

Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered

Jim Wilhoit • IPC • January 2024 • Session 2 Creating a Climate for Formation

My working definition of spiritual formation is fourfold: (1) a process (2) of being formed (3) in the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others.

Robert Mullholland

Unity and Maturity in the Body of Christ

4:1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. . . . 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:1-5, 11-16)

Q 48 What is the church? God chooses and preserves for himself a community elected for eternal life and united by faith, who love, follow, learn from, and worship God together. God sends out this community to proclaim the gospel and prefigure Christ's kingdom by the quality of their life together and their love for one another.

New City Catechism

Preformation Priorities (often set by the community, hence the power of retreats)

1. We need to have an approach to CSF that accounts for the richness of human life.

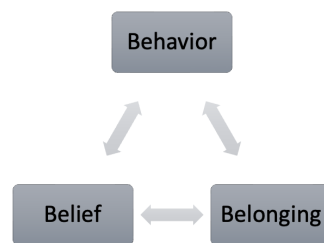


“Let us call the train engine ‘fact’—the fact of God’s promises found in His Word. The fuel car we will call ‘faith’—your trust in God and His Word. The caboose we will call ‘feelings.’ The train will run with or without the caboose. However, it would be futile to attempt to pull the train by the caboose.” (Cru.org, accessed 1/10/2024)

The Bible sees emotions as part of a flourishing life: joy (Philippians 4:4), hope (Psalm 42:5), fear (Luke 12:5), peace (Colossians 3:15), zeal (Romans 12:11), grief (Romans 12:15), desire (1 Peter 2:2), tenderheartedness (Ephesians 4:32), brokenness and contrition (James 4:9).

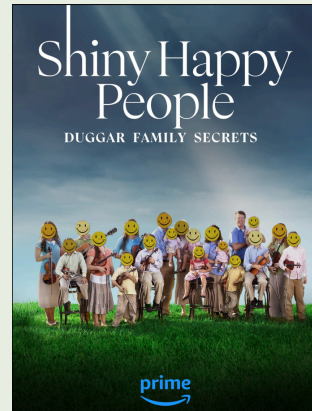
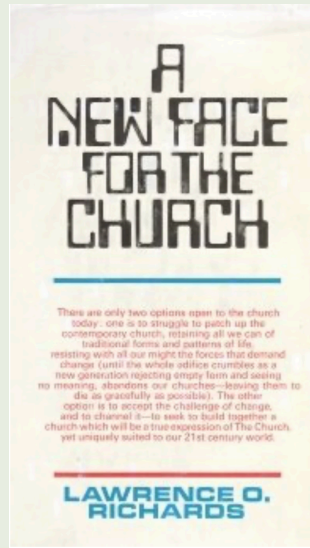
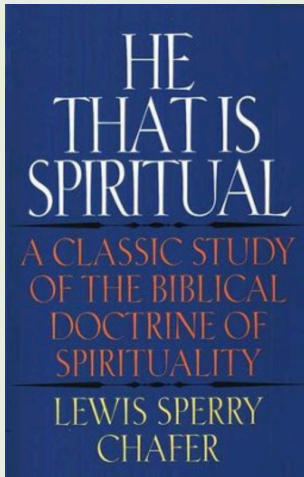
Augustine: We are fundamentally desire-ers, we become what we love. “A material object works its way toward its own place by means of its own weight. A weight doesn’t simply direct its course to the lowest level, but to its own proper place. Fire moves up, stone down. These things are in motion through their own weights, and they seek their own places. . . . My love is my weight. I’m carried by it wherever I’m carried.”

The “3-B Model” can be helpful here.

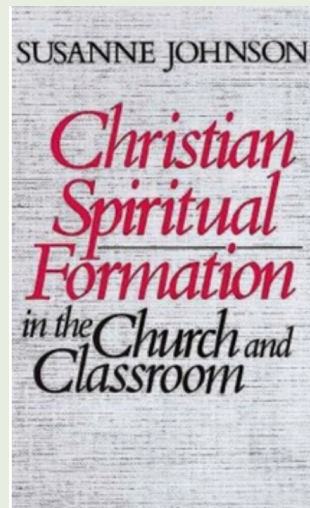


- **Belief:** What members affirm as true or real. These beliefs typically center around God's nature, life's purpose, moral values, and other theological tenets.
- **Behavior:** Behavior is what people do as a result of or as part of their religion. This can include personal rituals, spiritual disciplines, and corporate worship practices. Churches provide a framework for ethical conduct and moral decision-making based on doctrinal beliefs. Church communities have norms and rules that govern behavior, resulting in social cohesion.
- **Belonging:** Belonging concerns membership or identity, a sense of personal identification with the group, and a sense that this group cares about me.

Narrowly Focused



More Robust Accounts



2. The wisdom of Lawrence Kohlberg, “You can’t teach justice in an unjust environment.” Importance of the hidden curriculum.

3. Cultivating a Climate of Formation

Safety

The church must be a safe environment. To promote this, clear guidelines designed to exclude sexual, physical, and spiritual abuse and manipulation

must be in place. There should be effective monitoring, training, and accountability.

Welcome

The implicit messages that welcome and exclude people are a powerful dimension of the hidden curriculum. The church in the United States has had a particularly tragic connection with racism and racial exclusion. Jesus modeled inclusion and welcoming, though never at the cost of speaking truth, and we do well to strive to follow Jesus on this point and create welcoming churches.

Integrity

The leadership of the church must show itself to be honest and to live by the principles it espouses. A lack of integrity will affect the spiritual climate even if the hypocrisy is not revealed; as Jesus said, “Students are not greater than their teacher. But the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher” (Luke 6:40 NLT).

Adversity

As a rule, adversity will play an outsized role in most of our formation. In the stripping away that comes in adversity, we learn to see what counts and find that when all is said and done, God and his love are more real than anything else. If individuals are to grow through the experience of adversity, there must be a climate of worship, use of the Psalms, teaching, and prayer support to help them walk well through their various trials. Versions of the prosperity gospel implicitly deny the value of adversity and propose strategies for denying or escaping the trials of life. That can undercut CSF.

Word Saturation

Scriptures provide a countercultural road map to how we are to live; they provide us with a new set of images to guide our loves and lives, and they are a means of grace as we meditate on them and take them to heart. Formation is to be shaped by the Word and uses the Word as a means of formation.

Teachability

To help create an environment in which CSF will flourish, the whole church must be oriented toward teachability. This means that people are spiritually curious, eager to grow and learn, and willing to learn from anyone. There is respect for the teaching offices of the church and a recognition that we should be open to learning from anyone with a life message formed in faithfulness to God. The cancer survivor, the faithful single mom, the compassionate nurse, and the skillful kindergarten teacher who have all acquired life lessons and practical wisdom should be listened to with a spirit of teachability.

Four Rs of Christian Spiritual Formation

Receiving	Remembering
Responding	Relating