

# A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation

## *Online Discussion Post Ideas*

**Evan B. Howard**



© 2018 by Evan B. Howard

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
[www.bakeracademic.com](http://www.bakeracademic.com)

All rights reserved. You are hereby granted permission to use these materials in handouts, course packs, and onscreen presentations in individual educational or ministry settings. For all other uses, please contact [permissions@BakerAcademic.com](mailto:permissions@BakerAcademic.com).

Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

These are the discussion prompts I used for the online component of an adult Sunday school–level class on Christian spiritual formation that used *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* as the primary textbook. Each discussion prompt reviews the material from the session on the previous chapter and invites initial reflection on the next chapter, which the students would read during the following week.

## **After Class 1**

This discussion, our very first in this class on Christian spiritual formation, is really quite simple. We need to accomplish two things: (1) we need to introduce ourselves to each other, and (2) we need to begin thinking about Christian spiritual formation. We will do this by dividing our forum assignment into three parts. Feel free to introduce yourself to your fellow students with the following:

- First, give a brief summary about who you are.
- Second, drawing from your sources for this week (by either quoting, mentioning a concept from the source, naming the source and what you got out of it, or some other way of showing the relationship of your thought to the sources), share one insight you had about the nature of Christian spiritual formation.
- Finally, I would like you to share a brief formation story from your life. Can you, in a single paragraph, recount a memory of any encounter or experience where you were “formed” (perhaps even formed spiritually)?

## **After Class 2**

So far you have read chapter 1 and participated in a class that discussed the definitions and the elements of Christian spiritual formation. Some of you have also read chapter 2 by now, though you will not attend the class that discusses chapter 2 until later. Here are a couple of questions as we look at each of these chapters. Feel free to write a post on either or both questions, but give your post a name so we know what you are writing about.

- Is Christian spiritual formation dangerous? Some people, particularly in the blogosphere, argue that Christian spiritual formation is unbiblical, that it incorrectly understands the human condition, that it imposes practices that are not given by God, or that it opens us up to spiritual experiences that are not from God. See, for example, <http://christianresearchnetwork.org/topic/spiritual-formation/>. Given what you have learned so far in the class, what do you think about these issues and why?
- Chapter 2 presents a big story of transformation, what I call the “all things new” story. It is a story of deliverance, relationship, provision, and invitation to a response of formation. It is a story that involves not only our prayer but also our wider obligations. What do you think of this “all things new” story? What questions, concerns, excitements might you share with your fellow students?

## **After Class 3**

In class this week we talked about the Big Story, the gospel message of “all things new” and how the Scripture presents a beautiful story of mission and formation. In chapter 3 you will read

about the “all things new” story from the side of human experience. God desires to accomplish a deep and wide transformation because the people God were created to live a deep and wide life. It’s who we are. A couple of discussion ideas emerge from thinking about these topics. Feel free to write on any or all of them (or perhaps you can ask a question of your own and we can explore that together):

- Our discussion of story led us to see that God seems to deal with his people by delivering them, reaffirming his covenant with them, and then inviting and providing means of relationship that are appropriate to that time and people. One aspect of the “fullness” is addressed more at one time and another at another time. What do you think God is doing here and now with the church of God in the West? How would you take the frameworks of this chapter and describe God’s invitation(s) to his people today?
- The chapter on fullness is meant to complement the scriptural reflections in chapter 2 and to lead us into thinking about aims. It is the connection between the *fullness/bigness* of God’s design (in history and in human experience) and the *aim* of Christian spiritual formation that is important. But this picture can feel complicated or a bit too much. How does this big, “all things new” picture affect the way you have looked at formation? What does all this mean for the way we pursue our relationship with Christ? What questions or concerns do you have about growing in Christ as a result of examining these two chapters?

## After Class 4

This week we look back to our discussion of the fullness and aims of Christian spiritual formation, and we look forward to our exploration of how it all works: context, agents, process, and task (*reading chapters 4 and 5*). Pick one of these questions (or both) and have fun commenting:

- *Wish, aim, and goal.* I think that a lot of us want to grow in Christ. But I’m not sure we make it a goal. We don’t plan for growth. This is just my observation. So let’s talk about it. What have you seen? Am I on target here? If so, why is it that many people do not make spiritual maturity a goal or strategize to reach this aim? If not, what have you seen? Where does the evidence point, and what does all this mean for our own personal life and the life of the church today?
- *How it all works.* You have read about a lot of new terms in these two chapters: context, agents, process, task. This is probably a good time for an open, online “question and answer” session. What do you think you got out of these chapters? Where are you still scratching your head? Do you have a sense of what an *active cultivation of appropriate Christian transformation* might look like? Where are you lost? What other questions do you have about how it works? Feel free to share insights from your optional resources as well.

Discussion contributions are not merely “assignments” but also another means of joining class conversation. This is a way of extending our conversations in class, so feel free to include material from class conversation.

## After Class 5

In the class session, you were able to gain some clarity about the task of Christian spiritual formation and work your way a little bit toward a statement of the task of formation with regard to your own participation in this class. What is the next appropriate step forward? In your reading following the lecture you have been learning about the means of grace: the Holy Spirit, community, spiritual disciplines, and the trials of life. A couple of questions emerge from these themes:

- The *task* of formation. It seems like this idea of a wisdom approach to formation, with all the attention to context, agents, means, and so on, requires too much knowledge and effort. Isn't it all just too much? Who is able to do this kind of thing? Isn't it better that we just supply for people a simple formula for growth that they can understand? Or perhaps the emphasis should really be on just developing gratitude and trust in the work of Christ on the cross, accepting our forgiveness, letting go and letting God do the transformation. You can probably guess what your instructor might think about such matters. But what do *you* think and *why*?
- The *means* of formation. One of the questions we face—as those who not only make use of means in our own lives but also suggest means of grace for others—is the question of how to recommend their use. How do we encourage the use of means (even particular means) without being legalistic or oppressing others with “works”? How have you seen the encouragement toward means abused? How have you seen this handled well? What might you recommend for those of us who might be encouraging others after we finish this class?

## After Class 6

This past week we discussed the various means of grace that serve as vehicles through which the Holy Spirit does a transforming work in our lives. This coming week your reading and resources will be all about prayer. We might pose two questions in this light:

- Making intentional use of a variety of means of grace—particularly spiritual disciplines like fasting, private retreats, vigils, attendance at various meetings, and so on—could become an unhealthy focus on “works.” However, on the other hand, refraining from these (or other) means could be an expression of trust in the work of the Holy Spirit (but it also could become an unhealthy, lazy faith). Drawing from your readings and resources in this class, how might you learn where this fine line is both in your own life and for others whom you are leading?
- The Christian life is an “all things new” life. Every aspect of our lives is involved in the big and beautiful restoration that God intends for us. Yet prayer has some kind of priority in it all. Relationship with God is about, well, relationship with God: it seems like prayer is an integral part. Or does it? What do you think? Drawing from your resources for the week, offer your own reflections on the centrality of prayer in the Christian life.

## After Class 7

In the previous class lecture you explored the work of formation when it comes to our life with God in prayer. In your resources for the upcoming week, you will explore the world of being formed together as households, congregations, networks, and new monastic communities. A couple of questions emerge from this exploration:

- With regard to *prayer*. At the end of both the book and the class session, we focused on the task of formation. What does it mean to help another person (or even ourselves) take an appropriate next step of growth in relationship with God in prayer? There is an art to this, but any art is rooted in a set of skills and techniques and perspectives. What have you noticed so far? What are the steps, the resources, and the wisdom skills we need in order to help someone mature in prayer? How do we as leaders acquire these skills?
- With regard to *community*. It is always easy to gripe or complain about church. It is harder—but perhaps more productive—to explore what went well and why (for an example of how to do this as a daily practice, see <http://www.drmontedavenport.com/www/>). We will not do this WWW practice in a daily way this week. Our aim is to look back through our history of involvement with community and identify a time or two when things went well. See if you can describe an environment within which you saw a community contributing to an individual's formation or being formed into Christ. Then, take the next step of asking why. What was present in this environment to make it a positive means of grace?

## After Class 8

This past week we have been discussing being formed together. This coming week you will be exploring personal formation: character development and the like. One aspect of formation that we have only touched on in this course is spiritual warfare: combating the work of evil forces. It is interesting how the terms “devil” or “Satan” or “demons” come up in the Epistles with regard to issues of both corporate and personal life (see, for example, 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 4:27; 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Pet. 5:8). As you will see by reading these passages (and others like them), there are general principles underlying the particular circumstances and applications. So, the question for our discussion this week is, based on these Scriptures, how are we to be formed as individuals and communities so as to gain both victory over the enemy and newness of life? How do you see this in the passages, and how have you seen it in actual practice?

## After Class 9

In class we talked about forming the character of an individual: how we grow in heart, mind, and habit. In your resources this week you will be exploring the formation of missional congregations, asking how they relate to the world. By now you are beginning to get a sense of how we pay attention to the elements of formation in order to facilitate the growth of individuals and communities in ever greater conformity to the life and gospel of Christ. Let's put the two together in our discussion prompt. How do mission and personal formation come together?

- What habits, heart, or character are especially needed for a church to become a missional force in the world today, and how might we facilitate the development of those virtues of heart, mind, and life that are especially needful today?
- What is an “appropriate next step” of growth for your own congregation’s missional strategy? Compare my analysis of St. Cuthbert’s (pp. 194–97) with your own congregation. What are the similarities and differences? What suggestions would you have for forming a community of mission here and now?

## **After Class 10**

In the past week we have discussed mission. In the upcoming week you will explore discernment. These two are combined most clearly in the concept of vocation or “call.” Often someone will speak in a church meeting and describe a “call to missions.” They will tell of the circumstances and leadings that brought them to the conclusion that they are indeed “called.” But in this book I have been describing mission and formation as the very nature of the Christian story. It may be a cliché, but “we are *all* called to mission.” In light of the new mission consensus, our mission field is at our front door. Furthermore, our sense of call is both a matter of simple acknowledgement of our place in the Big Story and our sense of the task of discernment, discerning the next appropriate step of formation. Thus our sense of mission and our walk in discernment are one and the same. But all this leads to complications—and my question for the week:

- Does this breadth of formation, these elements of a new missional consensus, and the various virtues and procedures involved in discernment make the Christian life too complicated? Shouldn’t we just read our Bible and obey it? Doesn’t the Spirit guide us where we need to go? Why do we need all these categories?

## **After Class 11 (Prior to the Final Class Session)**

There can be only one real question at this point in the class: What have you learned through this class? Drawing from something of this week’s resources and something from previous resources in the class, share with your fellow classmates two of your big takeaways from this class. They can be either academic or personal. But if they are academic, describe how they can be applied; if they are personal, share where they came from in terms of the course content.