

Chapter One

Coming to Terms

Defining Christian Spirituality

If you are reading this, there is a good chance that you are alive, and there is also a good chance you are living a life. For most of us living our lives unfolds, often unwittingly, within the context and confines of the multitude of ideas, feelings, and impulses that appear and disappear within us throughout the course of any given day. From these impulses we think things, say, or not say things, and choose to do or not do things. Writing this first paragraph, or this entire manuscript for that matter, was just like that. There were ideas, feelings, impulses, and choices. Most came to fruition from somewhere inside me. Not my stomach, or lungs, or muscle structure, but from an intangible, inexplicable self. I refer to this “self” as my spiritual self or being.

Human Spirituality

The idea of human spirituality seems to be universal. Regardless of our world view, our personal experience, mirrored in the words we use, indicate that we acknowledge a reality that is more than flesh and blood. Every human being experiences life by means of both an outer, physical/material self-awareness and an inner/immaterial self-awareness. The very idea of self-awareness speaks to this spirituality. We even use words referring to experiences beyond materiality. The Bible also refers to human beings in terms beyond the physical. Along with basic words and concepts such as “body,” Romans 12:1, “soul,” Genesis 2:7, and “spirit,” James 2:26, we can add “heart,” Romans 8:27, “mind,” Romans 12:2, “conscience,” 1 Timothy 1:5, and “will,” 1 Corinthians 7:37.

As we talk about human spirituality, or, for our purposes, biblical¹ human spirituality, we embrace the idea that life expresses itself beyond the tangible. The notion of human spirituality recognizes that every human lives life beyond that which might be empirically understood. We have thoughts, feelings, intentions, and motivations; we project ourselves outside the moment, reminiscing, planning, and interacting with the abstract. We all live spiritually, or within the metaphysical.

By human spirituality, then, we simply refer to the undeniable experience every human being has, namely, the interior reality of self (and the self-existence of others).

Spiritual Formation

Assuming every human being is born a spiritual person, discussions about spirituality include how our spiritual/interior lives develop or form. This discussion includes our unique genetic make-up as well as our unique life circumstances (era, location, family, and personal experiences). Indeed, all these factors shape (form) us. In a general sense this is what we refer to when we

¹By biblical we simply mean that we arrive at our conclusions about human spirituality from a plausible/reasonable understanding of the biblical text.

discuss spiritual formation. Undeniably, then, every human being has experienced, is experiencing, and will continue to experience what many refer to as spiritual formation.

In its general sense, spiritual formation refers to and includes the variety of factors and processes that shape our inner self. Adding the testimony of Scripture to this understanding qualifies spiritual formation with the reality that the true and living God is the One who made us, Psalm 100:3, and who has planned and oversees the providential influences that shape all things, Jeremiah 10:23; Ephesians 1:11. This creative activity includes our inner qualities. Psalm 139:13 states, “Certainly you made my heart and mind (inward parts, ESV),”² Adding, as instruments for our formation, all life’s circumstances that inform our personal development we might conclude that spiritual formation refers to a constant process involving all divine provisions and providence that mold and make us unique vessels in God’s plan. Some recent definitions incorporating a biblical understanding speak of spiritual formation as “the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer’s life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ—accomplished by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the context of the biblical community.”³ Thus, acknowledging that, in God’s plan, we are being transformed from glory to glory, 2 Corinthians 3:18, the idea of “Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process for forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁴

For our purposes, then, the term spiritual formation, when used, concerns itself with our personal relationship with God in progressive holiness. As such, spiritual formation deals with the mechanisms of spiritual transformation whereby the Holy Spirit renews the inner man changing the believer’s character and behavior to be more like Christ.

Sanctification

While spiritual formation focuses upon the processes and mechanics of spiritual development, usual discussions about our spirituality from a biblical perspective find themselves under the heading we call sanctification. For those not familiar with this term, words such as “sanctify,” “sanctified,” and “sanctification,” (consider 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 2:11; 10:14; 13:12), come from the same Greek root meaning “to set apart,” “consecrate,” or, “make holy.”⁵ Additionally, within most discussions about “sanctification” there are usually three recognized nuances behind these words, positional, progressive, and final sanctification.

Positional sanctification is the idea that all believers have been ‘set apart’ from the ultimate consequences of sin and set apart unto God. To put this in plain language, Christians are

²כִּלְיָהּ literally, “kidney;” figurative as seat of emotion and affection Jb 19:27 Pr 23:16 ψ 16:7; 73:21, hence, as involving character, the object of God’s examination. BDB.

³Paul Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008), 24.

⁴Willard, *Renovation*, 22.

⁵Fredrick William Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἅγιος.” We only refer to one of several root variations. In future citations this work will be noted as BDAG.

‘holy’ in Christ. Christians are sanctified/set apart, even called “saints.”⁶ Every believer is considered as being holy, or consecrated, the moment they trust Christ.⁷

Our positional sanctification is largely due to our spiritual union with Christ, Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:30. Many times, whether through association or location, the phrase “in Christ” refers to a new dynamic for every believer.⁸ Christians are united with Jesus Christ. This union is a supernatural/spiritual union, Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13. This union is a living union, Romans 12:5. Further, our union with Christ identifies the Christian with Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, Romans 6:5,6; Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:11-15. This union with Christ’s death and resurrection has tremendous implications for our spiritual development as we, with Christ, have died to the Law and to our condemned status as sinners, Romans 6:7; 8:1. Through the “power of the resurrection” the Christian now is in a “position” (set apart) to live above the destructive pull of sin in the flesh. Finally, our positional union with Christ guarantees our glorification, 1 Corinthians 15:22b.

While positional sanctification is often categorized as being non-experiential (something we neither feel or experience in any tangible way), our positional status “in Christ” serves as the foundation for our progress in spirituality as well as the guarantee of our final and ultimate destiny as those redeemed by God’s grace. We will study all this in greater detail later. For now, our takeaway is simple, we who have placed our faith in Christ have a position in Christ and this ‘position’ sets us apart from sin and to God. He are holy; we are “sanctified”/set apart to God.

A second designation regarding sanctification is often referred to as ultimate or final sanctification. Final sanctification should be defined just as it sounds, final. Final sanctification refers to the work of God, whereby He, once and for all time, transforms the Christian into the sinless moral and glorified image of the Lord Jesus Christ, Philippians 3:21. Of course, we shouldn’t understand our final state as complete, namely, being like God in all His divine perfections. Rather, at the appearance of Christ (our bodily resurrection), the Christian is completely and finally removed from the pollution, practice, and presence of sin, being glorified to the likeness of Jesus Christ in character and motivation, Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:1-3. The Apostle Paul often refers to this as the believer’s glorification, Romans 8:17-25,30; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Philippians 3:20-21. At the moment of our glorification, we will experience the complete meaning of being an heir of God, Romans 8:17, 23; Galatians 3:29—4:7. We will experience the redemption of our bodies, Romans 8:23, and we will receive our eternal inheritance which has been “kept in heaven,” 1 Peter 1:3-5. As an heir of Christ, Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 2 Peter 1:5-11; Revelation 2:5,7, 10,17, 26; 3:5,11-12,21, the Christian receives his share in the glory of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, namely, his place in Christ’s rule and his responsibilities to reign in God’s coming kingdom.

⁶The word “saint” simply means “holy one”, consider 1 Corinthians 1:2 in which all the believers in Corinth are called “saints.”

⁷Consider the verb tenses in 1 Corinthians 6:11 (Aorist passive, emphasizing the historic fact); Hebrews 10:10 (periphrastic construction of the perfect participle and the present tense “to be” verb which is the equivalent of a perfect tense, emphasizing something already complete with lasting results).

⁸For a succinct discussion about our union with Christ see Letham, Robert. *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology*. Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011. For a detailed examination of each “in Christ” passage see Campbell, Constantine R.. *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.

Though usually listed second, a third category relating to biblical sanctification is known as progressive sanctification. In this study progressive sanctification refers to the Christian's ongoing experience of positive spiritual development. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian incrementally, or progressively, becomes less controlled by and conformed to the dominance of sin over the flesh (his former patterns of life apart from Christ), the culture (the expressions of the world system to which he is accustomed), and satanic strongholds (any ties or bondage to the oppression and deceit because of the prince of darkness). Simultaneously, the Spirit-filled, Spirit-led Christian becomes more conformed to the moral character of Jesus Christ (the fulfillment of Messiah's Law both internally and externally) through a renewed personal commitment to the Lordship of Christ and daily diligence to follow the Holy Spirit in accomplishing the will of God, Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:18. Thus, the believer is progressively ridding himself of the controlling impact of sin while being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (the perfect image of God in man).

To summarize what we mean by the word sanctification, we are saying that sanctification refers to God's work in which He sets the believer apart from the pollution, practice, and presence of sin. God's sanctifying work definitively (positional), incrementally (progressive), and ultimately (final) sets the believer apart unto Christ. Our position in Christ allows for the transformation of the Christian into the moral character of Jesus Christ (the renewed image of God). For our study, we propose that biblical/Christian spirituality refers to the progressive transformation of the inner human self by means of a dependence upon the indwelling Holy Spirit in which a person's spiritually changes from the natural self-sufficiency to that of Jesus' God-dependent and Holy Spirit enlivened character and lifestyle. In the study that follows we will deal almost entirely with the positional and progressive aspects of sanctification.

Christian Spirituality (Christian Spiritual Living)

Spirituality, the idea that everyone experiences life beyond the material; spiritual formation, the inescapable reality that all factors mold/form us into the persons we are; and, sanctification, that God, in His redemptive plan has set apart those who believe in Christ for Himself, are all part of our understanding of what we will call Christian spirituality, or, the Christian life.

While there are many terms and concepts that could be mentioned here, these few terms and their attending concepts help introduce us to a better understanding of Christian spirituality. Most of the specific vocabulary will be introduced and discussed along the course of our study. For now, to move forward, we simply needed to become familiar with, or remember, these few overarching terms and concepts. Next let's briefly discuss the importance for studying biblical Christian spirituality.