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# An Evaluation of Incomplete Spiritual Formation and Discipleship

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John Cole writes, “There exists a serious gap in the mind of the many believers between what they know to be the goal of sanctification and growth and where they know they actually are in their lives.”<sup>1</sup> Human observation and the biblical text leave the follower of Christ perplexed about the dissonance between the ultimate sanctified life versus the daily reality of personal experience. The various forms of spiritual formation and discipleship do not adequately account for the gap that exists between a method and implementation in the life of a believer.

By faith through grace, individuals place trust in Jesus as the atoning work of their sin, the appeasement of God’s wrath, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The Holy Spirit simultaneously regenerates, indwells, baptizes, and transforms new believers to become the set-apart persons God originally designed for them.<sup>2</sup> This work of the Spirit through spiritual formation and discipleship applies to each Christian. Yet, the goal of achieving perfection is not possible in this life, which may leave the sincere believer feeling incapable of pleasing God with all his heart, soul, and mind.

Since God is sovereignly in control, omnipotent, and omniscient, why does He not immediately transform his children? Instead, He has chosen to mold them through a process that will never produce ideal results on this side of eternity. The apostle Peter tells believers to be holy in all manner of life (1 Peter 1:15). Paul commands believers to have lives that are holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). Jude orders believers to develop a faith that can withstand deceitful teaching from unbelievers who seek to destroy their foundation of faith (Jude 19–20). Yet believers often find themselves daily confessing sins and wondering if true spiritual formation is possible and what role discipleship plays in their lives.

Peter Nelson asks, “How can we fashion a theology of [spiritual formation] that is, at one and the same time, honest about Christian struggles (the kingdom

is future) and yet hopeful about the potential for Spirit-empowered living (the kingdom is present)?<sup>3</sup> The focus of this paper is to bring to light the fact that all believers experience an incomplete spiritual formation and discipleship process that nevertheless incorporates the realities of the concept of *simul justus et peccator*.<sup>4</sup> This writer will present a spiritual formation model that incorporates both realities. Believers can experience a greater resistance to sinning if yielded to the commands of Scripture through the power of God. At the same time, they may have an awareness that sinning will continue in this life until full transformation in the life to come. Thus, a greater emphasis needs to be made that believers will live in the tension of wanting to please the Lord, while learning how to deal with a desire to sin.

## **Biblical Examples of Incomplete Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

### **Abraham**

When Abraham was 75 years old, God promised him that his family would become a numerous people group (Genesis 12). Yet by the time Abraham was one-hundred years old, he nearly lost his wife, Sarah, twice (cf. Gen. 12:10–19; 20:1–7). He had a son with Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian handmaid (cf. Gen. 16:1–16) in a vain attempt at completing God’s will through human means. In fact, Sarah (cf. Gen. 18:12) and Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:17) laughed at the promise.<sup>5</sup> This man of faith believed the promise of God (Genesis 15:6), but wavered about how God would implement His promise. Nonetheless, Paul informs his readers that Abraham grew strong in faith regarding the promise of his promised son (Romans 4:19–21).

Abraham was a man of faith, but he was also growing in faith. His faith was not fully formed in Genesis 12, 15, or even 17, but rather he had a maturing faith that made mistakes along the journey. Abraham was a work in progress. He never achieved perfect unwavering faith, but gradually matured in his faith in God. His spiritual formation during those twenty-five years revealed his desire to depend upon God. At the same time his experience exposed a struggle. Abraham never reached full maturity despite having the perfect teacher (Yahweh) Who developed the master spiritual formation plan.<sup>6</sup>

### **Peter**

Peter was one of the pillars of the early church (Galatians 2:9). He had been chosen by Jesus as one of the twelve apostles (John 1:42) and was one of the three disciples most closely associated with Jesus (Matthew 1:17). Peter saw Jesus perform supernatural feats, such as turning water into wine (John 2), restoring sight to the blind (John 9), calming the Galilean Sea (Mark 4:39), and raising the dead back to life (John 11:43). He was the one who declared that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matthew 16:16). Peter saw Jesus transformed into all His glory (Matthew 17) and was restored by Jesus after denying Him three times (John 21). He was present at the day of Pentecost and preached the message after which over 3,000 people came

to saving faith in Jesus (Acts 2). Yet, Peter was also the man whom Paul rebuked for distorting the gospel message (Galatians 2).

How was it possible, after years of spiritual experience, Peter still fell short of spiritual maturity?<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Peter was still maturing. God used Paul as part of Peter's spiritual formation. Peter had not arrived at the culmination of his spiritual journey; he was not complete. Although he was a leader with the Church, he needed to be corrected.

Followers of God never reach perfection in this life. We are not complete. We grow and mature, but we never reach the point at which sin is no longer a struggle. Spiritual formation programs have their place and help believers overcome their sinful proclivity. However, a discipleship curriculum that ignores the incomplete aspect of spiritual formation will leave believers bewildered in their understanding of progressive transformation.

### **Theological Framework of Incomplete Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

God has not left believers as orphans, but He has sent the Holy Spirit Who progressively is changing them into the image of Christ.<sup>8</sup> God has promised that His sanctification work will run its course until the return of Jesus (Philippians 1:6). He is diligently ensuring that spiritual formation will produce His desired results (Philippians 2:13). What we experience in this life is not the ultimate state of our spiritual journey (1 John 3:2). In glorification, we will be wholly transformed into the image of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:51 and Colossians 3:10), but we will never be complete in this life.

Transformation of the mind is a key component by which the believer, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, rises above the world's philosophy through the habitual digestion of the truth as revealed in Scripture.<sup>9</sup> As the mind is renewed by the Holy Spirit, believers will begin to distinguish between the hollow promises of worldly wisdom and the satisfying Word of God. The Bible teaches that each believer will be changed. Nevertheless, daily encounters with self-centered actions remind the believer that "the heart is never absolutely pure, nor does he ever do anything that is absolutely right."<sup>10</sup> It is rare to find a person who is entirely free from all taint of self-seeking.<sup>11</sup> Believers need to be reminded that the Holy Spirit provides the transforming power which makes them capable of doing the commands of the Royal Law.<sup>12</sup>

Nelson parallels twin motifs that the Old and New Testaments command holiness. At the same time, Scripture acknowledges believers' lingering imperfections and continual struggle against sin.<sup>13</sup> Romans 14:23 establishes that everything not done from faith is sin.

Matthew 6:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 10:12–14 seem to highlight spiritual formation dissonance. In Matthew 6:12–13, the focus is upon seeking forgiveness for our sins and believing that God would provide deliverance in the hour of temptation.

First Corinthians 10:12–14 warns against pride which leads to destruction and teaches that God does not allow His children to endure temptation without a way of escape. These verses confirm that believers may be tempted to sin, but, at the same time, they can always find a route to avoid sinning because God has guaranteed that submitting to sin is not a default position. Still, we often find ourselves doing the very thing that we know is wrong (Romans 7:19). “Thus, believers can endure temptations without failing, yet why is it that Scripture, history and personal experience provide no genuine examples of sinless believers?”<sup>14</sup>

### **Missing Emphases in Incomplete Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

Believers can find peace when they realize that when they sin there is a remedy – daily confession to the Lord (1 John 1:9). Too often, this truth is a missing emphasis in discipleship processes. Each day, the believer can ask the Lord to wash him of sin (John 13:10). God has provided a way to seek instantaneous cleansing from sin and guilt. Boa remarks, “The gospel is the offer of God’s ability to make us into the people we were meant to be all along.”<sup>15</sup>

Another missing emphasis is the mystery of God. God has chosen not to reveal why He does not instantaneously transform believers. Instead, He progressively molds believers through the process of sanctification. Because the sinful nature is still present in the lives of believers, First Corinthians 10:12–14 is not a guarantee that believers will always choose to resist sin. Nevertheless, God continues to form us into His image. Wrestling with sin is part of the maturation process that will help a believer become more like Christ.<sup>16</sup> This struggle is the process of working out one’s salvation (Philippians 2:12) and putting on the new self (Ephesians 4:24).

### **Maturation through Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

Maturity often comes through trial and error. Some individuals learn through observing the mistakes of others. For example, people can learn that an injection of heroin can kill without having to experiment with the deadly drug. However, most believers tend to mature through their spiritual struggles. For example, a child learns that a stove is hot through his sense of touch. In a similar way, “the journey of spiritual transformation with its pains and joys and its failures and advances is a process of rendering [the] new creation increasingly visible.”<sup>17</sup>

Thomas à Kempis reminds us that because we are in a spiritual war “as long as you live, the weapons of the Spirit will ever be necessary to you.”<sup>18</sup> The apostle Paul reminds believers that God predestined them to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29). The outcome is sure, but the process means the believer will never reach full maturation during the progressive stage of sanctification. Thus, in the opinion of this author, there are few popular spiritual formation or discipleship programs “that allow the Christian to know genuine peace and contentment in

Christ today in spite of the fact of ongoing sin.<sup>19</sup> The bridge between theology and praxis is missing.

### **Spiritual Theology: The Gap Between Theology and Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

Spiritual Theology is the integration of the “scriptural teaching on sanctification and growth as well as the observations and reflections of the Spirit’s actual work in the believer’s spirit and experience.”<sup>20</sup> Programs on discipleship and spiritual formation have succeeded in the areas of articulating the theology of the text. Yet these same programs have not factored sufficiently the data of the observation of how the Spirit brings about the transformational process. For example, pastors and professors can describe the meaning of Christ’s death, but some ministers may struggle to describe the methods that the Holy Spirit uses today to bring about maturity.

The believer can be taught about the sovereignty of God and affirm it in a paper, yet personally worry about finances or marriage. The theology is correct, but believers may experience a disconnect that stunts spiritual growth. Correct theology combined with acute awareness of how the Spirit matures believers are essential to spiritual maturity. Dispensing the spiritual disciplines may seem like an equivalent of spiritual theology; however, the act of doing is not the same as reflecting upon what God did or is doing to bring about maturity in one’s life. Reflecting is a spiritual discipline. Part of spiritual theology involves discerning how believers grow, looking for signs of the Spirit working today, and developing application of the truths of the text in real life. Reflection of this process can be invaluable for future spiritual growth.

Scripture describes the presence of the Holy Spirit Who empowers, enables, purges, and leads, yet many believers have not been taught to recognize His presence at work in their daily lives.<sup>21</sup> We need to be trained to observe the patterns of the Spirit’s action in our lives. Often evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges and institutes have followed a model of Academic-Professional rather than a Transformational Model.<sup>22</sup> This approach sometimes results in pastors, missionaries, and professors who are more focused upon the correct theological understanding of spiritual formation at the expense of actually assisting believers in the progress of spiritual maturity. True spiritual formation involves orthodox doctrine and personal spiritual growth. Few popular spiritual formation or discipleship programs “allow the Christian to know genuine peace and contentment in Christ today in spite of the fact of ongoing sin.”<sup>23</sup> To have such a model would be a paradigm shift within the discipline of Spiritual Formation and Discipleship.

## **A Suggested Model of Spiritual Formation and Discipleship**

If future leaders – pastors, theologians, missionaries, and lay leaders – could see this approach modeled, they would be better equipped to help others towards the Holy Spirit’s goal of transformation.

### **Progressive Growth**

First, the model should acknowledge that believers will continue to sin, while not accepting their sin as acceptable behavior. While believers never stop sinning in this life, they can experience victory over many sins (1 Corinthians 6:11), leading to spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:14). The idea that someone can be a complete believer implies there is no more room for growth. This achievement is not possible in this life. Sin, though never excusable, will remain part of the believer’s experience until he is transformed in heaven.<sup>24</sup> Being content with the process of sanctification helps believers avoid the expectation of attaining perfection on this side of heaven.<sup>25</sup>

### **Confessed Sin**

Second, this model emphasizes confession of sin as a means of spiritual growth. Confession involves agreement with God about one’s sin. Omitting confession of sin leads to the stifling of spiritual growth. Our Lord taught that sin between believers should be confessed with one another before seeking reconciliation with God (Matthew 5:24). Peter reminded husbands that their prayers will be hindered if they are not reconciled with their wives (1 Peter 3:7). Paul warns the Ephesian believers that their speech can grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). Without daily confession of sins to the Lord and, when necessary, between our spouses and other family and friends, a believer is not in a right relationship with the Lord. Confession is central to experiencing spiritual growth.

### **Positional, Progressive, and Permanent Sanctification**

Third, the model distinguishes between positional, progressive, and permanent sanctification. Scriptures confirm that believers are positionally sanctified (Romans 5:1, Titus 2:7, and 1 Corinthians 6:11); that is, they are completely justified – in a right relationship with God. In addition, Scriptures confirm that believers ultimately will be permanently sanctified with a new body, soul, and mind that does not desire to sin (1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 John 3:2, and Revelation 22:3). In heaven, confession of sin will no longer be necessary. Believers will be complete.

Believers are also experiencing progressive sanctification (Ephesians 2:21–22, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Philippians 1:6, and Colossians 3:10). The change is a transformation of desires. This progression will not be complete until the believer is permanently sanctified in the life to come. Pastors, church leaders, seminaries, Bible colleges, and Christian university professors should teach a distinction

between each aspect of sanctification, which will help the believer understand why sinful desires and actions continue in this life.

### **Word and Spirit**

Fourth, the proposed model emphasizes that teaching the Word of God with the power of the Holy Spirit is necessary for spiritual growth. When regeneration occurs, both the Word and the Spirit are present. Nicodemus knew the Word of God, but he had not experienced the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always working with the Word, but believers must remember that studying the text apart from the Holy Spirit is not sufficient for spiritual growth. Prayer and reflection upon spiritual growth are not peripheral to spiritual growth, but they hold a central place in spiritual growth. One evangelical seminary has altered its courses so that one-fourth of the coursework, classroom time, and assignments are intentionally focused upon the elements of prayer and the experiential work of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

### **Spiritual Gifts**

Fifth, this proposed model highlights teaching about spiritual gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Within academic settings, the verbal abilities (preaching, teaching and writing) are highlighted, while the gifts of helps, mercy, and encouragement may be less noticeable. Thus, within the church, the believer can be taught that certain gifts are superior while others are inferior. The Spirit of God has shown His creativity within creation and within humanity. No two people are likely gifted with the same gift mix, yet the Spirit transforms the church through those gifts in the body of believers.

To only focus upon the teaching gifts communicates a hierarchy of the gifts. It inadvertently communicates some gifts are less important to the body, while others are more crucial. The future church leader must be exposed to all the biblical gifts, including the less visible gifts. Dependence upon the Spirit through the gifts should drive future church leaders to model before their church families a continual infusion of the transformational work necessary for spiritual growth.

More can be said about the proposed model, but I believe the areas mentioned will assist believers in developing a more accurate understanding of spiritual formation and discipleship.

### **An Example of Spiritual Formation in the Academic Setting**

Christian academic institutions exist to help the church. God's vehicle to reach the lost is His church. Seminary, Bible college, and Christian university professors ought to be creating a classroom environment in which students are trained to model spiritual formation. Ministers need the ability to recognize how the Spirit is maturing each believer. They also need to know what to expect as the maturation process continues. The example below could be a starting point for future professors



and church leaders. Prayerfully, they can also improve it for the betterment of believers who struggle with the tension of wanting to please God while often sinning against Him.

### **Spiritual Formation in the Classroom**

Instruction should be designed with the goal of helping students to love God and neighbors.<sup>28</sup> Assignments should require introspection. For example, students writing about the sovereignty of God should be required to include a section examining whether their beliefs align with their actions. For example, do they trust God with finances, marriage, or managing their time. Students will affirm “I believe God is sovereign,” but then stress about finances. That condition is a disconnect a professor should help the student explore. If proper spiritual formation is modeled in the classroom, future church leaders might model it in their churches to help bring about spiritual growth. If the class does not require personal reflection, a change in behavior, and confession of sin, I am doubtful the class has accomplished as much as God would desire. Spiritual growth requires a change in thinking and actions.

### **Misapprehension of Academic Goals**

Some academicians believe a high-grade point average implies spiritual maturity on the part of the student. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day knew about God; but their knowledge did not translate into repentance, humility, and desperation for God. On the other hand, many of the outcasts of society, who had little knowledge of God, seemed to grasp their need of God quite well. Professors are not only dispensers of information but are teachers of the nature and character of God. They might recall how God used their educational experiences to transform them, even if just in part, to be persons who diligently seek the Lord in spite of their propensity to sin.

Educators cannot assume that academic knowledge equals spiritual maturity. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 1:26) that the Lord has not only used persons who are considered intelligent by human standards to advance His work. On the contrary, most of us are considered fools for following Christ.

A professor is a teacher first and foremost. Research should be encouraged, but not at the expense of teaching. Some doctoral programs do not require their students to take a course in teaching or, if required, then one course may be the maximum. Professors would benefit by training in andragogy. Potential ministers often see one way of communicating, the lecture model, but may not be exposed to other methods. A variety of methods include question and answers, directed discussion, or small group study. Additional methods of teaching and discipling could bring about a potential acceleration of spiritual growth. As teachers, we want to help people understand the process that the Holy Spirit incorporates to bring about spiritual maturity. Lectures or preaching cannot be the only methods employed.

## Mentorship of Teaching Assistants

One of the potentially best ways to accelerate an awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is through mentorships. This approach could involve one-on-one, smaller groups (2–4 people with a mature believer), or home/small fellowships (8–10 people with one or two mature believers). Teaching assistants should be mentored by their professors not only in their writing, but regarding spiritual growth. Thus, professors should exhibit spiritual maturity. Mentoring in academic institutions will translate into the church as pastors are trained. Given that people follow their leaders, an accelerated awareness of the Holy Spirit's work could be accomplished through mentoring in which vexing questions can be answered.

The above model should remind believers that what we model is often caught more than it is taught. Each person is gifted differently; therefore, no one person can provide all the discipleship one person needs. However, if believers are to understand the process that the Holy Spirit uses to transform believers, they need to be exposed to mature Christians who can guide them not only in theory, but also in practice.

## Summary

Discipleship and spiritual formation programs have overpromised. Too often, they have unintentionally directed the believer to conclude that a form of spiritual perfectionism in which sin loses its power completely during one's life is possible. This idea has been perpetuated by teachers who have accurately described the theological concepts of transformation but are unable to develop a practical model of spiritual formation. A model of spiritual formation and discipleship is needed in which the study of the Word is cultivated in conjunction with the power of life in the Spirit. Salvation began through impartation of the activity of the Spirit through the Word. Similarly, sanctification will continue through the impartation of the activity of the Spirit through the Word.

## NOTES

1. John Cole, "Spiritual Theology: A Theological-Experiential Methodology for Bridging the Sanctificational Gap" *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 2 (2009): 4–43.

2. See Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989). Mildred J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998). Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology: A Historical, Biblical, and Contemporary Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 1995). Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986).

3. Peter K. Nelson, "Discipleship Dissonance: Toward a Theology of Imperfection Amidst the Pursuit of Holiness" *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 4 (2011): 63ff.

4. See D. L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989). R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000).

5. See Bob Utley, *The Gospel According to Paul: Romans. Study Guide Commentary Series* Vol. 5 (Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 1998).

6. Unless the plan of Yahweh was that Abraham should never reach full maturity in his earthly life.

7. The NET Bible: New English Translation, (Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 2175. Retrieved from NetBible.com

8. See James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1986). Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*.

9. See Sproul, *The Holiness of God*.

10. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Revell 1987), 36.

11. T.A. Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Mineola: Dover Publications 2003), 80.

12. Jay Adams, *The Big Umbrella* (Calvary Press Publishing, 1972, 2010), 189.

13. Nelson, *Discipleship Dissonance*, 65–66.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

15. Boa, 264.

16. Nelson, *Discipleship Dissonance*, 79.

17. Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 265

18. Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 83.

19. Nelson, *Discipleship Dissonance*, 80.

20. Coe, *Spiritual Theology*, 7.

21. Packer, *Keep in Step*, 47.

22. John Coe, “The Seven Deadly Disconnects of Seminary Training: Theological and Spiritual Formation Reflections on a Transformation Model” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, Philadelphia, PA, 2005).

23. Nelson, *Discipleship Dissonance*, 80.

24. I would add that death does not transform the believer into his final perfect state. The sinful nature is removed, but to have a new body along with a full removal of the sin nature is the goal of transformation. I Corinthians 15 and II Corinthians 5 would argue that to be wholly transformed would include a new body. Thus, at the return of Jesus the believer will be given a new physical body and experience the final result of sanctification of the Holy Spirit.

25. Nelson, *Discipleship Dissonance*, 86.

26. According to Dr. John Coe, this was the decision of Institute for Spiritual Formation at Talbot Theological Seminary.

27. I do not see much evidence from Scripture that the so-called sign gifts are normative for today. For the sake of the argument, if they did exist today, my point would still be the same. There needs to be teaching upon the gifts less discussed (helps, hospitality, exhortation, etc.) and how the Spirit sanctifies His church through those gifts.

28. Some of my ideas in this section were influenced from John Coe, “Intentional Spiritual Formation in the Classroom: Making Space for the Spirit in the University,” *Christian Education Journal*, 4 (2000): 85–110.