

What Is Spiritual Formation and Why Does It Matter?

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:4–7

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It's possible—perhaps even likely—that you've never heard the phrase *spiritual formation* before. It's the kind of terminology that's often sequestered in academic circles. But in recent years, the concepts and practices of spiritual formation have gained popularity in the church and brought related issues to the forefront for many believers.

If the emails we receive at Grace to You are any indication of the overall direction of the church, the popularity of spiritual formation has exploded in the last several months. Weekly—sometimes daily—we hear from men and women wrestling with difficult questions about the disciplines and practices of spiritual formation. They're struggling to reconcile what they're reading and hearing with the Word of God.

The topic has even come up in some of John MacArthur's recent Q&A's, so I know it's on the minds of many believers and raising questions in congregations around the world.

Even forming a basic definition of spiritual formation is no simple feat. It's a fluid concept, with a wide range of accepted meanings and applications.

In broad terms, spiritual formation is the process of spiritual shaping and growth. Sending your children to a Christian school would fall under the wide canopy of spiritual formation. The same could be said of any education tied to a specific religion—Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, or Muslim schools all contribute to the spiritual formation of their students.

However, in Christian circles, spiritual formation refers to more than mere academic instruction. Most often, it's a reference to the dynamic means of sanctification. It deals with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and the various methods He uses to bring about spiritual growth in our lives.

It's at this point things can become confusing. On one hand, there are the time-tested, practical Christian disciplines we're all familiar with—things like personal and corporate Bible study, worship, prayer, discipleship, and service.

On the other hand, many of the leading voices in the spiritual formation movement stress the need for more intuitive interpretations of spirituality. They encourage believers to incorporate a wide variety of extrabiblical spiritual practices, such as contemplative prayer, silence, meditation, creative expression, and yoga. In fact, some of the most popular methods of spiritual formation have been lifted from Catholicism, new age mysticism, or other religions and rebranded with biblical-sounding terminology.

But any kind of subjective spirituality that draws your focus away from the Lord and His truth can have disastrous results, derailing your spiritual growth and cutting you off from God's plan for your

sanctification.

All true spiritual growth starts with the preeminent role of God's Word in the lives of His people. But is Scripture alone enough for spiritual maturity?

That's where we'll pick it up next time.

In the meantime, we want to know what you're hearing about spiritual formation. Is it even on your radar? Is this an entirely new idea to you, or is it something you've heard or read about in the past? Have you sat under teachers or been involved with ministries that encouraged spiritual formation? Maybe you've even tried some of the techniques and methods yourself? We want to hear your story in the comments below.

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