

## **Moving From Moral to Spiritual Formation: Redirecting the Heart in the New Covenant**

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One of my greatest concerns for our graduate students in the Institute for Spiritual Formation is that coursework intended to open the heart to the depths of sin and the ongoing need for Christ will, instead, move them to use spiritual disciplines as a cover for shame and guilt. Since the Fall, there has been a great temptation to respond to sin by covering moral failure with a regimen of character formation and good works done in the flesh. Unfortunately, these pre-conversion habits of the heart can enter *unconsciously* into the Christian life, distorting *spiritual* formation into a moral self-help program whereby the believer attempts to please God by modeling Christ's character and meeting intimacy needs with God apart from openness to the Cross and the Spirit. This lapse into "moralism" or religious "moral formation" is present in any attempt to perfect oneself in the power of the flesh. For some this is a heavy yoke leading to moral or spiritual frustration. For others it is simply fuel for the will in natural fortitude to sustain this moralism. In any case, no believer would consciously affirm or do this, but fleshly habits of the heart die hard, and remain alive in our behavior.

The corrective to moralism in the Christian life is to relentlessly ground one's human efforts and the formational elements of spiritual formation *experientially* and *theoretically* in the central salvific realities and doctrines of the faith, i.e., in Christ's loving and finished work of dealing with sin on the Cross and the new birth experience by the Spirit. This is not to deny the formational and human elements in growth.

However, it is to understand their true meaning in light of the *loving Divine initiative* in salvation. I want to explore this moralistic temptation in our spiritual lives as well its corrective in light of a New Covenant approach to spiritual formation grounded in the Cross and Spirit.

### **The Temptation of Moral Formation**

At first it appears counterintuitive that Christians, having begun their faith in the Spirit, would be tempted to perfect themselves in the power of the flesh. This heresy, encouraged by the Judaizers in Paul's day (Gal. 3:1-3), certainly has no relevance to the contemporary church or those of us in the spiritual formation movement. How could moralism tempt the believer? The answer is simple. Moral formation is the most common and "seemingly" effective human solution to the problem of sin without having to become aware of and deal with it before God. From Adam and Eve on, the human default of persons born in original sin has been to form a *human* answer to the problem of sin by covering shame (Gen. 3:7), hiding from guilt (Gen. 3:8), and filling the empty soul with something other than God in idolatry (Is. 44:14-20). This human propensity to repress awareness of sin can take the form of violence and vice but more often appears in moral fortitude and character formation as a *cover* of sin.

Although both vice and moralism represent sinful ways to live apart from God, moralism is more in harmony with the way God created human nature and, thus, reaps the benefits of natural goods (e.g., good character, healthier families, friendships, a sense of well being etc.). This explains why unbelievers often choose some kind of moralism over a life of pure vice. Furthermore, moralism provides a subtle way to appease

conscience and cover the true state of the heart, making it a deeper form of self-deception than vice. From the elaborate ethical musings of Aristotle to the moral regimen of the Roman Stoics to the decent upright living of the common man, the natural moral impulse represents the most pervasive means to cover original sin and find happiness apart from God.

It becomes clear, then, why the believer can be tempted by moralism. After conversion, the flesh-habits of the fallen heart, habituated in moral autonomy, become mixed into the believer's motivations in sanctification and spiritual formation. This should be expected, given that the pre-conversion habits of the heart are not yet completely transformed by becoming a new creature in Christ. This will take time as the person opens the heart to the transforming work of the Spirit. The new believer may be tempted to use the spiritual disciplines to perfect him- or herself in the flesh whenever shame, guilt and autonomy of the heart are not honestly dealt with in light of the work of Christ. Even prayer, worship, acts of service etc. can unintentionally be used to keep away painful self-awareness of sin and moral failure in much the same way as the unbeliever employs moral formation. In this case, acts of apparent obedience and practicing spiritual disciplines can become unconscious means to:

- (1) cover deep residual feelings of shame by trying to be good or "spiritual" in the power of the flesh, rather than considering this as rubbish in light of being in Christ's righteousness (Phil. 3:9);
- (2) hide from feelings of guilt by creating and engaging in a regimen of spiritual disciplines to appease conscience as a moral tutor rather than allow conscience to

show ourselves as moral failures to lead us to a deeper experience of the forgiveness we have in Christ (Gal.3:24); and

- (3) fill the human heart with *feelings* of religious intimacy and consolation as a substitute for the character-bearing fruit of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22, Eph. 5:18).

This temptation is *unconscious* in the sense that although we sincerely intend to live with open hearts to the reality of our sin, the Cross and the Spirit, we too easily fall prey to that part of the *hidden* heart that is still habituated by the old manner of life of hiding and covering. Although it is not evident in our *conscious* theology and intentions, it is implicit in our actions. This moralism is evident in our prolonged sense of frustration, feelings of failure and self-rejection when we become aware of sin. The problem only worsens when we *unconsciously* cover this frustration by using spiritual disciplines and acts of service to feel like “a good boy or girl” to satisfy or lessen guilt feelings. *Whenever awareness of sin results only in spiritual frustration or the need to fix ourselves, we have missed its meaning.* Awareness of sin and failure is a door to a heartfelt conversation with our loving and gracious God, a reminder that we cannot fix ourselves but that only Christ can atone for sin. As was true of our initial repentance at conversion, so too does real growth involve entering deeply into the truth of our sin, our need for Jesus and His work on the Cross and new life in His Spirit, and *only on that basis* to open the heart to a robust regimen of spiritual formation. However, the deceit of moral formation is so subtle and pernicious, for it looks so much like formation in the Spirit but gives no nourishment to the soul. Paul warned the Colossians of this temptation in terms of the Judeo-Gnostic heresy of fleshly, religious moral formation,

which has “the *appearance* of religion in self-made religion and self-made abasement and severe treatment of the body but [is] of no value against fleshy indulgence” (Col. 3:23, my italics). Moralistic formation looks good, feels bad and doesn’t work! Thank God for his loving patience in teaching us to surrender the works of natural fortitude to Christ who alone takes away guilt and covers shame.

### **The Move to Spiritual Formation**

Our efforts in spiritual formation must be clearly grounded in the New Covenant reality of the Cross and Spirit. This is the only way to avoid moralism and, ultimately, frustration and despair in the life of the believer. In particular, (1) the *forensic* elements of justification in salvation, i.e., God’s declarative actions for the sake of His people based upon Christ’s work and (2) the Spirit’s work in regeneration, are the interpretive context for the *transformational* elements of sanctification. These forensic and salvific elements are the bedrock *realities* making possible the *reality* of the transformational life of faith and abiding in Christ by the Spirit. The implications for living out a life based upon these realities of the Cross and new-birth experience by the Spirit cannot be more dramatic.

#### *Justification by Faith regarding Guilt*

In the first place, opening the heart deeply in the Spirit to the reality of our being justified by faith is the only cure for *guilt* before God. The fact that our sins have been imputed to Christ in His passive obedience to the Father on the Cross results in there being no condemnation from God towards the believer (Rom. 5:9, 8:1, 2 Cor. 5:21). By opening

the heart to experience this reality in the Spirit, the believer has every reason to come out of hiding from sin, no longer to be afraid of seeing oneself honestly in the light of God's constant acceptance, and of finding in confession and honest self-awareness a door to deeper dependence on God and His grace.

*Justification by Faith regarding Shame*

Secondly, opening the heart in the Spirit to the reality of our justification is the only cure for *shame* before God. The fact that Christ's "alien" righteousness, a righteousness that is His, has been imputed to the believer on the basis of His active obedience to the Father while on earth implies that God relates to the believer no longer as a criminal but as "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:9). By opening the heart in the Spirit to this reality, the Christian has no need to respond to sin in despair, excessive frustration and disgust or attempt to cover it by being good to please God, as in moralism. If shame results only in frustration or working harder to fix the self, then we have not allowed awareness of sin to take its course. A deep knowledge of personal sin and failure is intended to be a daily guide and friend, opening us to our neediness, to the reality that we cannot fix ourselves and to gratitude for Christ's imputed righteousness that alone covers sin. Only this forensic reality, to which the Spirit bears witness to the human heart, can open us to a true obedience in humility and dependence upon Spirit. This is the only ground for doing spiritual disciplines that guards us from moralism.

### *Regeneration by the Holy Spirit regarding Spiritual Death*

Although persons are born in a state of spiritual death, cut off from the covenantal love of God, the Spirit in the heart of the believer attaches them to God through the reality of the New Covenant and the new birth experience. Regeneration forms the ground for all subsequent dependence upon and filling of the Spirit in sanctification and is itself grounded in the forensic work of God in Justification. True spirituality does not consist in the natural modeling of Christ's character by doing spiritual disciplines in the power of human autonomy and fortitude. Rather, it is by *participation* in this new life of the indwelling Spirit of Christ begun in Regeneration on the basis of the Cross that we learn to do the spiritual disciplines in humility and dependence upon Him and not our own efforts. Thus, the transformational life in the Spirit is not understood primarily along the lines of a *character formational* model like that of Aristotle and the Stoics. Instead, the spiritual life is fundamentally a *salvific* model of growth in the sense that all true moral and character development *is on the basis of Christ's justifying work on the Cross and His work in the heart of the believer by the Spirit*. We certainly participate in this work, as a sanctifying synergism of the human person in conjunction with God. Nevertheless—and this cannot be stressed enough—all true, fruit-bearing obedience and transformation is *based on* and *motivated by* God's prior salvific work on behalf of the believer.

### **Conclusion**

Spiritual formation is first and foremost a salvific model of growth that grounds all attempts to theoretically develop and live out the robust transformational elements of

formation. From beginning to end, true spirituality is founded upon the forensic realities of the Cross in the context of new life in the Spirit. The realities begun in salvation—the repentant heart motivated by the Spirit, clinging to Christ alone as sin bearer, being opened to His righteousness as the ground for new life dependent on the Spirit—these are the same realities that only deepen in sanctification. The cry of my soul at conversion in high school thirty years ago has only deepened as the joyful refrain of my heart today:

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly, Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

O, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me *daily* hide myself in Thee. Amen.