

THE JOURNEY TOWARD SPIRITUAL FORMATION

by **Anthony Baxter**

Anthony is a graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in the USA. He, along with his family, has lived and ministered in the Middle East for more than ten years as a pastor, teacher, evangelist and discipler.

Human beings were created in God's image for an intimate relationship with him. Sin broke our intimacy with God but at the cross Jesus made it possible for us to be reconciled to God and for the intimate relationship to be restored. This process of restoration – of being formed, conformed, and ultimately transformed into the likeness of Jesus – is what we call spiritual formation. It is the process of Christ being formed in us. According to Gerald G. May, 'Spiritual formation is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instruction, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavours as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction.'¹

There is an expectation in Christianity generally that true faith in Jesus will produce a transformed life. Yet for many of us, years after our salvation experience we are still fighting the same issues we struggled with when we first came to faith. If we who have walked with Jesus a long time have not experienced much transformation, how can we expect to teach others – especially believers from Muslim backgrounds – how to walk with Jesus?

Part of the problem stems from our tendency to think discipleship is about changing external behaviour rather than true inner transformation. The goal of spiritual formation is not to produce people who act differently. The goal is transformed disciples who are different. Right hearts produce right actions. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, '*Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit*' (Matt. 7:16-18).

In this article, I want to suggest some basic tools we can use to help ourselves and others be transformed inwardly. But first, let me make three observations:

1. Spiritual formation is done in community.

It was Jesus' intention that we would walk together in the journey of faith. Through Christ we are brought into the *kingdom* of God, are members of the *body*

1 May, Gerald G. *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p. 6

of Christ and are part of the *church*. We are brought into a community of faith. When Jesus sent his disciples out to minister, he sent them in pairs. Jesus knew the value and necessity of partners in our journey of faith. As an African proverb says, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'²

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The reality of our faith, the transforming power of Jesus, is ultimately seen by how we live like Christ in our interaction with others. It is in relationship to others that our faith is grown, refined and tested. In relationships we learn to forgive, to bear another's burdens and to simply love one another. In relationship we learn that the proverb is true, '*As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*' (Prov. 27:7). In the community of faith we find acceptance and encouragement to press on in living out our faith even when it is difficult or we have failed. We learn: '*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!*' (Eccl. 4:9-10).

2. Spiritual formation is Christ-centred.

The purpose of spiritual formation is not to make new and improved versions of ourselves. It is that Christ be formed in us (Gal. 4:19). Dallas Willard suggests its purpose is the 'forming of the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.'³

Spiritual formation is not simply about sinning less. In Christ we are new creations and have been crucified to the old life. Our lives should increasingly take on the character of Christ. We will sin less as we surrender ourselves more and more to him. Our focus should increasingly be on Jesus – loving and knowing him. We want to be so intimate with Jesus that when we are insulted or cut off in traffic or lied about or put in a compromising situation, our natural response is not to sin but to do what Jesus would have done.

Spiritual formation is a work of the Holy Spirit because we cannot be made into the image of Jesus apart from God. Paul wrote, '*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work within you to will and to work according to his good purpose,*' (Phil. 2:13). We must actively seek to grow and experience more of the life God has for us. However, it is the Holy Spirit who makes it happen.

2 Quoted by Tippens, Darryl, *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life*, Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006, p.27.

3 Willard, Dallas, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002, p. 22.

3. Spiritual formation is intentional.

Some people are naturally disciplined. They can easily set up and follow a detailed program to guide their spiritual growth and formation. But others, like me, have difficulty following a regimented program for spiritual growth. I used to think there was something wrong with me until God reminded me of something crucial; The Christian life is not a list of activities to check off, it's a relationship. It is an intimate friendship and like any friendship there are things I can do to help it grow but there is no magical formula for spiritual growth.

In spiritual formation we need to be like a good golfer.⁴ He comes into a round of golf with a plan, an intention, for how he will approach the course. He assesses the weather and the conditions of the course: Is it long or short? Are the greens soft or firm? Are there many hazards to avoid? Does it play to his strengths or weaknesses? Though he approaches his round with a plan, he cannot program each shot ahead of time. He has no way of knowing how a particular shot will land, how it will roll or how long it will be. And so, he has a bag full of clubs designed to enable him to hit a variety of shots. In any situation, he can pull out the right club and (hopefully!) hit the right shot.

As we approach spiritual formation, we need to have a plan. We need to have a vision of where we want to go and how we intend to get there. We need to approach our spiritual formation with a bag full of disciplines we can use in the variety of life situations we encounter which will help us to move forward in our journey of faith. The following is a list of several activities I have found helpful in the journey toward spiritual formation. It is not exhaustive and it is not a program.

We have no idea what challenges life will bring. We cannot know when one discipline will be needed in exchange for another, but we can approach each situation, each season of life with a plan to prayerfully use the disciplines in our bag to keep moving forward toward the goal of Christ being formed in us. These tools, when used prayerfully and purposefully, will enable us to go deeper in our relationship with Christ.

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⁴ I am in debt to Scot McKnight for planting this image of a good golfer and his variety of clubs in my brain. He uses this illustration in discussing various theories of the atonement in his excellent work, *A Community Called Atonement*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. One could use the example of a craftsman with a toolbox full of tools to make the same point. You do not use a hammer to sand or a screwdriver to drive a nail. You need the right tool for each situation.

3.1 The Word

Paul wrote to the Romans that they should no longer *'be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of (their minds)...'* (Rom. 12:2). The primary way we are formed spiritually into the image of Jesus is through God's Word. This is the main way God reveals himself to us. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, *'in these last days (God) has spoken to us by his Son...'* (Heb. 1:2). There are a variety of ways to approach time in the Word. Some people find reading large portions of biblical passages helpful to really fill their minds with truth. Others prefer to read smaller portions and dig in more deeply.

Whichever approach one chooses there are two things that are especially helpful; *meditation and memorization*. I've gone through seasons when I've read the Bible through twice in a year and others where I've taken smaller portions and tried to focus more deeply.

In either case, I have found it essential to invite God to draw my attention to a specific phrase or verse. I write it down, read it several times and pray through it. I carry it with me through the day and meditate on it. As I sit in traffic, wait in line and brush my teeth, I ponder this verse. I think about what it means and consider how to live it. I ask what needs to change in me to make the truth of this verse a reality in my life. I ask God to use his resurrection power in my heart to bring needed change. *Meditation* allows God's Word to sink deeply into our hearts, into our souls. It makes the difference between a Word of information and a Word of transformation.

Invite the BMB you're working with to read through a book of the Bible. Encourage him to read a chapter each day and to pick one verse that strikes him as significant. Give him a small notebook so that he can write each day's verse in it and why he found it important. Work along with him so when you meet, you can compare the things that impressed you too. Try to call or see him between formal discipleship times to share something you're meditating on or to ask him how his reading went. Try to be specific in thinking about how the verse or verses he's seeing as important relate to his life. How can he live them out? Is there a pattern? If so, what might it mean?

The psalmist wrote, *'How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word...I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.'* (Ps. 119:9, 11). When the lies of the evil one tempt me to sin, having God's Word in my heart provides truth and perspective that give strength and help to resist it. There really is no substitute. We need our minds full of God's Word and that comes through *memorization*. Sometimes my meditation becomes memorization. As I think on a verse for a long time, I learn

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it. But usually I need to be more intentional than that. I need to purposefully memorize a verse or a passage.

Many discipleship programs have verses related to the lessons that you can memorize with the BMB. Memorizing an entire book may seem daunting but it is incredibly useful. When we spend time studying God's Word – meditating on it, memorizing it, letting it sink into our souls – the process of spiritual formation takes place. Our minds are renewed. Memorizing God's Word is a key element of transformation. Very likely our BMB disciple will find it natural and be able to memorise God's Word easily due to their traditional learning methods in which they are required to memorize large portions of the Qur'an.

3.2 Worship

Worship is our response to who God is and what he does. Studying about God is not enough. It should lead us to worship. As we look upon God's greatness, reflect on his character and remember all his deeds, we can only respond with adoration, praise, awe and exaltation. Dallas Willard suggests, 'Worship... imprints on our whole being the reality that we study. The effect is a radical disruption of the powers of evil in us and around us. Often an enduring and substantial change is brought about.'⁵ Through worship the Holy Spirit cements in us deeper faith, greater hunger for God and determined obedience.

We often think of worship as what we do weekly when we meet with a local body of believers. But worship takes many forms. We can praise God in prayer or with the written word. We can worship in songs that declare the greatness of God. With the advent of iPods and mp3 players, listening to worship music is easier than ever. We worship God when we make our lives the living sacrifices Paul talks about in Romans 12. By surrendering all we are to God, we show him that he is worthy of our time, our energy, our minds, and our hearts.

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3.3 Solitude, Silence and Sabbath

Perhaps of all the things available to us for spiritual formation, these three are the most neglected. In solitude, silence and Sabbath we consciously choose to withdraw from the world (or our activity in it) in a meaningful way for a period of time. These disciplines are not natural to us. We are accustomed to being around people, having music or noise around us and being active. The power

5 Willard, Dallas, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, p. 362.

of these tools is that we break from our normal routine and give God greater access to our hearts and lives.

Solitude and *silence* can be just a few minutes each day or an extended period of retreat. We need both. We need time each day to get away from people and noise and be alone in God's presence. In Scripture we see Jesus getting away from the crowds and his disciples for times with God. He understood the need to quiet himself before God. In Luke 6, for example, we see Jesus spend the night in prayer before choosing the twelve disciples. The night before his betrayal, he takes time to pray knowing the trials that lie before him. Drawing apart to be with God brings clarity, wisdom and strength.

I have taken time for long retreats of solitude and silence – alone and with disciples – and found them immensely helpful. Alone and silent for a long period, I realized how very close God really is. I learned afresh that I'm never really alone. And shortly after one retreat I found myself in a situation where I was being falsely accused and attacked. My natural reaction would have been to lash out verbally but miraculously I was able to hold my tongue.

I also try to practice regular times of silence and solitude. I love early mornings before my family is awake and the home is bursting with life. I find a quiet place to sit. Once comfortable, I close my eyes and try to quiet my heart and my mind. Now is not the time to remember all the things I need to accomplish that day! I just wait. There is no agenda – at least not on my part. I am open to whatever God might bring to mind. It is the Lord's time and I wait on him.⁶

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Sabbath is a meaningful break from the normal routine of life for a time of rest and/or recreation at regular intervals. The spiritual life is a physical life – we cannot escape that truth. We need to care for our bodies and in so doing, for our souls. Darryl Tippens describes Sabbath as 'a wonderful benefit and blessing to humanity that our culture greatly needs. Sabbath... rest, 'down time', quiet, renewal, recreation, getting away... can occur any day of the week.'⁷

Sabbath is not some legalistic splitting of hairs over what can or cannot be done. It is God's gracious permission to rest, to refresh, to slow down and be renewed. It is vitally important to our

6 I recommend Ruth Haley Barton's book *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004 and Siang-Yang Tan and Douglas H. Gregg's book *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit: How to Connect to the Spirit's Power and Presence*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1997 for help with cultivating a time of solitude and silence. Dallas Willard also has helpful thoughts on solitude in several of his books and articles.

7 Tippens, Darryl, *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life*, Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006, p 67.

spiritual development. Too often we see spirituality as doing, doing, doing. We think that if we are not serving we are not pleasing God. We are driven to do more. We have a hard time saying 'no'. But we need to realize that 'no' is a spiritual word. It is okay not to do a good thing because we have scheduled time for family or rest.

Taking a day each week for rest and rejuvenation will help us to be more productive, more focused and more ready to serve throughout the week. Jesus himself took time regularly for solitude, silence and Sabbath. Blessing comes when we learn from his example and we seek to walk in it. Jesus found time alone with God in solitude and silence valuable. Jesus found Sabbath rest important. How much more should we?

In a culture where community and family are so important, it might be difficult for our BMB friends to find time alone. It may be that we need to build times of silence and solitude into our discipleship meetings with them. As BMBs become more accustomed to it, they will see the benefit. Stopping to hear God's voice, learning to quiet our hearts, resting in God's presence, these things are vital to our spiritual health.

3.4 Conversation with God

In any relationship, talking to one another is essential. It's how we get to know and understand each other. Prayer is the way we talk to God. Julian of Norwich wrote, 'Prayer unites the soul to God.'⁸ We all know it's something we should do, but few of us would say we do it enough.

One of the most liberating experiences of my Christian life was realizing that prayer really is conversation with God. It's something I can do at any time, in any place. Certainly having a set time to pray and even a list of people or concerns to pray for is legitimate and important. But having an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day is even better. As I might send a friend an SMS or an e-mail or just call up, I can talk with God all day long. The biggest benefit in my life has been that it makes me more conscious of God's presence throughout the day. It keeps me mindful that He is right there with me and that helps to shape my thinking and my actions.

Like all of these tools, this one is best modelled. We need to spend time with the BMB outside our formal meeting time and allow him to see us stop and pray for a specific need when it arises. Even just saying a one-sentence prayer like 'Lord, we love you', can model this kind of

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8 Norwich, Julian of, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated into modern English by Wolters, Clifton, London: Penguin, 1966, p. 128.

awareness that God is always with us and we can always talk to him. Let the BMB see what it means to have an ongoing conversation with God.

3.5 Fasting

Fasting is an area where our BMB will need our input and guidance to see what a biblical fast is like. In Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose. There are many types of fasts and many reasons to fast. In my spiritual journey, I have fasted regularly for seasons. Often my desire to fast rose from a time when I felt more distant from God. I felt that the hunger and the thirst I once had for knowing God had waned. Fasting for me was a way of saying to God, 'You are more important to me than anything – even food. I believe that I cannot live by bread alone. I depend on you.' During my fast, when I would have the pangs of hunger, I would pray, 'Lord, as I am hungry for food, make me hunger more for you.' John Piper writes about fasting:

Similarly, fasting is peculiarly suited to glorify God in this way. It is fundamentally an offering of emptiness to God in hope. It is a sacrifice of need and hunger. It says, by its very nature, "Father, I am empty, but you are full. I am hungry, but you are the Bread of Heaven. I am thirsty, but you are the Fountain of Life. I am weak, but you are strong. I am poor, but you are rich. I am foolish, but you are wise. I am broken, but you are whole. I am dying, but your steadfast love is better than life (Psalm 63:3)."⁹

Such a prayer, such a desire, is something God delights to answer, to bless. When I have fasted in this manner, God has reawakened my heart to hunger and thirst more and more for him. As we model and teach this type of fasting to our BMB friends, we invite them to worship God from their heart. We invite their fasting to become a fast pleasing to God.

3.6 Spiritual friendship

One of the biggest obstacles to spiritual formation is our friends, or more accurately our lack of true friends. Many of us have acquaintances, people we spend time with, colleagues and neighbours, but rarely do we let them know who we really are. We show them a face, a mask, that reveals the person we want to be but not who we really are. If we want to make progress in our faith, we need people around us who push us, encourage us and challenge us. We need people who accept us for who we are, who love and accept us even when we blow it, and who will not let us settle for mediocrity but will spur us on to more. David Benner writes, 'If you are making significant progress on the

9 Piper, John, *A Hunger for God*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997, pp180-181.

transformational journey of Christian spirituality, you have one or more friendships that support that journey. If you do not, you are not. It is that simple.’¹⁰

At key points in my spiritual journey God has blessed me with men who have been **spiritual friends**. ‘*Spiritual friendship* is the most basic ministry of spiritual guidance in which two or more friends – on a relatively equal basis – support, encourage, and pray for one another on their journeys... A spiritual friend is one who makes time for you, cares when you have nothing to offer in return, rejoices in your successes, and weeps over your failures.’¹¹ Such friendship is costly. It requires us to be willing to be transparent. It calls for us to be honest. And it necessitates that we live 1 Corinthians 13 in loving patience, kindness, humility, selflessness, forgiveness and perseverance.

Spiritual friendship is not easy, especially in Muslim contexts. But the rewards of such friendship far outweigh the risks. As I think about my spiritual journey there were two or three godly men, true spiritual friends, God used to point me in the direction I needed to go. They were people willing to speak truth into my life when I needed to hear it. They were friends who listened to me and prayed with me and even wept with me when I needed that. They inspired me by their own desire and passion to know God. They humbled me when they would open their hearts and share honestly things they would never tell someone else. Really, this is what true discipleship is all about. It has to be modelled, expected and fostered.

Conclusion

Spiritual formation is a lifelong journey toward Christ-likeness. What are the clubs in your spiritual formation golf bag? What are the tools in your spiritual formation toolbox? How are you using them with your BMB friend? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you are and which ones will help you move forward. Ask a godly friend for his advice or direction. But do not settle for status quo. We must take the mindset of the Apostle Paul, ‘*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*’ (Phil. 3:12b-13).

10 Benner, David G., *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002, p. 16.

11 Demarest, Bruce A., *Soul Guide: Following Jesus as Spiritual Director*, Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003, p. 39.

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