jesus in the Gospels. This does not mean that these agencies never discuss spiritual formation. However, it seems clear that the bulk of the training and development phase for church planters deals with practical ministry issues. Table 2 provides a summary of the agencies and their stated priorities in the assessment and training process.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 116-120.

⁴⁵ Davis, Ken. "Mentoring Church Planters." *Journal Of Ministry & Theology* 14, 2 (2010): 69.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 26-69.

Table 2: *Summary of Stated Priorities for Church Planting Development in ARC, CMN, and Acts 29*

Agency	Assessment Focus	Training/Development Focus
Association of Related Churches (ARC)	Personal and spiritual life of the church planter including: marriage, finances, and ministry. ⁴⁷	How to recruit a team; Identify and secure financial resources; develop a marketing plan; Cultivate small groups; lay the foundation for member service. ⁴⁸
Assemblies of God Church Multiplication Network (CMN)	Past ministry experience, past leadership experience, and personality preferences. ⁴⁹	Personal networking, fundraising, marketing, developing discipleship pathways, and goal setting. ⁵⁰
Acts 29 Network	Theology, Vision, Family, Calling, and Character. ⁵¹	Theological formation and “tough-issues” of ministry. ⁵²

IV. DISCUSSION

It is important to note that Table 2 is neither exhaustive nor representative of the lived-experiences of church planters in these agencies. It is not the intention of this review to assume that spiritual formation is ignored in the assessment, training, and developing processes of these agencies. However, it is equally important to note that spiritual formation, discipleship, soul care, and theological education must move beyond intellectualism and pragmatism and connect with the leader on the deepest of levels of what it mean to be a *follower* of Christ.⁵³ The results of this review and the stated function of these church planting organizations raise two questions that should spark future research into spiritual formation and ecclesial leadership development:

How does the suffering of Christ inform spiritual development in ecclesial leaders?

Vos suggests that the best way to *become* like Jesus is to *behave* like Jesus in the rhythms of life.⁵⁴ Christian leadership is both hard and traumatic. Christian leaders are susceptible to leadership fatigue, which has a negative impact on ethical and moral

⁴⁷ ARC. “Are you ready to launch a life-giving church.” <http://www.arcchurches.com/launch/overview/>, 2015.

⁴⁸ ARC. “Give us 2 days and we will show you how to start a life-giving church.” <http://www.arcchurches.com/launch/train/>, 2015.

⁴⁹ CMN. “Assessment.” <http://churchmultiplication.net/assessment/>, 2015.

⁵⁰ CMN. “Church Planting BootCamp Journal.” *Gospel Publishing House*. (2007), 121-135.

⁵¹ Acts 29 Network. “10 Qualifications of a Church Planter.” <http://www.acts29.com/10-qualifications-of-a-church-planter-2/>, 2009.

⁵² Acts 29 Network. “Why Training is Important.” <http://www.acts29.com/acts-29-training-programs/>, 2015.

⁵³ Betsy Barber and Chris Baker. “Soul care and Spiritual Formation: An Old Call in Need of New Voices.” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, 2 (Fall2014 2014): 277.

⁵⁴ Beverly Vos. “The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, 2 (2012):101.

decision making.⁵⁵ Simply put, ecclesial leaders should be taught how to suffer well. However, the research seems quiet when it comes to connecting the sufferings of Jesus, Paul, or the early church with ecclesial development, especially within the framework of new churches. One way to fill this gap could be to conduct exegetical research on the Gospels, Acts, and 1 Peter 5 with the intention of juxtaposing the results of said exegesis with the current trends in ecclesial leadership development.

Do church planting agencies treat spiritual formation as a given?

It seems that once a planter has been assessed, most of the ecclesial training and development focuses heavily on the practical aspects of ministry. However, the statistics show that most ministry failures do not happen on the practical level.⁵⁶ On the contrary, it seems that most ministry failures happen on the ethical and moral level – levels that are synonymous with Christian spiritual formation.⁵⁷ Could it be that these failures stem from the neglect of intentional Christ-centered spiritual formation? To answer this question, future studies may involve empirical research that categorizes types of failure with an element of spiritual formation. Another option could be the development of a scale that measures the seven dimensions of Chandler's theory of Christian Spiritual Formation. A third option for future research could be a larger study that synthesizes these two questions into one project. Regardless of the approach, the research seems to confirm the importance of spiritual formation in ecclesial leadership development. According to Huizing, "The holy grail of leadership research is successfully identifying and developing leaders."⁵⁸ Thus, the way forward for future research necessitates an exploration into how variables such as Christ-like suffering and church planting inform the process of spiritual formation as it relates to ecclesial leadership development

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⁵⁵ Carlo Serrano. "An Examination of the Role of Leadership Fatigue and Trauma in Ethical and Moral Leadership through a Sociorhetorical Analysis of 2 Samuel 11:1-27." Regent University, (2017): 102.

⁵⁶ Jared D. Ham, "Preventing ministry failure: a shepherd guide for pastors, ministers, and other caregivers." *Southwestern Journal Of Theology* 52, 2 (2010): 290-291.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Russell L. Huizing, "Leaders from Disciples: The Church's Contribution to Leadership Development." *Evangelical Review Of Theology* 35, 4 (2011): 333.

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