

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS A NATURAL PART OF SALVATION

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“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!
Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is
in you—unless indeed you fail the test.” 2 Cor. 13:5 NAS

The announced theme of this conference is “Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective.” Earlier indications from some of the organizers of the conference said that we would be concerned with “the deeply spiritual and practical aspects of following Jesus.” I would like to use my time to address a central issue in theology (specifically, Soteriology—the understanding of salvation) that, given prevailing understandings, poses almost insurmountable barriers to (trans)formation of professing Christians into Christlikeness, which is the meaning of Spiritual Formation in Christ.

Simply put, as now generally understood, being “saved”—and hence being a Christian—has no conceptual or practical connection with such a transformation. There is plenty of talk about transformation in the New Testament (2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 5:1-5 & 12:2, Eph. 4:14-16, Col. 3:4-17, 2 Peter 1:2-11 & 3:18, etc.), it is *presupposed* in its massive descriptions of normative behavior, and it shines in the lives of acknowledged “great ones” in the way of Christ and in the literature spun off by the Church through the ages. But all of this appears to the ordinary Christian today like near or distant galaxies in the night sky: visible, somehow, but inaccessible in the conditions of life as we know them. Hence, you will rarely meet an individual Christian who is seriously engaged in the transformation (spiritual formation) depicted in the Bible and in Church History, or who even has a hope for anything like it this side of heaven. And while you might think that Christian organizations would have such transformation as their central focus, that simply turns out not to be true. They are doing something else.

So let us start out with some clarification of “spiritual formation.” As I have explained in various writings, spiritual formation in Christ as portrayed in the Bible and the “great ones” is not primarily behavior modification, though modification of behavior certainly is an outcome of it. Especially, it is not being trained into one or another outward cultural form of the Christian religion: Lutheran, Benedictine, Quaker, etc. That is how it has often been approached, but to suppose that it is identical with such training will only result in another form of “the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees” (Matt.

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5:20) which leaves untouched the inward character of the person, the “heart,” the source of action and outward bearing. (Mark 7:21-23) It is not entirely misleading to regard this inner dimension of the self as the “spiritual” side of the human being, and then to think of “spiritual formation” as **the process of reshaping or redeveloping it until it has, to a substantial degree, the character of the inner dimension of Jesus himself.** Of course this is a process to which the agency of the Holy Spirit is indispensable, along with other instrumentalities of God and His kingdom. One can think of the process as formation of the human spirit as well as formation by the divine Spirit, for it indeed is both.

What this looks like is indicated in various ways in the teachings of Jesus and his early followers. When asked by a Scribe to state the foundational commandment of all, Jesus replied in terms of recognition of Jehovah as the One God, and of our loving him “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:29-31) This would be the outcome or “product” of the *process* of spiritual formation in Christ. In various wordings, that is the uniform testimony of the New Testament. High points are, of course, 1 Cor. 13 & 16:22, Rom. 5:5, Col. 3:14, 2 Peter 1:7.

The *behavioral outcome* of such a spiritual formation is assured. “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me.... He who does not love me does not keep my words.” (John 14:21-24) Paul remarks that “love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.” (Rom. 13:10) John says bluntly: “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” (1 John 2:4) But one must understand the order that is in these sayings, or otherwise they will throw us into a legalistic frenzy—as has happened over and over in the history of Christ’s people. Accordingly, the practical aim of the one who takes obedience seriously is not to obey, but to become the kind of person who easily and routinely *does* obey as a result of devotion to Jesus and consequently of taking him as Lord, teacher and friend. The practical aim is to know him, to be devoted to him, in this inclusive manner.

What, then, does “being saved” have to do with such a transformation? We should perhaps start with recognition that, for almost everyone today in Western Christendom, being saved has *nothing* essentially to do with it. We *might* find “being saved” and such transformation conjoined in an individual here or there, and that might be regarded as admirable; but it is not normative for being a Christian, and when it does happen it has to be accounted for in terms other than the basic nature of the salvation presumed. All notable theological and ecclesiastical positions with which I am familiar in the contemporary world hold that **you can be right with God in ways that do not require transformation and in ways that do not routinely support and advance transformation.** These ways may involve (1) professing right doctrine, (2) a specified form association with a denomination or group, or—on the more liberal side—(3) a kind of vague—or even intense—sympathy with what one takes Jesus to stand for. There are, of course,

many ways in which this can be spelled out, which I have tried to deal with in more detail elsewhere.² But together these three “paths”—frequently overlapping—pretty much take in the ways in which North Americans, at least, along with many Europeans, think of themselves as “Christian.” This seems to me to be a merely descriptive point or matter of fact, which would be borne out by statistics.

Now within this broad range of Christians, a narrower group—many Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Evangelicals—think of “salvation” or “being saved” as strictly a matter of having one’s sins forgiven and of having heaven “nailed down” as a result. In what follows I am going to speak mainly to this group, because I take it to be the group mainly represented in this conference. The problem we are addressing then arises from a Soteriology that identifies being saved with having your sins forgiven. And our question then comes down to how having your sins forgiven relates to spiritual formation as process and as outcome. The background assumption is that *justification is the entirety of salvation*. If you are justified—your sins forgiven—then you are saved and you will be “okay” after your death. I submit to you that this is what is offered, in still more specific forms, by current efforts (“evangelism”) to convert people to Christianity, and it is what people generally understand to be essential to the transaction. It is how many people “come into the Church.” Other words may be used—such as “giving your heart to Jesus,” or “taking Him into your heart,” or even “accepting Jesus as Lord of your Life”—but what is essential, no matter the words, is receiving forgiveness by counting on the merits of Christ to cover your sin-debts.

To get the complete picture you have to explain how grace is understood in this context. Salvation is by grace through faith. That is a foundational truth. But it is usually understood to mean that nothing you do contributes to salvation. With this, a pervasive passivity enters the scene. You will even be told by some that your very faith in Christ as the sacrifice for your sins is not something you do, but something God just produces in you (or not). It is not just that grace is “unmerited favor,” but that it is something *exterior* to you—an event involving God in heaven, a transfer of merit from Christ to your “account.”

Now when that is done it is done. “Salvation” is complete. On some Soteriologies you have to service the account in various ways if you are going to make it in—faithfulness to the sacraments, for example, or periodic repentance and efforts to do better, perhaps, or even re-baptism—but only in cases few to none is there an insistence that you have to be significantly transformed into Christlikeness to “get in.” In one tradition it is said that *gratitude* for forgiveness will in fact make you adhere to Christ in such a way that transformation and obedience will follow. That has happened, and perhaps still happens in some cases. But if you simply observe the groups that propose this, you will see, I think, that the rate of radical transformation in them is quite low, and usually no higher than in groups which do not hold their view.

² *The Divine Conspiracy*, chapters 1 and 2.

The conclusion I draw from all of this is that a view which takes salvation to be the same thing as justification—forgiveness of sins, and assurance of heaven based upon it—*cannot* come to see spiritual formation as *a natural part* of salvation. The result of that will be the routine *omission* of spiritual formation unto Christlikeness as a serious objective of individuals and groups who hold a mere “justification” view of salvation. Further, it seems to me, adherence to this view of salvation is what **accounts for the transformation of Evangelical Christianity into a version of nominal Christianity** over the course of the 20th Century, even though, historically, Evangelicalism has strongly opposed nominal Christianity.

But is there a recognizably Christian view of salvation—one prominent in scripture and history—that *does* have spiritual formation as a natural part or outgrowth of “salvation,” understood to be an identifiable *status* (sometimes, at least, associated with a specific *event*)? You will perhaps not be surprised to hear me say that there is such a view, and that it comes in the form of the theological concept of *regeneration*.³ This is the event of **a new type of life** entering into the individual human being. The kind of life that the human being has on its own—its “natural” life, so to speak—is a kind of “death” compared to the type of life that begins to move in us at “re-generation.” Once this is mentioned, I believe the person familiar with the New Testament writings will recognize the passage from “death” to “life” as a constant biblical theme, where “life” is a real and powerful presence in the regenerate individual. (Eph. 3:20; 2 Tim. 2:1)

John the Apostle states as a sure indication that we have “passed out of death into life, <that> we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.” And also: “He who has the Son has life.” (1 John 5:11-12) “Life” is perhaps John’s favorite term for what happens when one comes to Christ. It is the entire point of “the birth from above” as discussed in John 3—a passage that is desecrated by the usual reading of it as focused upon forgiveness of sins. There the “life” is associated with seeing and entering the kingdom of God. “Birth” and “life” of course go together. Paul describes the action of God in saving us: “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” (Col. 1:13) To enter the kingdom is to have the life “from above.” *That life is the principle of kingdom inclusion.* It is otherwise described by Paul as sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus himself. “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:3) Again: “You were dead in your trespasses and sins.... But God..., even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and positioned us with Him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:1-6) That is what the birth “from above” does. Simple inductive study of the New Testament will, I believe, convince anyone that the primary way of understanding salvation according to it is in terms of a divine life that enters the human being as a gift of God. There is then **a new psychological reality** that is God acting in us and with us. Eternal life is said by Jesus to

³ See works cited in the attached bibliography.

be knowledge. Knowledge in biblical language is an interactive relationship, and in this case with “Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.” (John 17:3) Eternal life in the individual does not begin after death, but at the point where God touches the individual with redeeming grace and draws them into a life interactive with Himself and His kingdom. **A new, non-human activity becomes a part of our life.** Our life is now interwoven with His and His (amazing grace indeed!) with ours. Speaking thus we must make it clear that we are not just “talking something up,” but referring to the concrete reality of regenerate existence.

What is life? What is a *new* life? Not to attempt here a definition of life, but observation will show that life is **self-initiating, self-directing, self-sustaining activity**, of *some* kind and *some* degree. That is what distinguishes living things from non-living things, and things that are still alive from things that have died. An important part of the activity that is life consists of the living thing’s interaction with its environment, and, indeed, the *kind* of life that is in a thing determines *what counts* as its environment. The life that is in a plant makes soil, water and sunlight the major factors of its environment, and when it dies it ceases to interact with those factors by appropriate activity. A kitten has a different kind of life in it and interacts with different types of things in different ways: small rubber balls, mice, and other kittens, for example. A dead kitten is totally indifferent to those things, as the plant is indifferent *to them* while it is alive. And so on through the scale of living things. A human being, in comparison to other living things, has a real or possible environment of fantastic proportions not yet revealed. (Isa. 64:4, 1 John 3:2)

The human being is by nature meant to function on the basis of interaction between itself and God at the very center of its life. The sufficiency of God to the human being (Romans 8:31-39) is adequate to the “fantastic proportions” of human abilities and aspirations. To lose that central reality is what it means to be “dead in trespasses and sins.” Life activity *of a sort* continues on in the human being for a while, but defined in terms of the reverse trinity of the world, the flesh and the devil. (Eph. 2:2-3) But that activity draws from limited, chaotic and self-destructive resources. Its condition of *spiritual* death ends in *total* death. (Rom. 8:5-6)

God alone has life in himself (John 5:26), and it is he who gives life to all things. (1 Tim. 6:13) He alone can say “I am that I am.” (Ex. 3:14—Not, please: “I am who I am”! That is no distinction.) Life in anything other than God is always dependent. Its self-initiating, self-directing, self-sustaining activity is always limited and dependent on other things—ultimately upon God. In re-generation God, utilizing various instrumentalities, imparts his own life to the fallen life of the human being apart from God. The self-initiating, self-directing, self-sustaining activity of God now penetrates the darkened world of the human soul and begins to act in it and around it. It has rarely if ever been better said than this:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay
 Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
 Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray,
 I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
 My chains fell off, my heart was free;
 I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”

Charles Wesley

Salvation, being saved, is then not a meager, merely human existence here, but with a heavenly account flush in the transferred merits of Christ. It is a human existence, to be sure—meager as it may be—but one in which the currents of divine life have at least begun to pulsate. It is: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:27) It is: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it...” (Phil. 1:6) It is: “God, who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) It is: becoming “partakers of divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” (2 Peter 1:4) It is: “Your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:3)

Now life of whatever kind has a natural development. This is the absolutely crucial point for our discussion here. The “activity” that is life is poised for a specific order of development. It can be deflected or stunted, but its natural course is set by the kind of life it is. The same is true with the new life “from above” that enters the human being, however degraded, upon regeneration. The first clear manifestation of heavenly life in the individual is recognition, hearty confidence, that Jesus really is the Anointed One, Christ, Lord. This is not primarily a *profession*. It is a gripping realization of what is the case. It is not possible for the unaided human being to arrive at such a condition. When it gripped Peter, the Lord told him that only divine assistance could have brought it to him. Not “flesh and blood.” (Matt. 16:16-17) That was not a point upon which error could be tolerated. Jesus went on to say that the *rock* of this realization would be the foundation upon which his triumphant *ἐκκλησίαν* would prevail and stand, with access (“keys”) to the resources of the kingdom of the heavens. Paul, in helping the Corinthians come to an understanding of where God was really present, pointed out that “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by assistance from the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:3) When one understands the realities involved here it will be clear why: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.” (Rom. 10:9) (To “confess” is to *own up* to a condition of your soul; to *profess* is to *put forth* an understanding of something.) Confidence in Jesus as absolute Maestro of the universe is the first indication of regeneration. It is this, not a mere credit transfer, that constitutes a “personal relationship with Jesus.”

The natural consequence of this confidence is apprenticeship to Jesus in kingdom living. We will not say that failure to become the apprentice or disciple of Jesus is a metaphysical impossibility for one who has confidence that he is Lord of the universe. A

certain degree of understanding of “what comes next” is presupposed, and in the midst of confused teaching and example, things might not proceed as they naturally would. Life in all its forms permits of distortion within limits, of not becoming what it was meant to be. But in the nature of the case, one who really understands who Jesus is sees their own situation in a realistic light and wants to take measures to remedy their condition by staying as close to Jesus as possible. Discipleship is a natural part of confidence in Jesus as he really is.

What exactly is a “faith” that does not naturally express itself in discipleship to Jesus. It would be that of a person who simply would use something Jesus did, but “has no use” for him. This is the person I have outrageously called the “vampire Christian.” “I’ll take a bit of your blood, Jesus—enough to cover my debts—but I’ll not be staying close to you until I have to.” Wouldn’t heaven be hell for a person stuck forever with the company of someone (the magnificent Jesus and the Trinity) that they did not admire or even like enough to stay as close to them as possible? There is no way you can say that such a person has faith or confidence in *Jesus Christ*. This is not “the faith which works by love” (Gal. 5:6), or the faith through which Christ dwells in the heart. (Eph. 3:17) It is not the faith which is a natural part of regeneration as life from above.

Discipleship may be loosely described as staying as close to Jesus Christ as possible. It is life *with* him, which from the reverse side is his life with us. As his disciples we are learning from Jesus how to live our life here and now in the kingdom of the heavens as he would live our life if he were we. Now the locus of our life with him as disciples is precisely obedience where we are. Our “obedience” to start with will be ragged, messy and inadequate. But we are not trying to be “righteous” anyway. All hope in that direction has been abandoned and we do not deal with ourselves or with others on the basis of “righteousness.” Our faith in Christ, now that we understand what it is, is the basis upon which our interactive relationship with God in Christ is based. “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (Rom. 4:3) That is to say, God based His relationship to Abraham upon Abraham’s confidence in God, not on Abraham having always done or continuing to do “the right thing.” So with us. Obedience to Jesus Christ is not how we earn anything, it is simply the place where the kingdom of God is in relation to us. It is where we know it and where we know him. Merit is not the issue. Life is the issue: life beyond merit.

That enables us to get grace right. Grace is God acting in our life to bring about, and to enable us to do, what we cannot do on our own. (2 Tim. 2:1) Inductive study of scripture, once again, will make this unmistakably clear. Grace is inextricably bound up with discipline in the life of the disciple or apprentice of Jesus. Discipline in the spiritual life is doing something in our power that enables us to do what we cannot do by direct effort—because in this way we meet the action of God (grace) with us, and the outcome is humanly inexplicable. This is what it means to speak of discipline as “a means to grace.” Thus Jesus tells his puzzled and frightened friends that, if they love him they will

keep his commandments, and God will give them “another Helper” that will always be with them. (John 14:15-16) Loving him, keeping his commandments, and Trinitarian co-habitation are inseparable parts of the life into which regeneration “naturally” develops. (14:9-28)

Thus the famous statement of Jesus about truly being his disciples: “If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32) The “abiding” here is “dwelling in” or living in. The word is μένῃτε. It is the same basic term used in the great teaching of John 15:1-7—*Abide in me, as the branch dwells in the vine*. But what does it mean “to abide in his word”? It means to put his words into action, to act according to them. When we do that we “inhale” the reality of the kingdom. That is what it means to be his “disciples indeed.” And one who does this will come to know the truth, the reality, of the kingdom and of God’s action with them, and that in turn will enable them to live free from the bondage of sin. This is exactly the situation that Paul is spelling out in Romans 6: “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.” (vs. 14—“Grace,” of course, as an active agency in the psychological and biological reality of the disciple.)

So we think like this: Being a disciple (apprentice, student) of Jesus is the status into which regeneration naturally brings us, just because of the nature of the belief in Christ through which regeneration expresses itself. Now discipleship to Jesus has as its natural outcome transformation of character—the hidden realities of heart, mind, soul, body and social atmosphere—in such a way that conformity to his commands becomes the easy, routine, standard way the well-developed disciple comports himself or herself. (We of course are not talking about *legalistic* perfection, or perfection in the way it has been taken in most of the battles over that subject. And, of course, when we say “natural” here, we mean it in such a way that it does not exclude, but actually requires, the *supernatural*—as should be clear from what we have already said.)

It should be clear that we, with all our faults and failures, have an indispensable role in both discipleship and in spiritual formation. “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.” (1Cor. 16:13) Once we are clear that the issue is no longer merit, but life—that grace is not opposed to effort but to earning—this responsibility should cause no problem. We are quite prepared to hear the ceaseless admonitions to action set down in scripture, to welcome them, and to undertake the corresponding actions—as best we can, learning as we go. Paul’s admonitions to “put off the old person and put on the new” now present themselves as something **we are to do!** James’ directive to “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (1:22) is completely appropriate. Jesus’ own picture of the foolishness of those who hear him but do not do what he says (Luke 6:49) makes utter sense. “The grace of God which brings salvation” does not offer us a cushion, but “...instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age...zealous

for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14) That looks like the only way for a believer in Jesus to go anyway.

The key to it all, from the point of view of action, is indirection. We want to obey Jesus, and we know that we cannot do this just by trying to do what he said. We understand that we are broken—not only wrong but *wrung*, twisted, with parts that do not connect up right. We realize that our feelings, embedded in our body and its social context, are running and ruining our life, and producing godless and destructive actions under the direction of false ideas and images and messed up patterns of thinking. We know that we must, instead of just trying to obey, find a way to become the kind of person who does, easily and routinely, what Jesus said—does it without having to think much about it, if at all, in the ordinary case. It is here that disciplines come to our rescue, always encompassed by grace. In engaging disciplines we go to the root of the tree of our life, the sources of behavior. We do the things that will transform our minds, our feelings, our will, our embodied and social existence, even the depths of our soul, to “make the tree good, and its fruit good.” (Matt. 12:33) We cultivate and fertilize the tree. (Luke 13:8) We don’t try to squeeze fruit out of the ends of its branches. In doing this we use tried and true methods of Christ’s people, as well as any sensible means at our disposal, including “professional help.” And in this way we become, by divine grace, the kind of person who does the things Jesus said to do and avoids what he said not do. From the point of view of our assemblies of disciples, we “teach disciples to do everything Jesus commanded.” (Matt. 28:20)

So all of this—if we “get it”—can give us a practical hope when we look at remarkable New Testament passages such as 2 Peter 1:1-11, Colossians 3, and 1 Corinthians 13, or at the landmark literature of discipleship and spiritual formation generated by the lives of disciples throughout the Christian ages (Francis of Assisi, Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, etc.).

In 2 Peter 1 the writer addresses “those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” He then prays that “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of <’interactive relationship with’> God and of Jesus our Lord.” He cites the fact that “through genuine knowledge of Him who called us to Him by His own glory and virtue...divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.” (vs. 3) All of this means that “He has given to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by desire (‘lust’/ἐπιθυμία). This brings fully before us the picture of salvation as leading a life that is caught up in the kingdom of the heavens, or in what God is doing in human history. It is a life in which “God works all things together for good to those who love him and are absorbed into his purposes.” (Rom. 8:28) It is “resurrection” life”: a life already beyond death. (John 8:51-52 & 11:25-26; Col. 3:1-4)

And then there comes as a “natural part” of such life the active response of discipleship and spiritual (trans)formation. “Now for this very reason,” the writer continues—or, “Because all of this is so”—“also, applying all diligence, in your faith achieve moral excellence (‘virtue’/ἀρετήν), and in your moral excellence achieve knowledge, in your knowledge achieve self-control, in your self-control achieve endurance, in your endurance achieve constant adoration (εὐσεβειαν), in your adoration achieve kindness to others <‘brotherly love’>, and in your kindness to others achieve divine love (ἀγάπην).” (1 Peter 1:5-7)

We do not have time and space here to discuss each of these in turn, but an adequate course in discipleship and spiritual formation would go into each of these “additions” and explore how each lays a foundation for the later ones, and how each of the later ones enriches and strengthens the earlier ones. Also, such a course—should it not be the standard curriculum of our local assemblies and denominations?—would go into detail as to how, starting from faith, one achieves virtue, from virtue one achieves knowledge, and so forth, always presupposing divine assistance, grace, in the human progression. This would be done in a way that includes practical directions, training sessions, and disciplines, not just “information”—though the relevant information is crucial and currently is sorely lacking. Such details were not laid out in the New Testament because they were conveyed by the examples and practices of the communities arising out of the original fellowship of Jesus and his Apostles.

Peter, in any case, clearly assumes that “these qualities are <to be> yours and increasing,” and that “they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the genuine knowledge of <interactive relationship with> our Lord Jesus Christ.” (vs. 8) That would be the natural progression and outcome of spiritual formation in the disciple. *Diligence* in this direction makes one sure of his “calling and election,” “because as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble, and because in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.” (vss 10-11) We should not assume that this latter “entrance” refers primarily to the famous “gates of splendor”—though that entrance is certainly grand and important, and is also included in the package. It too is a “natural part” of the *life* in question. Rather, the eternal kingdom mentioned, as the context should make clear, is the one Jesus announced as already “at hand,” from which the regenerate person is drawing “the life that is life indeed.” (2 Tim. 6:19)

Now with all of this before us we can perhaps make good *practical* sense of the parting admonition of 2nd Peter: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (3:18) Grace, we have said, is God acting in our life to bring about results beyond human ability, and *knowledge*, biblically, is interactive relationship with what is known. They are two aspects of one reality in the concrete existence of the disciple of Jesus living out the process of spiritual formation. But for our purposes here it is vital to understand that we can, by our attitudes and actions, actually *increase* the

amount of grace and knowledge of Christ that is in our lives. “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus,” Paul instructs Timothy. (2 Tim. 2:1) To increase in grace and knowledge is to open our life ever more fully to the presence/action of God with us in all we are and do. This is something we intentionally undertake and learn to do as we go. In Old Testament language it is to “*acknowledge* him in all our ways.” (Prov. 3:5-7) It is increasingly to “humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.” On prevailing understandings of grace and salvation, however, 2 Peter 3:18 seems to remain in the category of pretty words without practical implications. “Christian education” now has the mandate to change that.

So, just to review and reemphasize: Regeneration, entry of God’s nature and life into our real existence and identity, has, as a natural progression or part, entry into the status of discipleship to Jesus Christ in the power of the new life. Living in the status of disciple has, as a natural part and progression, spiritual formation in Christlikeness. Progression in spiritual formation in Christlikeness leads to easy, routine obedience to the commandments Christ brought to us, and to living the public life—from the inside out—any sincere and thoughtful person would expect from the biblical record and the track record of the “great ones” in Christian history. In practice all of this is, no doubt, more ragged and messy than I have, for the sake of simplicity, made it look here, but the basic structure is clear and holds up in the demands of actual human existence.

But this leaves us with **difficult practical problems** facing the project of spiritual formation in Christlikeness in our local assemblies and in the larger units of Christian organization—even, indeed, in the “Christian” atmosphere of thought still pervading the Western world. We have to deal with a massive population of churchd and unchurchd people who think of “being saved” or “being right with God” merely in terms of some picture of justification, not regeneration. Being “born again” is usually understood now, not in terms of being animated by a “life from above,” but in terms of a profession of faith—often a profession of faith in the death of Christ as bearing the punishment for sin that otherwise would fall on us. This understanding usually prevails in ways that do not involve—may not even make mention of—participation in divine life. (And, of course, one can *mention* it without engaging it.) Then, of course, the otherwise natural progression into discipleship and its spiritual (trans)formation **naturally** does **not** occur, and the churches and surrounding society is flooded with discipleshipless Christians whose lives seem not to differ profoundly, if at all, from non-Christians. Because of human hunger for something deeper than a strictly physical existence, we then see multitudes who say that they are not religious (not “churchd,” they usually mean) but they nonetheless are “very spiritual.” Most often these are people who *think* they have seen, and seen *through*, the authentic Christian way. (Ironically, the “spirituality” they practice commonly has little or no bearing on their character, for they despise “morality” almost as much as they do “religion,” and morality now is often lumped together or confused with religion: treated as “the same thing.”)

For Evangelical Christians, turning around the ship of their social reality, and restoring the understanding of salvation that characterized evangelicalism from its beginnings in Luther, and periodically after him, will be very difficult if not impossible. It would primarily be a work of scriptural interpretation and theological reformulation, but modification of time-hardened practices will also be required. Radical changes in what we do in the way of “church” will have to be made.⁴ This in turn will demand the utmost in loving character, humility of mind, and dependence upon the hand of God in a “with God” life.⁵ But that is the way it is supposed to be anyway, is it not? It can be done and has been done, providing some of the most brilliant periods in the history of Christ’s people.

I will suggest two steps on the way forward. **One** is that responsible leaders at all levels of Christian activity begin to exemplify and teach, in their official activities, spiritual formation in Christlikeness as something essential to the condition of “being saved”—not as a *precondition* but as a natural development. How that is to be worked out, avoiding “works righteousness” and legalism, is something that must be carefully elaborated in scriptural, theological, ecclesiastical, and psychological terms. **The other** is that efforts in evangelism and toward increasing “church membership” be very purposively reoriented toward **bringing people to the point of regeneration and discipleship**. The work of turning people to Christ is not done until that point. If we continue to make “converts” or “Christians,” instead of disciples animated with the life from above that comes at “new” birth, spiritual formation and obedience to Christ (doing “all that he commanded”) have little prospect other than that of a passing fad, which will certainly disappoint or will fade into diverse legalisms and vacuous “spiritualities”—things that fall entirely within human abilities, otherwise known as “the flesh.”

The future of vital Christian life lies in the hands of the pastors and others who teach for Christ—especially including those who teach pastors. What will they do? The greatest field open for *discipleship evangelism* today is the North American and European churches and seminaries (“divinity” schools). They are full of people hungering for the real life which, surely we all know, is offered in companionship with Christ in his kingdom.

⁴ I have tried to outline some of the basic changes in Chapters 12 and 13 of *Renovation of the Heart*. American edition.

⁵ Richard Foster, *Life With God*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008.

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