



Christian Spiritual Formation

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The term spiritual formation has been used in many Christian contexts given its recent popularity and yet this term can carry different meanings in these various contexts. The history of this word is traced to Roman Catholicism, and yet it has a different meaning within the Christian evangelical world. This literature review will focus on the various dimensions of spiritual formation such as its definitions, the underpinning theological foundation, the formational elements and the desired outcomes. The paper will also suggest the possible gaps that will require further attention so that the concept of spiritual formation is beneficial to the formation of the Body of Christ.

Spiritual Formation has gained much interest and attention in the last two decades. It has been a popular title in many publications and a frequently used term in Christian conferences. The popularity and demand for spiritual formation resources have led to the establishment of spiritual formation institutions to meet the growing requests for teaching and training in this area. Some of these institutions are set up by well-known authors and scholars such as Dallas Willard Center for Christian Spiritual Formation and the Renovare Institute for Christian Formation. The interest for spiritual formation has gone beyond pastors and believers in local churches to the academic sphere where graduate institutions have partnered with the Renovare Institute to recognize spiritual formation modules as part of their postgraduate level programs (Renovare, n.d.). These highly recognized academic institutions' engagements in spiritual formation reinforced its current importance and value to the Body of Christ, especially for ecclesial leaders. However, the growing popularity and acceptance of spiritual formation among believers have heightened the need for greater understanding and clarity on what spiritual formation is. Different Christian writers and speakers have used the term - spiritual formation to refer to the various facets of spiritual growth journey of believers, resulting in different concepts and constructs for its definition. Some have avoided the usage of the term because of the strong association with the Catholic Church whereas others have voiced strong support for it to see transformed Christian lives among believers. Others see spiritual formation as a restoration to the spiritual disciplines and

practices of the early church desert fathers whereas others have seen it as the discipleship process that believers must be part of as true followers of Christ. With this background on spiritual formation among the Christian Church, this literature review will attempt to clarify and highlight the various concepts and constructs involved in the definition of spiritual formation such as its theological foundations, goals, formation elements and the challenges within the Body of Christ towards spiritual formation.

Definitions of Spiritual Formation

The term spiritual formation has a historical association with the Roman Catholic Church. It is used within the Catholic Church to denote the training of full-time ministers in both the academic arena and spiritual disciplines such as prayer, bible reading and fasting (Sheldrake, 2005). However, the current day Protestant churches do not use the term in the same way as the Catholic Church. Willard (2002) has even highlighted that spiritual formation can take place for every person regardless of one's religious faith. He believes that every human spirit is formed either by the spiritual realm or social-cultural factors that are surrounding the person. Wilhoit (2008) has expressed similar views that a person is formed either positively or negatively and the formational process takes place all the time throughout one's life. For the focus of this paper and the vastness in the scope of spiritual formation, only Christian spiritual formation within the Protestant arena is explored.

There are various concerns raised among the evangelicals because of the history of spiritual formation. Porter (2008) has listed eight areas of concerns which he has also systemically addressed to assure readers that these concerns should not lead believers to avoid spiritual formation. He has encouraged evangelical churches not to shun spiritual formation as it has strong Christo-centric focus and Biblical supported albeit the term is not found in the bible. The acceptance for spiritual formation has been increasing as more and more scholars, and pastors are theologizing and embracing its importance and emphasis in transforming believers' lives (Andrews, 2010). Many of them are frustrated with the lack of change in lifestyles, values, and behaviors when one becomes a Christian. Many see the critical need to promote spiritual formation to bring about genuine life changes in the Body of Christ.

Some proponents of spiritual formation have expressed it as the practice of spiritual disciplines such as *Lectio Divina* where there is a strong emphasis on prayer, meditation, and contemplation on God's word derived from the bible (Tang, 2014). Although these practices are rooted in past church traditions, many current authoritative writers on spiritual formation consider such spiritual disciplines as part of the greater constitution of spiritual formation. Armstrong (2009) has called spiritual disciplines as a "spiritual renaissance" (p. 113) rather than spiritual formation.

The Christian academic world has its views on spiritual formation as well. There are established scholars who have emphasized that “spiritual formation is the key organizing principle of Christian education at all times” (Steibel, 2010, p. 342). Palmer (2003) has also listed three areas in education that shape one’s spiritual formation. They are “the study of sacred texts, the practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself” (p. 55). He believes that students are formed spiritually in some ways through these three activities that take place within Christian academic environment. There have been major discussions on the critical importance of spiritual formation in American Christian colleges and universities that led to the formation of a formal definition by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). CCCU has defined spiritual formation as “the biblically guided process in which people are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit within the faith community in order to love and serve God and others” (CCCU, 2011, p. 13). CCCU aims to use this definition to guide Christian higher education institutions to ensure that students will experience spiritual formation through their faith-based curriculum.

Other advocates of spiritual formation believe that spiritual formation has the same biblical significance of discipleship as demonstrated in Jesus’ ministry on earth. Hull (2007) has equated spiritual formation as the same as discipleship but expressed in a modern term that will relate better with believers today. Willard has supported this approach in using spiritual formation as a replacement term for discipleship as the latter has lost its relevance and meaning in churches today (Tennant, 2005). He has further distinguished discipleship as the decision to follow Jesus as an apprentice whereas “spiritual formation is the direct action of the Holy Spirit upon the inner person” (Hull, 2010).

A group of spiritual formation leaders and writers came together in 2009 to draft a definition for spiritual formation and presented it in the Renovare International Conference during the same year. The group has defined spiritual formation as the “process of being shaped by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ, filled with love for God and the world” (A Call to Spiritual Formation, 2009). The definition has cut across different denominational lines and traditions with the call for believers to return to the basic of becoming like Christ.

This attempt to consolidate the different usages and nuances of spiritual formation has proven to be a challenging one given that it encompasses multidisciplinary knowledge ranging from psychology, education, philosophy, history to theology (Tang, 2014). However, the broad definition by A Call to Spiritual Formation (2009) is probably the most suitable for both churches and the Christian academic world to reference and use as a starting point.

Theological Foundation of Spiritual Formation

The two main concepts that provide the theological underpinning for spiritual formation is the imago Dei and godly relationships that surround a truly transformed Christian life.

The Imago Dei

Armstrong (2009) has emphasized the need for strong biblical and theological support for spiritual formation to prevent the movement from becoming a Christian fad that does not get entrenched in the Body of Christ. Many scholars and theologians have responded by forming theological frameworks to support the spiritual formation movement. Bock (2008) has commented that the best biblical support in the New Testament for spiritual formation is found in 2 Corinthians 3:18. In this verse, Apostle Paul writes that “we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit “ (NIV). Tang (2014) has explained that Paul wanted to use this passage to describe the spiritual formation process where:

1. Believers will be transformed into the likeness of Christ.
2. The transformation process is a lifetime ongoing process.
3. It is Trinitarian in nature.
4. The Holy Spirit is involved in the transformation process.
5. God’s glory is restored when the above take place. (p. 79)

The emphasis to be transformed into Christ-likeness is a direct result of the fall of Man. God made Adam and Eve in his image, the imago Dei according to Genesis 1:26-27. However, God’s image was “perverted” when Adam and Eve sinned against him (Hoekema, 1986, p. 75-96). Jesus Christ came to earth as God’s last sinless Adam and the perfect representative of God’s imago Dei which the first Adam lost. Therefore, when Jesus Christ came to redeem humanity, he came not only to restore humanity’s relationship with God, he also came to restore God’s original image in humanity as well. When one becomes more like Christ through the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the process of spiritual formation, one is being restored to God’s image as Jesus Christ is the perfect reflection of God. As believers get transformed into God’s image, the covenant community of believers will display God’s restored image to the world where humanity will see the glory of God.

Godly Relationships

Jesus teaches the two Greatest Commandments in Mark 12:29-31 where the first emphasizes on one’s relationship with God and the second, emphasizes on one’s relationship with others. These two commandments indicate the outcomes for spiritual

formation as one becomes more like Jesus (Tang, 2014). The first greatest commandment comes from the Shema of Judaism where it is the “Jewish creed of spiritual formation” (McKnight, 2004, p. 6). The declaration of “the Lord is one” in Mark 12:29 is a declaration not only for monotheism but also a recognition of the wholeness or oneness of God (McConville, 2002). The worshippers of God must have the same wholeness or integrity when they come before God in worship. Spiritual formation will enable one to come before God with the wholeness and integrity of heart, soul, mind, and strength as required in the first commandment of Christ. The second greatest commandment is a requirement for believers to love their neighbors as themselves. Believers can only express healthy love to their neighbors when they truly know how to love themselves as God’s chosen people formed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, spiritual formation is the ongoing process where believers learn and develop right relationships with God, self, and others as they are formed spiritually to act and behave in Christ-likeness. When believers live in Christ-likeness, they will attain the goals of spiritual formation as a natural part of their godly and transformed lifestyles.

The Goals of Spiritual Formation

Tang (2014) has suggested three goals of spiritual formation which he derives after examining the formative strands of spiritual formation as proposed by Reed (2011). The three goals are namely:

1. Believers acquiring a Christ-likeness at the personal level
2. Believers becoming a people of God at the community level
3. Believers establishing the Kingdom of God at the missional level

These three goals move God’s influence from the personal level to the community level and thereafter, to the missional level where God’s people will influence the greater environment.

Both Tang and Reed believe that spiritual formation is not meant to be confined at the individual level but has a progressive missional component that facilitates the community of God to bring transformation and healing to the whole creation. However, transformation at the community and missional levels can only take place when true spiritual formation takes place at the personal level. The transformation at the personal level is discussed earlier when one is restored back to the *imago Dei* through becoming like Christ. It is not sufficient to have a relationship with God through faith in Christ but to continue one’s sanctification process after salvation to become like Christ so that the core of one’s being can be transformed from the inside out (Crabb, 2013; Hull, 2010). However, spiritual formation is not a method for one to earn salvation or God’s favor. It is the work of the Holy Spirit after salvation in helping believers to conform and grow into Christ’s image and likeness (Averbeck, 2010). Willard (2002) has given some very

insightful thoughts on how one can partner with the Holy Spirit in the process of spiritual formation at the personal level.

Kang (2002) believes that at the center of biblical theology and spiritual formation is the establishment of a people of God. This establishment is seen from God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 6:7) to Apostle Paul's writing on the concept of the temple of the Holy Spirit to the Corinthian church (1 Cor.3:16-17). The Ten Commandments were given to help in the spiritual formation of a group of slaves to become the people of God. God desires to have a people unto himself, and this can only take place when there is true spiritual formation among believers. As God forms his people through spiritual formation at the community level, he will use the Church to reach the world at the mission level (Averbeck, 2008). The world will experience God's love when his people are spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit to carry Christ's image and glory to bring healing, social justice, peace (shalom) and godliness to their neighbors (Fuller, 2010; Tang, 2014). In summary, spiritual formation facilitates God's purpose and will "to work in us, among us and through us" (Averbeck, 2008, p. 30).

The Elements of Spiritual Formation

The previous section has shown that the three goals of spiritual formation are achievable only if spiritual formation takes place at the personal level. Spiritual formation at the personal level requires the elements of the Bible, the Holy Spirit and people (Andrews, 2010; Tang, 2014).

The Bible provides the biblical content and source for spiritual formation to take place in the lives of believers (Averbeck, 2010). It reveals the nature of who God is and enables believers to become like Christ in their values, behaviors, and lifestyles. Apostle Paul has highlighted the importance of scriptures for the practice of spirituality and spiritual formation in 2 Timothy 3:16 (Averbeck, 2008). Averbeck has reinforced that the Bible is the authoritative canon that tells a story – an evolving story from the past to our present lives where it brings the relevance of God's will and purpose into what we do today. The Bible is not just "descriptive of what happened in the past, but it is prescriptive for how we should live now" (2010, p. 284). The content of the Bible also serves to illuminate us to understand the need for spiritual formation and its importance to cultivate Christ-likeness. God's Word is life-giving when one meditates and lives out the truths that are found within it. The principles in the Bible also empower believers to discern and evaluate spiritual formation models and approaches that are biblical and appropriate for Christian growth and maturity. Maddix and Thompson (2012) have suggested using the Bible not merely for informational purpose to seek knowledge but to use it for transformation purpose in believers' lives. This transformation is achieved through *Lectio Divina*, inductive Bible study within small groups and worship as expressed through preaching, scripture reading, and communion.

The second key element in spiritual formation is the person of the Holy Spirit.

Glerup (2010) has defined the critical role of the Holy Spirit in his chapter which forms part of the overall response from the Theological and Cultural Thinkers (TACT) group on the relevance of spiritual formation. He writes that “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” (p. 251). He believes that the Holy Spirit is involved in the lives of believers convicting them before their salvation, transforming them into the image of Christ after their salvation, and empowering them to proclaim God’s love to the world thereafter. Pinnock and Scorgie (2011) have also proposed three purposes of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers which is closely related to spiritual formation as described by Glerup. They are namely relational, transformational and vocational purposes. The Holy Spirit convicts, nurtures and affirms the relational dimension of believers as children of God (Rom. 8:15-16) before and after their conversion. The Holy Spirit continues with his transforming work through sanctification by conforming believers to the image of Christ through scriptures, the faith community, and many other life-changing events. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit will use these transformed lives to proclaim God’s glory to the world through their vocations. Therefore, we can see that the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in the formation of believers to become like Christ.

The third important element for spiritual formation is the involvement of people in this process. The people element is expressed through three important areas in believers’ lives. Firstly, the believers’ posture of openness and willingness for transformation by the Holy Spirit (Willard, 2010). Secondly, the believers’ commitment to the practice of spiritual disciplines (Foster, 1989). Thirdly, the nurturing community of faith that demonstrates God’s grace through godly acceptance and love for each other (Thrall & McNicol, 2010). Spiritual formation can only take place in believers’ lives when they want to experience a real transformation in their hearts. Such a desire will propel believers towards the practice of spiritual disciplines and the participation in faith communities that will further enhance and strengthen the transformation process. Believers who are self-motivated will not see spiritual disciplines as chores to do to develop spiritual growth but will treat them as a natural longing to become more like Christ. Believers’ participation and involvement in nurturing faith communities will allow them to experience the true unity and relational life that takes place within the Trinity (Demarest, 2010). They will reap the benefits of spiritual growth and maturity as they live with the diversities and differences that exist among themselves. Tang (2014) has also recommended for spiritual directors who will engage in spiritual conversations with believers and assist them to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The intent is to bring spiritual awareness into the lives of believers through taking the time to converse and reflect over life encounters (Peterson, 2010).

The Challenges in Spiritual Formation

The different sections have highlighted the importance, components, and constructs of spiritual formation. Although there are many scholars, writers, and pastors who have passionately advocated for spiritual formation to be a key focus within the Body of Christ, there are many existing challenges and reality gaps that can stall and even derail the momentum of this movement. This section will raise three possible challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that the emphasis of spiritual formation will take root among the larger Christian community.

Issue of Definition

The earlier section has highlighted the history of spiritual formation, and the numerous definitions of spiritual formation that are used among the various Christian church traditions, scholars and educational institutions. No formalized definition for spiritual formation is found in all the various entities in the Christian world. Some quarters are still propagating their preferred definitions and consider other definitions as inadequate to describe what spiritual formation is. Some writers have even used discipleship and spiritual formation interchangeably in their writings to refer to what they believed as the same inner transformation process but in different terminologies for different generations of believers (Andrews, 2010; Hull, 2007; Tennant, 2005). This situation is complicated further by other definitions that come from academic institutions and that changes depending on which academic discipline is presenting spiritual formation (McMinn & Goetsch, 2013; Otto & Harrington, 2016). Ecclesial leaders will have difficulty finding clarity with the myriad of definitions that are used for spiritual formation by renowned scholars, writers and established academic institutions. Many pastors will not be able to determine the constructs of spiritual formation and how it can be expressed in their local churches if the definition is not clear. These pastors will not be able to effectively implement and fulfill the goals of spiritual formation if they are struggling to comprehend spiritual formation or have doubts about its importance given the broad variations and issues in definitions (Langer, 2012). However, for pastors who can determine the appropriate and biblically supported definition for their churches and implement the necessary initiatives for spiritual formation to take place, they will reap the benefits of deep transformation in their lives of their members.

Issue of Implementing Effective Spiritual Formation Initiatives

Wilhoit (2008) has expressed that “spiritual formation is the task of the church” (p. 15). He believes that local churches provide the best avenues to form spiritual communities to experience spiritual formation. The issue for local churches is not just understanding the constructs of spiritual formation but also to implement effective strategies to motivate members to be involved in the transformation process. Many scholars and writers of spiritual formation have stated that effective spiritual formation is solely a

work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (Glerup, 2010; Pinnock & Scorgie, 2011). Believers must see the critical need to get involved in the spiritual formation process and not perceived that it is something good to have but not essential for their Christian growth and maturity. Furthermore, believers must not see spiritual formation as a set of spiritual disciplines that become a burden to them in their spiritual journey. Therefore, ecclesial leaders' main role is to strategically facilitate the process by providing the necessary environment and initiatives to support and encourage believers' involvement in spiritual formation (Barton, Chandler, Tan, TenElshof, & Wilhoit, 2014). Ecclesial leaders will need to have the ability to use church-wide strategies and initiatives to promote and facilitate spiritual formation across the major events and programs in the church life. Many ecclesial leaders do not have such competency and strategic ability to craft church-wide strategies to affect church life. Ecclesial leaders who lead big churches will encounter more levels of difficulty and resistance in implementing church-wide spiritual formation strategies that involve different programs and age groups. Therefore, churches require leaders with competency and strategic ability to formulate and implement a roadmap for spiritual formation to occur effectively.

Issue of Church Model

Matthews (2010) has also raised the need for ecclesial leaders to change their church framework from a conversion model to a transformation model. Many ecclesial leaders are focused on implementing exciting programs and strategies to facilitate people to come into churches to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The focus of conversion model is towards salvation for pre-believers and helping them to stay in churches as Christians after their salvation experience. Matthews believes that conversion model churches will produce passive believers who are satisfied with their salvation and have very low desire to see the inner transformation within them to become spiritually mature and missional in their lives. He proposes that the transformational model will lead believers through an intentional process of spiritual formation where they will grow in spiritual maturity and be missional in their outlook of life and usage of resources. Hawkins and Parkinson (2011) have also confirmed through their research in more than 1,000 churches that churches are facing the same issue where more than 25% of their congregants are stalled spiritually because of the lack of spiritual formation processes to direct or assist them in their spiritual maturity. One of the reasons highlighted is the focus on numerical growth through conversion model without the concrete steps and processes to guide believers in their spiritual formation. However, for many local church pastors, the conversion model is the only model that they are familiar with as they have operated in this model for as long as they are in the ministry. Many megachurches have grown numerically through this model and perceived by many as a successful and proven model. It will not be an easy process for pastors to change to a transformation model given their current worldview and theology of church life. The challenge is for pastors to move from a conversion model to

a transformation model in their ministry framework when leading their churches. This move will require a change of conviction and constructs to support the new purpose and vision in their ministry (Geiger & Peck, 2016). Pastors who can lead their churches in this change will experience the joy of seeing not just mere numbers in their churches but real and authentic Christian transformation and maturity among their members.

Conclusion

Tang (2014) has highlighted the complexity of spiritual formation given the historical evolvment and the multidisciplinary dimensions that are involved in the formational process. Many Christian scholars and writers have reinforced the need for true life transformation where believers are conformed to the image of Christ and live in Christ-likeness. However, the challenges include the definition of spiritual formation, the practical issues of implementing effective church-wide spiritual formation initiatives and strategies, and the change of church model that propagates inner life transformation. Furthermore, effective spiritual formation also requires the full involvement of the Holy Spirit, believers, and ecclesial leaders. Therefore, spiritual formation will remain a vital focus and challenge for the Church of God until the return of Christ.

About the Author

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