

Philosophy of Spiritual Formation and Christian Discipleship

Discipleship is a life long journey of obedience to Christ which transforms a person's values and behavior, and results in ministry in one's home, church and the world. The word disciple in its simplest form means "a learner." Discipleship should focus on Biblical content and its application toward life change. It involves a devotion to the study of God's Word and obedience to the principles and precepts revealed by God Himself. The result of this knowledge and a life lived in the wisdom of God's character will result in a passion to teach others the wonders of God and accomplish much for His glory. Colossians 1:9-10 states, "For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may 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;"

Spiritual formation takes place as we study the word of God and learn to apply what we learn to daily living. The virtues and wisdom of God's character are seen in Proverbs chapter two and finds its foundation in God himself, "My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk in integrity, (Proverbs 2:1-7).

The pursuit of God's wisdom and knowledge leads believers toward a spiritual life that is becoming transformed into the image of Christ. This process of spiritual formation involves several dynamics and biblical principles. First, spiritual growth and progressive sanctification must be visible in the lives of Christians. They must be rooted in truth. Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth, Thy word is truth." (John 17:17) Believers must be set apart and grounded in truth that is illuminated from Scripture by the Holy Spirit as they abide with Christ daily. Jesus also said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7). God's Word must be the center of a relationship with Jesus Christ. This abiding relationship is a must for spiritual growth and sanctification. All believers if they are going to be effective must spend time in God's Word and prayer. Jesus again draws attention to this abiding relationship and its success for spiritual growth, in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

A second biblical principle for spiritual formation is to disciple believers for the purpose of spiritual transformation. Paul states believers are, "... being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) He again says in Romans 12:2, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Ephesians 4:12-24 continues this principle, "If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." It is clear from

Scripture that God's desire is for life change. One must lead believers toward being transformed spiritually. It is my philosophy that this begins with the mind. The mind must be renewed in God's Word. As the mind is changed, the believer should realize change outwardly by no longer being conformed to the world or one's old life. He or she must walk in righteousness and holiness.

The third biblical principle of spiritual formation is to equip the saints with a Christian worldview that transforms their beliefs and their behaviors. A Christian worldview is based in Scripture and gives believers a lens through which they can view their world. They should know what they believe and why. We often complain because Christians do not know doctrine, but where do we teach it? The foundation of a biblical belief system is Scripture and its basic teachings must be taught. This is the principle from Proverbs 2:6, "For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Paul is clear in 1 Timothy 4:6, "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following." Practically this can be done through courses on doctrine and basic apologetics. The church should follow this with a curriculum plan that bases its primary teaching in a systematic study of the books of the Bible. It is the content of Scripture that will bring about a true "biblical belief" in the lives of God's people.

A Christian worldview should also change the way we behave. What we say we believe should be seen in our lives and how we act. It should impact our character. Yet we often are not clear on the basic spiritual disciplines. We do not teach how to put off the old man, to be renewed in the mind, and how to put on the new man. We do not train regarding spiritual

warfare and how to put off destructive behaviors. It is imperative that we teach these areas and others to new believers.

A fourth biblical principle of spiritual formation is stated in Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” The Ezra principle is as follows: that a leader must be a student of God’s word, practice its principles, and be able to teach others its truths. The servant leader of the church must grow in his or her ability to study and understand God’s Word. God’s revealed truth is the basis of all that we do in Christian ministry. The leader must also be a model to follow. His leadership ability will not rise above his commitment to practice God’s word in his personal life. The leader must also learn how to give away truth that God has taught him and that he is practicing. This principle is crucial in any leader’s life and a must for continued leadership.

Evangelism and the ability to mentor others to share their faith is also a biblical principle. Jesus states in John 4:35-38, "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." This passage implies two persons laboring for the fruit of eternal life, the one who sows and the one who reaps. The one who reaps is experienced in the fields and is “receiving wages and gathering fruit.” This implies that he is experienced and already working in the field. I believe the more experienced believers should take younger, less mature believers and teach them how to sow and to harvest. The passage is clear that the fields

are ready; they just need to be harvested. The experienced and inexperienced can join together in a mentor and apprentice partnership to teach the art of sowing and harvesting. This is a key element of biblical evangelism as we partner with one another to build the Kingdom of God. Fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) is primary and foremost. We must make disciples of all nations and as we make disciples we will see those we have reached baptized. Then we will have an opportunity to teaching them to observe all things Christ has taught.

A sixth principle of spiritual formation is service in ministry empowered and gifted through the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter 4:10 states, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." As we are transformed, we must put to work the spiritual gift divinely given by God and serve because of the empowerment of the Spirit of God. Galatians 5:24 says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." Romans 8:11 states, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." The power of Christ to live a life reflecting the His image is possible by His divine power.

Ministry must be accomplished in one's home, in the church and in the world. The home is the place that spiritual maturity is nurtured and is genuinely displayed. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 is clear, "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. "You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." The church and its ministry to the community is the place of kingdom impact. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 states, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same

Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.” God desires that all members of the body exercise their gifts for the greater health of the body. Paul goes on to state again in 1 Corinthians 12, “But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (1 Cor. 12:24-27) Concerning our ministry to the world, Jesus prayed for believers in this regard. "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.”(John 17:18-21)

As true disciples of Christ, let us commit to this lifelong journey which transforms us and results in changed lives. Jesus summarized the nature of spiritual formation in his closing statements in the Sermon on the Mount. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall." (Matthew 7:24-27)

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