

Conformed to The Image of Christ: Evaluating Approaches to Spiritual Formation

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Abstract

In his letter to the Church in Ephesus, Paul writes that every disciple of Jesus ought to “make God’s activity the pattern for their lives” and become Christlike by Andrew T. Lincoln. Every disciple’s goal is to imitate the perfect image of God—Jesus Christ. This imitation is possible through practical obedience, as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated. Keeping in mind that the disciple’s end goal is to imitate Jesus, it is deemed essential to evaluate Spiritual formational approaches that are viewed as scaffolds in conforming to the image of Christ. The research seeks to critically analyze four approaches to Spiritual formation to appreciate their strengths and identify their weaknesses and evaluate their effectiveness to determine if such approaches can help believers in conforming to the image of Christ. Thus, the thesis of this article is to argue for the quintessential role of the Holy Spirit, the essential responsibility of the human agent, and the indispensable role of the Christian community, which are deemed crucial for effective Spiritual formational approaches.

Keywords: Spiritual Formation, Communal, Missional, Transformation, *Imago Dei*

Abstrak

Dalam suratnya kepada Gereja di Efesus, Paulus menulis bahwa setiap murid Yesus harus “menjadikan aktivitas Allah sebagai pola hidup mereka” dan menjadi seperti Kristus oleh Andrew T. Lincoln. Tujuan setiap murid adalah untuk meniru gambar Allah yang sempurna—Yesus Kristus. Peniruan ini dimungkinkan melalui kepatuhan praktis, seperti yang dinyatakan oleh teolog Jerman Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Mengingat bahwa tujuan akhir murid adalah untuk meneladani Yesus, maka dipandang penting untuk mengevaluasi pendekatan-pendekatan pembinaan rohani yang dipandang sebagai tiang penopang agar sesuai dengan citra Kristus. Penelitian ini berusaha menganalisis secara kritis empat pendekatan pembentukan Rohani untuk menghargai kekuatan mereka dan mengidentifikasi kelemahan mereka dan mengevaluasi



keefektifannya untuk menentukan apakah pendekatan tersebut dapat membantu orang percaya dalam menyesuaikan diri dengan citra Kristus. Dengan demikian, tesis dari artikel ini adalah memperdebatkan peran esensial Roh Kudus, tanggung jawab esensial agen manusia, dan peran tak tergantikan komunitas Kristiani, yang dianggap krusial bagi pendekatan formasional Spiritual yang efektif.

Kata-kata Kunci: Formasi Spiritual, Komunal, Misi, Transformasi, *Imago Dei*

Introduction

This article seeks to establish a means by which Spiritual formational approaches are evaluated for effectiveness. To begin this endeavor, the question may be asked: What crucial aspects are to be considered to evaluate approaches of Spiritual formation that lead to Christlikeness? In ascertaining the purpose of the research, we begin by discussing the concept of *imago Dei*. Within this concept, the discussion is divided into three sub-sections—the *imago Dei* in man, the state of *imago Dei* after the fall, and the need for continual renewal to the image of Christ. This is followed by discussions on what is meant by Spiritual formation, the process and the telos of Spiritual formation, and a brief sketch of four different approaches to Spiritual formation. We then shift the discussions to the rationale for evaluating approaches of Spiritual formation based on three identified aspects. It is then followed by a section that evaluates the four different approaches to Spiritual formation. Considering the goal of Christian Spiritual formation as a process of conforming to the image of Christ, the three identified aspects deemed crucial for effective Spiritual formation that leads to Christlikeness are:

- (i) The quintessential work of the Holy Spirit
- (ii) The responsibility of the human agent
- (iii) The indispensability of the role of Christian community

The Concept of *Imago Dei*

Theologians and scholars have come to a point of sincere appreciation that the work on the subject matter of *imago Dei* is never

ending. The topic of *imago Dei* is truly “limitless”¹ and “nearly infinite,”² and “occupies a central place in the Christian theological tradition.”³ Although countless works on this particular topic have been produced, yet it still remains an important task to undertake in understanding the meaning of the image of God because of its anthropological importance (it helps in understanding humanity as a whole).⁴ This section will include a discussion on the understanding of *imago Dei* in man, the state of *imago Dei* after the fall, and the need for continual renewal to the image of Christ. It must be noted that the concept of *imago Dei* is pertinent for the research because the process of Spiritual formation is through which believers are being transformed into the perfect image of God. And the process of Spiritual formation is possible because humanity is made in the image of God who have the capacity through the Spirit and the Word to become more like Christ—the perfect image of God.

The *Imago Dei* in Man

In Genesis 1:26, the Hebrew word for “image” is “*tselem*” and the word for “likeness” is “*Demuth*.” The Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer is of the view that the two terms “*tselem*” and “*Demuth*” because of its interchangeable use in Genesis can be understood as one single entity.⁵ He further mentions that the presence of *imago Dei* in man distinguishes him from other living creatures.⁶ Humanity is a special creation of God because of the divine image that is bestowed upon him. On one hand, while there is no denying of this truth (that man is made in the image of God); however, on the other hand there is no clear mention in the Bible of how the image of God is to be understood. In his article *A Whole Approach to Interpreting Creation in God’s Image*, John Hammet summarizes

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary*, Trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 148.

² Gunnlaugar A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998), 1.

³ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 184.

⁴ John Frederic Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 12. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: W. M Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

four major approaches to understanding what it means for humans to be made in the image of God:

John Collins alliteratively calls them resemblance, representational, and relational; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and Millard Erickson use the categories of substantive, functional, and relational; and Marc Cortez prefers structural, functional, and relational, and term the fourth approach “multifaceted.”⁷

One common element in these approaches as Hammet points is the fact that “despite the differences in nomenclature, they are referring to the same basic approaches.”⁸ However, Hammet does not mention how these different approaches can be reduced to one basic idea. Some theologians are of the view that the image of God is to be simply understood as to be in “communion” with God. One such scholar is the evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer who believes that the presence of *image Dei* in man enables him the ability to enjoy communion with God.⁹ Berkouwer along the same lines as Collins sees the image of God in man as representational through which man “can find and possess his riches and glory precisely only on his dependence on and in his communion with God.”¹⁰ According to Berkouwer, humanity is able to depend and commune with God because he represents God.¹¹ Anthony Hoekema suggests that the “image of God involves both structure and function.”¹² The structural aspects (gifts, capacities, and endowments) are the means for fulfilling the functional aspects (relationship to God and others); the former being secondary and the latter being primary.¹³ Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo understands the image of God in man as

⁷ John S. Hammett, “A Whole Approach to Interpreting Creation in God’s Image,” *SWJT* 63, no. 2 (2021): 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

¹⁰ Berkouwer, *Man*, 114.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

being relational through which man can relate to God and His creation.¹⁴ G. E Ladd also understands the image of God is that which enables mankind to relate to God because he “possesses *pneuma*.”¹⁵ He bases his idea of the *imago Dei* as being spiritual and therefore man can relate with God because he has been given a soul. John F. Kilner in *Dignity and Destiny* views that the “creation in God’s image entails a special connection with God and an intended reflection of God.”¹⁶ He views humanity’s connection with God as quintessential for being able to reflect God.¹⁷ Kilner’s “connectional” aspect of the image of God seem to be in consonant with the “relational” aspect of the image of God, although Kilner adds a nuance to his view that the image of God is also reflectional (humanity reflect God). Stanley Grenz, like others argues that the image of God is primarily a relational concept.¹⁸ Hammett suggest that the biblical passages all point in support of the relational aspect of the image of God in man because “the capacity for relationships puts it very close to what may mean by a relational approach to the image of God.”¹⁹ The relational aspect of *imago Dei* enables humanity to divinely relate to God and others.

Although, every approach has their own merit and theological grounding that explains the understanding of the concept of *imago Dei*. However, the relational approach helps better understand humanity and his greatest need to first relate to God, second to relate to himself, and thirdly to relate to others. A relational view of the image of God employed in Spiritual formation would suggest that humanity have the capacity (even after the fall) to conform to God’s image by relating to God, himself, and others through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology for the Natural World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 74.

¹⁵ G. E Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 463.

¹⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸ Stanley Grenz, “Theological Foundations for Male-Female Relationships,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (1998): 620.

¹⁹ Hammett, “A Whole Approach,” 36. Our view is in support of the relational approach of the image of God because believers are best connected to God when they are in relationship with him.

The State of *Imago Dei* after the Fall

The fall had a major bearing on the image of God bestowed upon men. Kilner laments the widespread idea of the damaged image of God which he believes springs from the notion—"if people are damaged, God's image must be."²⁰ He identifies four ways how theologians and scholars from the first century church fathers to the present have viewed the state of the image of God in man after the fall: (i) The image as completely lost, (ii) The image as virtually lost, (iii) The image as partly lost, and (iv) The diminished image of God in humans (appearance compromised).²¹

It must be noted that how one views the state of *imago Dei* after the fall deeply effects one's anthropology (how humanity is to be viewed), and understanding of the nature of God's grace in the restoration of humanity from the effects of the fall. Grant R. Osborne in his commentary on *Romans* views that the image of God is completely lost. He comments:

Humanity was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), but because of Adam's sin that image was lost. Christ through his atoning sacrifice has restored that image, and in him we are conformed once more to it.²²

Osborne is of the view that the consequences of the sin of Adam had its diminishing impact that resulted in losing this image of God in humanity; the loss of the image of God is a direct result of the fall, and the work of Christ on the cross is the restorative measure to reinstate that image. Kilner argues that the Bible is silent and does not reveal whether the image of God was disoriented or distorted.²³ Anthony Hoekema also supports the view that the image of God is not lost. He provides his reasoning to his claim:

Summarizing, now, what we have learned from the Bible about the image of God, we note that from the Old Testament (*there is nothing mentioned of the damaged image of God in the Genesis account*) passages cited and from James 3:9

²⁰ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 131-138.

²² Grant R. Osborne, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 223.

²³ John F. Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 3 (2010), 615. The words in the parenthesis are mine.

(*the New Testament confirms the undamaged image of God*) it is clear that there is a very important sense in which man today, fallen man, is still a bearer of the image of God, and must therefore still be so viewed.²⁴

Hoekema supports his view by alluding to the fact that the biblical text warranting the lost image of God in man cannot be ascertained in the Old or the New Testament. However, he views the “image of God as having been tarnished through man’s fall into sin...”²⁵ This seems to be contradictory to his original claim (that the image of God is not lost). Kilner further emphasizes that Christ is the perfect image of God, and it can be logically consistent to hold the view that the image of God has not been lost. He further comments, “No image has been damaged, for God’s image is Christ—it is the standard of what God intends humanity to become. Nevertheless, sin has severely damaged people, who desperately need renewal according to the image of Christ.”²⁶ He mentions that the various texts in the New Testament like Romans 8 verse 29, 2 Corinthians 3, and Colossians 3 say nothing about the diminishing aspect of the image of God in man.²⁷ He maintains:

Sin has badly damaged people by rendering them incapable of living out God’s intention for them. God’s intention (for what the reflection should look like) has not changed due to sin, nor has the fact that people are specially connected with God. In other words, sin has not damaged what being in God’s image constitutes. Sin has damaged people, but not God’s image.²⁸

What Kilner is suggesting is that the image of God is not only undamaged (not even tarnished) but also not lost. Because Christ is the perfect image of God,²⁹ the image cannot be damaged. Thus, he is of the view that the image of God has not been affected at all in anyways. Instead, he suggests that damaged human beings are rather being

²⁴ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 31. The words in italics are mine.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 101.

²⁷ Ibid., 188–20.

²⁸ Ibid., 189.

²⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, “True Righteousness and Holiness: The Image of God in the New Testament,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 76.

restored. Believers are being renewed as they emulate Christ who is the image of God.³⁰ Hammet likewise acknowledges that the “image is still present in *man* but requires renewal *through the help of God*.”³¹ He says,

Scripture uses the language of renewal and transformation with reference to the image of God in us; something must be present to be renewed and transformed. God can breathe new life into those spiritually dead; he can reactivate the spirit left dead by the ravages of sin. The fall had a horrific impact, but it doesn't not change our status as created in the image of God.³²

From Hammett's statement, it can be implied that there can be no restoration of the image of God in humanity if the image is lost. The image of God affected by the fall needs renewal (the image of God still presents in man), and this renewal ought to take place in humanity's relationship with God.³³ Sin has marred the relational aspect of humanity with God and therefore imitating Christ enables the recovery of this relational aspect.

Continual Renewal to the Image of Christ

Romans 8:29 highlights the idea that believers are “destined from his conversion onward to ‘conform’ to Christ's pattern of suffering followed by glory.”³⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18 implies the notion that “believers’ continual, Spirit-empowered encounter with God in the gospel would transform their hearts to reflect his image and glory.”³⁵ Similarly Colossians 3:10 speaks of “the life and power of Christ within is thus being constantly renewed, as the Christlikeness is being reproduced

³⁰ Steven Hultgren, “The Origin of Paul's Doctrine of the Two Adams in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25, no. 3 (2003): 367.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 39.

³³ Hammet says, “Fallen people today do not live out a positive relationship with God, but they have not lost the capacity for such a relationship (39).”

³⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 534.

³⁵ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170.

more and more in the believer's life."³⁶ One common theme found in these three verses is the theme of continual and ongoing process of transformation until believers are conformed to the perfect image of Christ. Hammet mentions that the renewal texts,

Found in Pauline letters (Rm. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10; and Eph. 4:24)... speak of the image of God in humans as something dynamic. It is something renewed in believers in conversion (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24), something into which believers are now being increasingly transformed (2 Cor. 3:18), and something to which believers will one day be perfectly conformed (Rm. 8:29).³⁷

The implication made from the statement above is that until believers are conformed to the image of Jesus, transformation is a continuous and lifelong process. And "it is only until the time of the final glorification of man that the renewal of the image of God will be brought to completion."³⁸ The perfect transformation will only take place when Christ returns. Hoekema has observed that:

From the other New Testament passages consulted, however, we have learned that there is a sense in which fallen man needs more and more to be restored to the image of God—a restoration that is now in progress but will someday be completed. We must still see fallen man as an image-bearer of God who by nature, apart from the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, images God in a distorted way. In the process of redemption that distortion is progressively taken away, in the life to come, we shall again perfectly image God.³⁹

What Hoekema is suggesting is that believers as a result of the fall remain ever in need to be restored to the image of Christ. After the fall the "image of God stands before us in the contexts of guilt and restoration, of being lost and being found."⁴⁰ God is working in the lives of believers to renew them to the image of Christ. This constant

³⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 146.

³⁷ Hammet, *A Whole Approach*, 34.

³⁸ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21–32.

⁴⁰ Berkouwer, *Man*, 117.

transformation and renewal are a lifelong process which will only see perfection at the time of resurrection. However, until that day comes, believers in active relationship with the Holy Spirit ought to continuously strive for transformation by putting on Christlike attitudes and characters.⁴¹

The image of God in humanity is not destroyed. However, the relationship between God and humanity is affected due to sin. The latter stands in active opposition against the will of the former, and is in desperate need of God's grace who by submitting to the Holy Spirit (the initiating agent that facilitates and produces Christlikeness) can experience transformation. How believers "decisively put off the old self" and "put on the new self" by working with the Holy Spirit determines how the progress of conforming to the image of Christ is taking place. In other words, since the goal of every believer is to conform to the image of Christ, a process that continues until Christ returns, it becomes necessary for believers to identify how the process of transformation must take place. In simple words, the process of spiritual formation

Spiritual Formation

One of the significant movements in the history of Christianity is the Spiritual formation which began to gain prominence in the late twentieth century. As spiritual formation is defined by its practices, it is difficult to define it precisely. Christian spirituality compared to other religious spirituality is unique because the aim of Christian spirituality is projected towards Christ—to imitate the Lord and savior Jesus as Paul mentions in his letter to the church of Ephesus.⁴² With this understanding, the following section will discuss the definition of Spiritual formation, the process and telos of Spiritual formation, and the rationale of the three aspects for determining the effectiveness of Spiritual formational approaches.

⁴¹ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 108. The words in italics are mine.

⁴² Eph. 5:1.

Towards a Definition of Spiritual Formation

Kenneth Boa sees Spiritual formation as a direct outcome of “faith and obedience” in Christ.⁴³ He defines spiritual life “as an all-encompassing, lifelong response to God’s gracious initiatives in the lives of those whose trust is centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ Boa’s concept of spiritual formation implies a continual faith-relationship with Christ marked by lifelong obedience to Christ. Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as “(1) a process (2) of being formed (3) in the image of God (4) for the sake of others.”⁴⁵ He understands Spiritual formation to be a “process.” John M. Dettoni views spiritual formation as “an intentional, multifaceted process which promotes the transformation by which Christ is formed in us so that we can become His continually maturing disciples.”⁴⁶ He focusses on intentionality which for him is necessary for becoming more like Christ. Dallas Willard sees spiritual formation as “the process through which those who love and trust Jesus Christ effectively take on his character.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere, he says that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁴⁸ Willard along the same lines with Mulholland gives importance to the “process” of spiritual formation. Evan B. Howard sees Christian Spiritual formation as a “spirit-and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God.”⁴⁹ His definition

⁴³ Kenneth D. Boa. *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19.

⁴⁴ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 19.

⁴⁵ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), pt. 1, “The Road Map: The Nature of Spiritual Formation,” para. 3. Kindle.

⁴⁶ John M. Dettoni, “What is Spiritual Formation,” in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Bake Books, 1994), 16.

⁴⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teaching on Discipleship* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 80.

⁴⁸ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 22.

⁴⁹ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scriptures, Spirit, Community, and Missions Shape our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 18.

implies that the outcome of relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human agent brings about maturity in the life of the believer. A definition of Spiritual formation by Wesley D. Tracy et. al., found in *The Upward call* need to be applauded for its extensiveness and inclusiveness. It says that Spiritual formation is “the whole person in relationship with God, within the community of believers, growing in Christlikeness, reflected in a Spirit-directed, disciplined lifestyle, and demonstrated in redemptive action in our world.”⁵⁰

The first inference that can be drawn from the definitions above on spiritual formation is that the process of Spiritual formation takes place within the Christian community. The second inference is that the Spiritual formation process is led by the Holy Spirit which leads to Christlikeness. The third inference is that the role of the human agent is seen as pivotal in the Spiritual formation process. The believer’s continual transformation is projected towards becoming more like Christ or simply being transformed into the image of God (2 Cor 3:18). Spiritual formation therefore can simply mean to be *a process of being transformed continually to the image of God through the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, the submissive attitude of the human agent to the Lordship of Jesus, and the restorative power of God that takes place in the context of Christian community.*⁵¹

The Process and the Telos of Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation for every believer ought to be projected towards becoming Christlike daily. This is the telos of Spiritual formation. It is a continuous and gradual process—with the one and only goal of being conformed to the image of Christ. Hoekema emphasizes that the “renewal in the image of God, in other words, is not just an indicative; it is also an imperative.”⁵² Therefore, believers ought to be in mind that the process of renewal to the image of God—the telos of

⁵⁰ Wesley D. Tracy et. al, *The Upward Call: Spiritual Formation and the Holy Life* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 12.

⁵¹ We believe that the process of Spiritual formation must take a *trinitarian* approach. A trinitarian approach of Spiritual formation considers the works of the three persons of the trinity—how each person works individually and corporately in bringing transformation in the life of the believers. The Holy Spirit brings regeneration as the believer trusts in the restorative power of God through the act of submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ for salvation.

⁵² Hoekema, *Created in His Image*, 28.

Christian formation—is a command that believers have to seek to achieve with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is not an optional add-on in Christian life. Hoekema also contends that every believer's goal or purpose is to be conformed to the image of the Son—and therefore to the image of God.⁵³ In other words, every believer ought to become Christlike in all aspects of life. Diane Chandler sees Christian Spiritual formation as a “process of being restored to the image of God through Jesus Christ in its multidimensionality by the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁴ The telos of Spiritual formation is transformation and renewal in all spheres of life through which believers can conform to the image of Christ. Hence as Chandler suggest, the spirit, emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, physical health and wellness, and resource stewardship are different dimensions where the restoration process of being conformed to the image of God takes place.⁵⁵ Mulholland also views the telos of Spiritual formation as projected towards conformation to the image of Christ, which he describes it as a journey.⁵⁶

The “putting on Christ” mentioned by Paul in Colossians 3 suggest that Spiritual formation is a continuous process. Believers put on Christ in relationship with Christ by participating with the Holy Spirit through obedience. It is a process “through which those who love and trust Jesus Christ effectively take on his character.”⁵⁷ The telos of Spiritual formation—to be conformed to the image of Christ—cannot be achieved by a believer without a desire for life transformation between now and then until Christ returns. As James Wilhoit mentions that,

Christian Spiritual formation requires that we actively and continually receive from God. We need to be extraordinary consumers of his grace; we need to receive his words of love and correction, his forgiveness, his

⁵³ Hoekema, *Created in His Image*, 23.

⁵⁴ Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁶ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 25.

⁵⁷ Dallas Willard, “The Spirit is Willing: The Body as a Tool for Spiritual Growth,” in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Bake Books, 1994), 225.

affirmation, his life, and list goes on. Without receiving from God there is no true freedom.⁵⁸

What Wilhoit is implying is that Spiritual formation is dynamic and not static. Believers are to zealously by the grace of God seek to desire the things that are eternal through the help of the working of the Spirit. Believers ought to be active participants in the Spiritual formation process. However, it must be noted that this process is initiated by God through the working of the Holy Spirit. “Jesus does not participate in our nature but we in His, since He is the Elected one of God.”⁵⁹ Christ is being formed in believers as they desire God’s will for their lives. As Maddix puts it, “we cannot ‘conform ourselves’ to the image of Christ, but God is the one who conforms and transforms us by the power of the Spirit.”⁶⁰ Chandler in her definition of Christian Spiritual Formation says that “CSF is defined as an interactive process by which God the Father fashions believers into the image of his Son, Jesus, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit...”⁶¹ While she suggests Spiritual formation as an interactive process, she strongly suggests the idea of God’s active work in fashioning the believers into the image of the Son. She believes that the “goal of this process is to become more like Jesus in all life dimensions (Rom 8:29; Eph 4:15).”⁶² Finally she emphasizes that Spiritual formation is not the end itself for the individual believer but a means through which God’s love is projected love to others.⁶³ Christian spiritual formation must therefore extend to the Christian community and beyond through which believers can obey the command of Jesus—to love others.

⁵⁸ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 77.

⁵⁹ Berkouwer, *Man*, 96.

⁶⁰ Mark A. Maddix, “Spiritual Formation and Christian Formation”, In *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development*, ed. James R. Estep and Jonathan H. Kim (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), Chap. 8, “Toward a Definition of Spiritual Formation,” para. 2, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶¹ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71.

A Brief Sketch of Four Different Approaches to Spiritual Formation

In this section four approaches to Spiritual formation will be introduced.⁶⁴ The purpose of introducing these four approaches will serve as the basis for analysis, examination, and critique (of the four approaches to Spiritual formation) in the later part of the paper. It can be said that though the four approaches overlap with one another in its approach, yet they are distinct in how they appropriate the work of the Holy Spirit, the responsibility of the human agent, and the role of the Christian community in the Spiritual formational process.

A Multi-dimensional Integrated Approach to Spiritual Formation

In *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness*, Chandler takes up the task to “present an integrated approach to Christian spiritual formation in seven dimensions reflecting holistic integration.”⁶⁵ Chandler argues that a comprehensive transformation considers the seven synergistic dimensions of human life that lead to the restoration of humanity into the image of God. Chandler acknowledges the importance of Christ and his atoning sacrifice as the primary medium through which the restoration process of a believer can begin. She goes on to assert that “the wise stewardship of these seven God-given human dimensions through grace, we both reflect the imago Dei through godly character and ethical living, and give God glory in the process.”⁶⁶ The Spiritual dimension according to her is the most vital aspect of the seventh dimension and provides a grounding for other six dimensions of human life.⁶⁷ Each aspect of the formation seems to be intricately woven with one another and exists because of the other dimensions. She points to right praxis of theology for right living and grounds her framework on the theme of love. The seven dimensions of Chandler’s spiritual information is rooted in the highest call for

⁶⁴ The four approaches are: Diane Chandler’s *A Multi-Dimensional Integrated Approach to Spiritual Formation*; Kenneth Boa’s *A Multi-Faceted Comprehensive Approach to Spiritual Formation*; Evan B. Howard’s *A Communal and Missional Approach to Spiritual Formation*; and Dallas Willard’s *The Transformation of Spirit as an Approach to Spiritual Formation*.

⁶⁵ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 17. The seven dimensions are: (1) spirit, (2) emotions, (3) relationships, (4) intellect, (5) vocation, (6) physical health and wellness, and (7) resource stewardship.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Christians to live the second double love command—to love others.

A Multi-faceted Comprehensive Approach to Spiritual Formation

In *Conformed to His Image*, Kenneth Boa offers a “more comprehensive, balanced, and applicable approach to what it means to know Christ.”⁶⁸ He proposes an *all-inclusive* approach to spiritual formation that considers “not one or two but a variety of pathways in the spiritual life and showing how each of these pathways can contribute to the dynamic process of spiritual growth.”⁶⁹

Boa suggests that the formation in all the twelve aspects of Spirituality provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to faith formation. Boa sees spiritual formation as a process of journey with Christ “that begins with the gift of forgiveness and life in Christ and progresses through faith and obedience.”⁷⁰ This journey with Christ can be fruitfully completed through *intimacy* with Christ; *fidelity* in the spiritual disciplines; a biblical *perspective* on the circumstances of life; a *teachable*, responsive, humble, and obedient spirit; a clear sense of personal *purpose* and calling; healthy *relationships* with resourceful people; and *ongoing* ministry investment in the lives of others.⁷¹

A Communal and Missional Approach to Spiritual Formation

Evan B. Howard in *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* presents a clear guide approach to Spiritual formation. Howard contends that the Scripture, Spirit, community, and mission are four essentials that contribute to the development of the believers’ souls. He presents “Christian spiritual formation with community and mission at its center.”⁷² He also believes that “our formation as individuals and our formation as groups of people are deeply interwoven. Who we are is, to a large extent, who we are together.”⁷³ Thus Howard focusses on the

⁶⁸ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 21.

⁶⁹ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 22. These twelve pathways are: relational spirituality, paradigm spirituality, disciplines spirituality, exchanged life spirituality, motivated spirituality, devotional spirituality, holistic spirituality, process spirituality, spirit-filled spirituality, warfare spirituality, nurturing spirituality, and corporate spirituality.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 451.

⁷² Howard, preface to *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, viii.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 152.

importance of the Church and its mission as an integral part of the Spiritual formation process. Howard asserts,

As we engage in the task of formation, we find ourselves being formed: in our relationship with God through prayer; in our life together; in our thinking, feeling, and choices; and in our relationship with the world through a life of mission.⁷⁴

What Howard is saying is that through the continuous engagement of the various task of Spiritual formation, the gradual life change takes place in a believer's personal relationship with God, in the transformation of the entire self, and in relationship among believers. According to Howard, Christian spiritual formation requires everything essential that helps the Spiritual formation of the believer.

The Transformation of Spirit as an Approach to Spiritual Formation

In *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard offers a process of Spiritual formation through the "renovation of the heart." He hinges his idea on the logic that because "our spiritual dimension has been formed, so it also can be transformed."⁷⁵ Willard says that

Christian spiritual formation is focused entirely on Jesus. Its goal is an obedience or conformity to Christ that arises out of an inner transformation accomplished through purposive interaction with the grace of God in Christ. Obedience is an outcome of Christian spiritual formation (John 12:34–35; 14:21). External manifestation of "Christlikeness" is not, however, the focus of process; and when it is made the main emphasis, the process will certain be defeated. The instrumentalities of Christian spiritual formation therefore involve much more than human effort and actions under our control.⁷⁶

According to Willard, Spiritual formation springs from the inner transformation as one walks with Jesus out of which results a natural desire to obedience. Therefore, spiritual formation is a not simply a set of instructions to follow in order to obtain its goal. Because "the revolution

⁷⁴ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 244–45.

⁷⁵ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit.”⁷⁷

According to Willard, spiritual formation takes place first by a relationship with Jesus which has its revolutionizing impact that affects every dimension and aspects of human character—one that penetrates the heart or the spirit.⁷⁸ What we become “within” is the spiritual arena where the Spiritual formation takes place, contends Willard. Willard suggests that the heart or the Spirit is what needs restoration. Willards also suggest that all the six aspects of human nature (thought, feeling, choice, body, social context, and soul) ought to be restored for a holistic approach to Spiritual formation.⁷⁹

Rationale for Evaluating Approaches of Spiritual Formation Based on Three Identified Aspects

To ascertain the reliability and the validity, every approach has some criteria for its qualification and for the purpose of this research we have identified three aspects as the criteria based on which these approaches will be examined. The three aspects are:

- (i) The quintessential work of the Holy Spirit
- (ii) The responsibility of the human agent
- (iii) The indispensability of the role of Christian community

The Quintessential Work of the Holy Spirit

One of the reasons why humanity can relate to God is because we have a soul. Therefore, Maddix claims that “Christian spirituality refers to those who are living by the presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Triune God.”⁸⁰ Hoekema mentions that “we are being enabled by the Spirit to image God more and more adequately; some day we shall image God perfectly.”⁸¹ Along the same lines, Wilhoit mentions that “all persons are being shaped spiritually: their heart or spirit (the core of their being) is undergoing formation.”⁸² Maddix,

⁷⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 15.

⁷⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 15.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 30–31.

⁸⁰ Maddix, *Spiritual Formation and Christian Formation*, chap. 8, sec. 1, para. 1.

⁸¹ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 28.

⁸² Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the church mattered*, 35.

Wilhoit, and Hoekema sees the role of the Holy Spirit in the transformation process as quintessential. Without the Holy Spirit, there can be no Spiritual formation. Willard describes the universal nature of formation as “a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admired of person have a spiritual formation. Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed.”⁸³ Our spirits cannot be formed by the material things of the world because the spirit is immaterial. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit is quintessential for Spiritual formation in the life of a believer. Because the “filling of the Spirit, like any other benefit of salvation, is all of grace.”⁸⁴ Therefore, the grace that the Spirit freely gives empowers believers to grow spiritually as they daily submit to the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit enables a believer to walk by the Spirit and helps the person to set the mind on Christ and on the things that have eternal perspective. Since personal growth in Christ cannot be measured; therefore, a believer's obedience (desiring the things of the Spirit) to the leading of the Spirit is a sign of knowing the active working of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ The Spirit's work enables believers to do everything that Christ has commanded them to do. As Dwight Pentecost rightly asserts that the Holy Spirit empowers in fulfilling the “obligation placed by God on every believer” without which it is impossible to obey Jesus' command.⁸⁶ Michael Wilkins views the work of the Spirit as the One who instructs how believers are to conduct and demonstrate themselves in the community.⁸⁷ It means that without the work of the Holy Spirit, believers cannot have the ability to live in relation with other people in the community. Leroy Eims identifies the Spirit's work in enabling believers to minister and to make right application of God's Word.⁸⁸ The

⁸³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 19.

⁸⁴ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1998), 111.

⁸⁵ We believe that human obedience to the Spirit's call is also the act of the Spirit that enables him to do so. Humans can only respond with faithfulness and obedience.

⁸⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 124.

⁸⁷ Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 270.

⁸⁸ Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 45–46.

work of the Holy Spirit is countless, its role in the Spiritual formation cannot be overemphasized. The Holy Spirit empowers believers to live faithfully and to imitate Jesus daily.

The Responsibility of the Human Agent

Paul teaches believers that Christian living is possible when two things work synchronously side by side: the power of God and human responsibility.⁸⁹ Wilkins says that “the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ is one in which we learn to balance the work of the Spirit of God with our own obedience.”⁹⁰ Believers have an essential role in the Spiritual formation process because “we must constantly and continuously develop to become full-grown disciples.”⁹¹ This role is seen in the believer’s obedience to the call of Jesus and *doing* what the master says. Bonhoeffer believes that by means of obedience “Jesus calls people into an actual situation where faith is possible.”⁹² The role of the human agent in the Spiritual formation is hinged in obedience. Hoekema also suggests that humanity’s responsibility to the process of the “renewal in the image of God is not just an indicative; it is also an imperative.”⁹³ Based on Bonhoeffer and Hoekema, Spiritual formation can take place through “imperative obedience” on the part of the human agent. The responsibility of man to work with the Holy Spirit in the renewal process cannot be overemphasized. Because “it is through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in and through us, and through our response to the Spirit, that we are brought closer to the likeness of Christ.”⁹⁴ Human responsibility consequently plays a major role in spiritual formation.

Susanne Johnson identifies human responsibility in Spiritual formation with faithfulness. She says that “our participation is measured

⁸⁹ Phil 2:12–13.

⁹⁰ Michael Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 56.

⁹¹ James E. Carter, *Following Jesus: The Nature of Christian Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1977), 16.

⁹² Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 83.

⁹³ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 28.

⁹⁴ Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebsteyne King, Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 44.

by faithfulness, not effectiveness as determined by cultural standards.”⁹⁵ The faithfulness to obeying everything Jesus has commanded believers to do brings Spiritual formation. Richard Foster observes that “spiritual formation does not occur by direct human effort, but through a relational process whereby we receive from God the power or ability to do what we cannot do by our own effort. We do not produce the outcome. That is God’s business.”⁹⁶ Therefore, through obedience and faithfulness, a believer participates with God as the divine shapes and molds the finite human to become more Christlike.

Wilhoit views that the “imitation of Christ is a means of addressing some of the most basic struggles we face as humans.”⁹⁷ He summarizes E. J Tinsley’s idea about what true imitation in Christ is about,

True imitation respects the tension between reality that the Holy Spirit ultimately brings about our imitation through conforming us to Christ’ likeness and the reality that we must *work hard* and carefully at imitating Christ by adopting his lifestyle and patterns of life.⁹⁸

What Wilhoit is emphasizing is that humanity’s true imitation of Christ consists not only a spiritual aspect but also a physical aspect. Through the literal imitation of Jesus’ lifestyle, the Holy Spirit works to conform the individual to the image of Christ. The “*work hard*” is the aspect of human responsibility. The theology of human embodiment supports the view that sanctification comes through the stewardship of the bodily and spiritual disciplines.⁹⁹ The spiritual disciplines along with bodily disciplines through the help of the Spirit brings an all-round Spiritual formation. Willard emphasizes the importance of role of human agent in learning to become Christlike through bodily discipline which

⁹⁵ Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 51.

⁹⁶ Richard Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 155.

⁹⁷ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church mattered*, 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 44. The italicized word is not original. It is italicized to show its emphasis.

⁹⁹ For a discussion on Human Embodiment See Greg Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 2021; Sam Allberry, *What God Has to Say About Our Bodies: How the Gospel Is Good News For Our Physical Bodies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

he views it as an “active engagement with and in God, *acting* with our bodies.”¹⁰⁰ Spiritual formation is therefore contingent on the role of the human agent who ought to actively choose to live like Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Downs mentions that “we are responsible to teach, and to teach well. We must work at the educational process and work hard to teach to the best of our ability.”¹⁰¹ Human responsibility for Downs comes in the form of stewardship of teaching for Spiritual formation thorough the area of education.

The Indispensability of the Role of Christian Community

One of the greatest dangers faced by the church today is the “myth of the individual victorious Christian life.”¹⁰² Therefore, Francis Schaffer is right to mention that “Christianity is an individual thing, but it is not *only* an individual thing. There is to be true community, offering true spiritual and material help to each other.”¹⁰³ Spiritual formation cannot be achieved through individual efforts, but it can rather be wholly achieved through the coming together of believers in the Spirit for the single-minded pursuit of worshipping the true and living King. Hoekema captures the essence of the importance of Christian community by asserting that “the renewal of the image of God is seen in its richest form in the church.”¹⁰⁴ The Church is the community of believers through which believers can find restoration as they participate through discipleship in helping one another to grow mature in their knowledge of Christ and seek to love him corporately. Chandler asserts that “Spiritual formation is neither to be an exclusive nor solo endeavor for one’s own personal maturation process, but rather it is to be the means of extending the love of God to others in the world.”¹⁰⁵ Colin Gunton asserts, “To be human is to be created in and for relationship with divine

¹⁰⁰ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 200.

¹⁰² Ross Snyder, *Introduction to Robert Wood, A Thirty-Day Experiment in Prayer* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1978), 7.

¹⁰³ Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality: How to Live for Jesus Moment by Moment* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), 176.

¹⁰⁴ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 95.

¹⁰⁵ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 71.

and human others,” which is the life and the soul of humanity.¹⁰⁶ Based on Chandler and Gunton’s statements, it can be understood that the process of Spiritual formation cannot take place in isolation because of the inherent divine relational aspect of the image of God in man. It must rather take place in the context of Christian community where God’s love can be manifested to others.

It is only in the framework of Christian community that the mandate to love one another can be realized. When believers’ lives are woven in a community through their love for God and their love for one another, Spiritual formation takes place. Jack O. Balswick and others say, “To bear the image of God is to live in reciprocating relationships with God and our fellow human beings.”¹⁰⁷ When believers gather together as a community to worship the true and the living king, only then they are able to live in “reciprocating relationship” with one another. Perry G. Downs rightly asserts that “Spiritual growth takes place in *Christian* community as the body of Christ ministers to itself and builds itself up by means of the gifts of the Spirit.”¹⁰⁸ The gathering of the church community through which Christian relationships are beautifully interwoven provides an environment where Spiritual formation can thrive personally as well as corporately.

The process of Spiritual formation cannot happen in isolation, it must be done within the context of community. Paul D. G Bramer emphasizes that “the formational objective in community is that members bond and interact so that relationships are facilitated, needs are met, and there is mutual encouragement and edification through shared worship, learning, ministry, governance, and the common concerns of daily life (Eph. 4:16; Col. 3:13-17).”¹⁰⁹ Paul Wells emphasizes that in the New Testament “the image and its restoration are invariably

¹⁰⁶ Colin E. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 222.

¹⁰⁷ Balswick, *The Reciprocating Self*, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 199. The italicized word is mine.

¹⁰⁹ Paul D. G Bramer, “Christian Formation: Tweaking the Paradigm,” *CEJ* 3, no. 2 (2007), 360.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323776178_Christian_Formation_Tweaking_the_Paradigm.

associated with Christ and the new community he introduces.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, it can be understood that Church community is integral in restoring and facilitating believers to conform to the image of Christ. Wilhoit points out that “we often misread this image as being just about ‘me abiding in Jesus’ when the actual image and language have a strong community focus; when the branches are connected to the vine, a marvelous crop of grapes is produced.”¹¹¹ Because of the image of God present in man, believers relate to one another within the Christian community—out of which creates an environment for Spiritual formation to flourish. Maddix beautifully explains how Spiritual formation takes place in a community. He says,

This transformation takes places as humans participate in avenues of God’s grace such as worship, prayer, Bible study, communion, and acts of service provide a “channel” for participation and communion with the Triune Good. Finally, Spiritual formation takes place as humans care for “selves,” relate to other in Christian community, and serve others.¹¹²

Spiritual formation as Maddix points can powerfully take place in the community of the body of believers. The process of Christian Spiritual formation cannot overlook the important element of the Christian community. Therefore, “Spiritual transformation must extend beyond the individual to the church, the family, and society.”¹¹³ Because, “the relational life of the triune God is not represented *within* ourselves but *among* ourselves.”¹¹⁴ “Spiritual formation takes place in community and the community in which it should take place is that of the church,” says Wilhoit.¹¹⁵ The Church is the Christian community where believers can help one another to be formed spiritually through the corporate practice of Church liturgy.

¹¹⁰ Paul Wells, “In Search of the Image of God: Theology of a Lost Paradigm,” *Themelios* 30, no.1 (2004). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/in-search-of-the-image-of-god-theology-of-a-lost-paradigm/>

¹¹¹ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church mattered*, 19–20.

¹¹² Maddix, *Spiritual Formation as Christian Formation*, chap.8, sec. 1, para. 11.

¹¹³ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church mattered*, 23.

¹¹⁴ Balswick, *The Reciprocating Self*, 45.

¹¹⁵ Ruth Haley Barton et. al, “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7, no. 2 (2014), 295. <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.aaron.swbts.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=10&sid=6199a0fa-c77c-40e7-84d9-4d4a97b7e784%40redis>

Evaluation of Four Different Approaches to Spiritual Formation

To evaluate the four approaches of Spiritual formation,¹¹⁶ we have put forward three aspects that are deemed crucial for Spiritual formation that leads to Christlikeness. The three aspects are (1) How is the role of the Holy Spirit portrayed in these four approaches? (2) To what extent is the responsibility of the human agent emphasized in these four approaches? (3) Has importance been given to the context of Church community for nurturing Spiritual formation in these four approaches? The goal of this section is to appreciate the strengths and identify the weaknesses of each of the approaches of Spiritual formation.

Evaluating The Role of the Holy Spirit

Chandler's approach emphasizes the foundational work of the Holy Spirit as vital to the process of Spiritual formation. She says that "the primary impetus for spiritual formation is the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁷ She also sees the transformational works that the Holy Spirit brings in the lives of believers.¹¹⁸ However she finds herself contradicting when she says the "spiritual practices become doorways for the Spirit to work deeply in the human heart, drawing us further into worship by way of a reciprocal love relationship."¹¹⁹ Thus, she passively limits the work of the Spirit to the status of a secondary agent who works towards the Spiritual formation of a believer. Hence, she does not appropriately bestow the proper role of the Spirit in the Spiritual formation process.

Boa along the same lines as Chandler acknowledges the role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual formation as being "central" and "dynamic."¹²⁰ He sees a twelve-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer.¹²¹ Boa laments the limiting of the working power of the Holy Spirit and mentions that the dangers of limiting the Spirit's work results in limited

¹¹⁶ The four approaches of Spiritual formation are mentioned under the subheading "A Brief Sketch of Four Different Approaches of Spiritual Formation."

¹¹⁷ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 71.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²⁰ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 292.

¹²¹ The twelve roles of the Holy Spirit mentioned by Boa are: *convincing, regenerating, baptizing, sealing, indwelling, filling, empowering, assuring, illuminating, teaching, praying, and gifting.*

experience of the power of God.¹²² While Boa gives much importance to the work of the Holy Spirit for Spiritual formation, however, he falls into the same danger of confining the Spirit's work to two fold—the *inward work* and the *outer work*.¹²³ Such a classification of the work of the Holy Spirit is not wrong but it tends to constrict the work of the Holy Spirit.

For Willard, the role of the Holy Spirit is that of an interlocutor whose “interactive presence” contributes to the spiritual formation of a believer.¹²⁴ He sees Spiritual formation as a “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self...”¹²⁵ While Willard views the role of the Holy Spirit as being vital in Spiritual formation, he does not seem to make clear the work of the Spirit as Chandler and Boa. This is problematic because it only promotes a mystical role of the Holy Spirit and limits the Spirit's essentiality in the Spiritual formational process. Without clearly formulating the role of the Holy Spirit, Willard runs contrary to his disagreement that “Spiritual formation in Christ is not a mysterious, irrational—possible hysterical process.”¹²⁶

Howard sees the role of the Holy Spirit as the “key to the maintenance of relationship with God and formation into conformity with Christ's life and purposes.”¹²⁷ He sees Spiritual formation as an “ever-deepening relationship to the Spirit of Christ” and “learning to walk in the Spirit—in all areas of life.”¹²⁸ Howard seems to attribute the role of the Spirit in Spiritual formation as the One who introduces and fosters a relationship with the believer. This relational role of the Spirit mentioned by Howard is central as it emphasizes the relational aspect of the image of God through which believers are able to relate to God and to others. Howard further mentions that the Holy Spirit is the agent of Spiritual formation who reveals truth, brings moral renewal, fosters relationships, empowers the believers for missions, and leads and guides the believers in worship.¹²⁹ Howard thus seem to appropriate a comprehensive role of the Holy Spirit that is focused on relationships—with God the father, God the Son, and others.

¹²² Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 294–95.

¹²³ *Ibid.* *Image*, 299.

¹²⁴ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²⁷ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Life*, 71–2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

Evaluating the Responsibility of the Human Agent

Chandler observes that the process of Spiritual formation is “interactive, meaning that although it is overseen by the Holy Spirit, spiritual formation requires our cooperation and intention for maximum effect (Phil 2:12).”¹³⁰ She further mentions that the process of Spiritual formation is “grace-based”—“by continually receiving God’s grace, we are able to embrace God’s work in us and surrender to the multiple ways chosen to accomplish this conforming work (Rom 5:2; Jas 4:6).”¹³¹ Chandler also believes that humanity’s free will must participate with God’s grace through which spiritual formation is “dynamically activated.”¹³² Human stewardship working alongside with God’s grace, according to her brings glory to God. She envisions a vital role of human responsibility which together with the grace of God enables believers to “reflect the *imago Dei*...and give God glory in the process.”¹³³ This is seen prevalent in her statement—“Pursuing God through Spiritual passion and obedience remains the barometer of the spiritual life (Jn 14:23-24; 15:10; 1 Jn 5:3).”¹³⁴ Her view of human responsibility is simply stewardship that is motivated by the grace of God through which Spiritual formation takes place. Chandler validates the importance of the responsibility of the human agent, a process first initiated by the grace of God through which the active process of transformation can take place effectively.

Boa acknowledges that biblical spirituality advances through “faith and obedience.”¹³⁵ He further says that biblical spirituality “is based on a present relationship, it is a journey with Christ rather than a journey to Christ.”¹³⁶ What this implies is that human responsibility in the Spiritual formation process for Boa is crucial as believers constantly abide in Jesus until he “brings us into complete conformity with himself.”¹³⁷ He argues that “the biblical balance is that the spiritual life is both human and

¹³⁰ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 70.

¹³¹ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 70.

¹³² Ibid., 71–72.

¹³³ Ibid., 17.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁵ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 19.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 20.

divine.”¹³⁸ For him, the total dependence on the Spirit’s work and the active yielding of the human will to the Spirit’s desire are two ways in which human responsibility becomes central to the process of Spiritual formation.¹³⁹ While Boa sees human responsibility as being dependent on Spirit’s dependence, he seems to overstress the role of the human agent as seen in his statement: “The Bible comes alive when its percepts are put into practice, but this does not happen apart from human choice. We must choose to have our mind and emotions guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.” He needs to appropriate the proper role of the human agent otherwise Spiritual formation will no more be grace-based (as Chandler’s) but rather a work-based process.

Willard views the role of the human agent as one of the instruments of Spiritual formation because “well-informed human effort certainly is indispensable, for spiritual formation is no passive process.”¹⁴⁰ However, he cautions that “Christlikeness of the inner being is not a human attainment. It is finally a gift of grace.”¹⁴¹ He thinks in the same lines with Boa that Spiritual formation comes “from the interactive presence of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴² He also sees Spiritual formation as “a gift of grace,”¹⁴³ an idea similar with that of Chandler’s ‘grace-based’ spiritual formation. Willard does not undermine the role of the human agent in the Spiritual formation process. He believes that Spiritual formation “is something we human beings can and must undertake...it is also something we are responsible for before God and can set about achieving in a sensible, systematic manner.”¹⁴⁴ Willard can be appreciated for making Spiritual formation practical because of the God-given ability to choose freely. At the same time, Willard seems to be in danger of making the process of Spiritual formation too practical to the point of stripping off its spiritual aspects of the process.

Howard views Christian spirituality as “being both Spirit- and human-led.”¹⁴⁵ He believes that “we ourselves play distinct roles in our

¹³⁸ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 75.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁴⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 17.

own formation as Christians.”¹⁴⁶ Howard gives due importance to the role of human agents in Spiritual formation. Furthermore, he emphasizes that we ought to “learn to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.” Howard provides two separate roles of the self in the Spiritual formation—(i) “First our role in our own formation us to see with the eyes of faith and to act—even aggressively—into that sight...It is a life-changing reorientation toward the truth of the gospel”¹⁴⁷ (ii) “Second, regarding the agency of the Holy Spirit, our role in spiritual formation is to attend to the active presence of the Holy Spirit and to respond. We fulfill our role with regard to the leading of the Spirit when we are most carefully attending and most radically obeying.”¹⁴⁸ The first role of the self seems to imply that the role of the human agent plays a huge role in Spiritual formation by “aggressively” responding to faith. The second role of the self in Spiritual formation is contingent on obedience of the human agent through which the leading of the Holy Spirit takes place. Howard can be appreciated for emphasizing the essential role of the human agent who walks in the spirit by literally obeying the Spirit’s will and actively responding to the truth of the Gospel. However, he seems to overlook the “grace-based” process of Spiritual formation that Chandler emphasizes through which human stewardship in the Spiritual formation process should be guided.

Evaluating the Indispensability of the Role of Christian Community

Chandler gives high emphasis on the community as being indispensable for Spiritual formation. She says that “by observing, interacting with, and imitating others, we learn about God through relationships that intertwine with spiritual, emotional, and intellectual holistic dimensions. Thus, relational formation is the glue that binds together our formation in Christ.”¹⁴⁹ What she is simply saying is that the comprehensive approach to spiritual formation cannot be achieved without social relationships. She bases her justification for keeping a high view of social relationship on the relational concept of the *imago dei*—(God is relational and therefore we who have been created in his

¹⁴⁶ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴⁹ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 107.

image reflect this relational nature).¹⁵⁰ While Chandler does not undermine the significance of Christian community for Spiritual formation, and although she does not implicitly say so, she seems to give more importance to the community as a whole rather than the Christian community for Spiritual formation.¹⁵¹ She says, “God uses community as a ‘means of grace’ to nurture faith, spirituality and moral practices within the Christian faith.”¹⁵² God undoubtedly uses the community (the world) for the sanctification of the Christians. However, “the Christian life is best lived in community where worship, fellowship, small groups, and services are practiced.”¹⁵³ Spiritual formation must be primarily consigned within the context of the Christian community (Church) through which believers are formed into the image of Christ as they relate with God and with one another.

Boa sees the indispensable role of the Christian community when he says, “we come to faith as individuals, but we grow in community.”¹⁵⁴ He believes that the image of God in believers enables them to live in community with God and other believers; only those who are identified in Christ can be identified with “the community of faith.”¹⁵⁵ While Boa does not say so outrightly, he identifies the active formation of the Spirit within the community of believers. As a matter of fact, he emphasizes that “spirituality does not flourish in isolation.”¹⁵⁶ Therefore “our personal walk with Christ is nourished in communion with others.”¹⁵⁷ Finally, Boa stresses that “true community...is a by-product of other-centeredness”¹⁵⁸ and “kingdom living is about loving and serving God and others.”¹⁵⁹ Boa can be commended for underscoring the

¹⁵⁰ Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 107.

¹⁵¹ She defines community as: “Community relates to the building of substantive relationships where individuals are known, accepted and embraced, and where they live in mutuality (121).” One her understanding of Christian community, she believes that “Christian community revolves around relational formation within the body of Christ, the church, not only as the primary vehicle for God’s purposes on the earth but also for transforming believers into the image of Christ. (121).”

¹⁵² Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 121.

¹⁵³ Maddix, *Spiritual Formation as Christian Formation*, chap.8, “Toward a Definition of Spiritual Formation,” para. 5, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁵⁴ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 416.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.

indispensable role of the Christian community for Spiritual formation because he strongly suggest the vitality of Christian community in Spiritual formation process. When we live in the community of faith and extend Christ's love to others through sacrificial service—we become conformed to the image of God individually and corporately. Our corporate spirituality is dependent heavily on corporate relationships.

Willard emphasizes that “the exclusive primary goal of the local congregation” is to be spiritually formed in the likeness of Christ.¹⁶⁰ He believes that the Church's roles should be “entirely devoted to the spiritual formation of those in attendance.”¹⁶¹ Making disciples of Christ, growth in Christ, and imitating the lifestyle of Christ are three stages of Spiritual formation in the church, suggests Willard.¹⁶² Although, he does not say so directly, he assumes that the Church's role is to make genuine disciples of Christ who are able to make other disciples for Christ. Thus, he views the role of the community of believers as being important for the process of Spiritual formation. Willard gives importance to the role of discipleship for Spiritual formation. Discipleship must take place in the church context, and it ought to be the life of the church if Spiritual formation is expected to take place. Thus, he believes that “spiritual formation in Christlikeness the exclusive primary goal of the local congregation.”¹⁶³

Howards believes that “spiritual formation is formation into Christian community.”¹⁶⁴ He states that “Christian spiritual formation must be the formation of communities as well as individuals.”¹⁶⁵ Spiritual formation is not only personal but also includes a communal aspect (community of believers) through which believers help other believers to become Christlike.¹⁶⁶ Howard is of the view that “we reflect the image of God as communities.”¹⁶⁷ Therefore the “Spirit of God also forms us through communities.”¹⁶⁸ The context of Christian community for Howard is indispensable for Spiritual formation; believers are formed

¹⁶⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 235.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 233.

¹⁶² Ibid., 240.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶⁴ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 152.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 153.

together “in community, through community, into community.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, Howard sees Christian community as indispensable for the process of Spiritual formation.

Conclusion

Evaluating the four approaches of Spiritual formation based on the three identified aspects show that different approaches hold different views on each of the aspects. In Howard’s *Communal and Missional Approach to Spiritual Formation*, appropriation of the role of the Holy Spirit is commendable because he views the relational role played by the Spirit through which a believer can relate to God as well as relate to others. Humanity is being renewed to the image of Christ through the active working of the Holy Spirit by fostering divine relationships with the creator and others. In Chandler’s *Multi-Dimensional Integrated Approach to Spiritual Formation*, the view of the role of the human agent is well-balanced, as she balances it with the gift of grace and the vital role of the Holy Spirit. The submissive attitude of the human agent to the Lordship of Jesus leads to the renewal of humanity to the image of Christ. While, on the question of the indispensability of the context of Church community, Boa’s *Multi-faceted Comprehensive Approach to Spiritual Formation* views that believers’ growth can happen in the context of community. Likewise, Willard’s *Transformation of Spirit as an Approach to Spiritual Formation*, stresses the importance of discipleship in the church for individual and corporate Spiritual formation. Also, Howard and Chandler see Spiritual formation as being centered on the community through which formation takes place. It must be noted that the four approaches have strengths and weaknesses. And each approach provides a theoretical framework and practical guidance as to how the process of Spiritual formation can be actively pursued in a believer’s life. These four approaches taken as one whole comprehensive approach can provide a robust methodology for effective transformational process that can help believers to be conformed to the image of God. As the goal or telos of Christian Spiritual formation is to be conformed to the image of Christ, every believer’s imperative command is to grow continually in obedience with the goal to become Christlike. Thus, considering the goal of

¹⁶⁹ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 153.

Christian Spiritual formation as conforming to the image of Christ, this research has identified the quintessential role of the Holy Spirit, the essential responsibility of the human agent, and the indispensable role of the Christian community which are deemed crucial for effective Spiritual formational approaches. Without the Holy Spirit, believers alone cannot grow Spiritually. Likewise, the human agent also must participate with the Holy Spirit through obedience and faithfulness to attain Spiritual formation. Also, the community or the Church cannot be excluded because Spiritual formation cannot take place in isolation.

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