



The Task of Spiritual Formation

They were being formed then.

The year was 1935 and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a faithful disciple of Jesus, was tasked with leading an underground seminary in a small German town called Finkenwalde. This seminary was fueled by the radical vision of helping believers resist the growing pressure of falling in line with the Nazi movement by instead building lives around prayer, the Scriptures, and a shared fellowship. The seminary was closer in form to a spiritual boot-camp than a mere Sunday school class. There were high expectations because they were faced with a high cost.

The story goes that a friend came to him asking if Bonhoeffer's expectations for the seminary were too high; was this level of formation truly necessary? Bonhoeffer responded by taking his friend on a rowing trip to Oder Sound. He led them to a clearing where a Nazi training camp could be seen in the distance. As they watched Nazi planes take-off and land, and soldiers fall in line, Bonhoeffer began to share about the driving force behind his vision. One historian described it this way: "Bonhoeffer spoke of a new generation of Germans in training, whose disciplines were formed 'for a kingdom... of hardness and cruelty.' It would be necessary, he explained, to propose a superior discipline if the Nazis were to be defeated." The vision was clear: whatever spiritual formation was happening in Finkenwalde had to be stronger than the formation that was happening in the culture.

We are being formed now.

To be clear, this is not to imply that we are living in Nazi Germany. Yet, what was overtly seen then is still true now – culture forms us. Always. Think about it for a moment. We live in a culture where the average American spends 4.8 hours (a whopping $\frac{1}{3}$ of their daily waking time) on their smartphone¹ consuming content from someone they've likely never met before. We live in a culture where the sixty-hour workweek is normalized, and rest is treated as a luxury. We live in a culture where people are publicly cancelled for holding differing political ideals or social values. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are being formed.

Let's illustrate this with a specific example: our culture's message on the celebration of sexual fulfillment. Think about any of the TV shows you've watched recently. Odds are, it builds itself around the on-again-off-again tension of two main characters, and then it culminates in them getting together and having sex. More often than we'd care to admit, we find ourselves celebrating this moment of our favorite characters getting together. Yet, if one of our friends came to us and shared that after a semester of pursuing another person they had finally had sex with them, would we celebrate? The Bible's message is that sex belongs within the celebration of marriage. TV disagrees. But tell me, which message have you spent more time consuming this week? This is the battle over our formation. As followers of Jesus, we need to grow in our awareness of the ways in which we are being formed and in which direction.

In order to resist cultural pressures in the opposite direction of truth, disciples of Jesus need a more superior discipline elsewhere. Our Spiritual formation must be stronger than our cultural formation. If this language of Spiritual formation is new to you, it is important to define what we're talking about. John Mark Comer in his book *Live No Lies*, defines it this way:



“Spiritual formation is the process by which we are formed in our spirits, or inner persons, into the image of Jesus. Or conversely, deformed into the image of the devil. Spiritual formation isn’t just a follower of Jesus thing; it’s a human thing. We’re all being formed every minute of every day. We’re all becoming someone. Intentional or unintentional, conscious or subconscious, deliberate or haphazard, we’re all in a process of becoming a person.” – John Mark Comer

Formation is not optional. The question is not *if* we are being formed but *how*. Will we be deformed into the image of the devil, or formed into the image of Jesus?

So what do we do about it?

This process of Spiritual formation should not be just a *reactive* step to dealing with cultural lies and lived-out sin in our lives. If so, we would already always be operating on the defensive, trying to counteract our negative formation. Rather we should embrace the *proactive* process of discipleship which is building a foundation that can help us resist the cultural pressure we come across when we come across it. To use our previous example, we shouldn’t just turn to the Bible to try to “fix” ourselves once lust is running rampant in our lives. Rather, if we start building a theological understanding of sex first, then we’ll be better able to handle the temptation when it arises.

But how can we be proactive? Let’s look at two main areas: Kingdom convictions and spiritual disciplines.

Cultivate Kingdom Convictions

One of the biggest ways we can deepen our Spiritual formation is by cultivating Kingdom convictions. As disciples of Jesus, we operate under His Kingship. This means, among many other things, that we are to learn about and live under the values of His Kingdom. This includes things like honor, humility, forgiveness, loving your enemy, generosity, hope, etc. These values, as we have already talked about, are not always in line with the values of the kingdom of man. But, if we can know them and partner with the Holy Spirit in holding them dear, we can walk with a spiritual fortitude that withstands any kind of collision with the values of the world. We identify as citizens of Christ’s Kingdom first, and thus hold allegiance to His laws.

A way to hold these Kingdom convictions in the face of cultural opposition is to train yourself to ask the right questions. When we ask ourselves “what is right in this situation?,” the reality is, we may not always answer from a Kingdom perspective. Maybe pride gets in the way, or bad advice, or lingering worldly views. Instead, if we can learn to ask “what difference does the Gospel make here?,” we will instead be teaching ourselves to view everything through a Christ-led lens. It is impossible to tackle every possible heart issue in our discipleship meetings, but if we proactively train ourselves and others to ask this question, we can be formed in a way that when heart issues arise, we already know how to approach them.

For example, as you begin to ask what difference does the gospel make in your community, you begin to see that the Kingdom conviction is to walk with humility and to honor those around you. As such, we choose trust over suspicion when dealing with unmet expectations or conflict in these relationships. Or, as you begin to ask what difference does the Gospel make in your studies, you begin to see that the Kingdom conviction is that you are a steward of your academics, and you need to resist the cultural



pressure to become a slave – indebted with your identity – to the outcome of your exams. No matter the area, the Gospel will have an answer to what a Kingdom-led response would be.

Develop Spiritual Disciplines

As we talk about Spiritual formation, it is also important to note that we are not purely spiritual beings. We are body, soul, and spirit and thus, we can take physical steps that train us on a soul level. Disciplines such as prayer and fasting train our souls to depend on the Lord. The discipline of reading Scripture trains us to not believe the lies of the enemy but instead be saturated in the truth of God. The discipline of Sabbath trains our souls to be filled in the presence of God and resist the lie that we have to earn our rest. The discipline of silence and solitude trains us to tune out the noise that we are bombarded with everyday and listen attentively to the voice of God.

Indeed, these disciplines are necessary because the formation of the world is also in our actions: scrolling TikTok makes us crave the things we consume on it. Spending all our time in the library or office traps us in its value system, forgetting that work performance is not the only variable of worth in our life. Always giving our bodies exactly what they want -- whether that is a food or sloth or sex -- teaches us that life is only about fulfilling our desires. We learn to think that we are king of our lives, rather than The King himself.

The goal of these disciplines is never the discipline itself. The goal of the disciplines is our formation into the image of Christ. These disciplines build liturgies: rhythms of spiritual formation that continually point us back to Jesus. As we are formed, the Lord equips us to be ready for the mission to which we are called. The aim of the Christian life is not 'project-self'. The Lord does care deeply about our formation out of his love and desire for us to be like Him. Still, the natural and necessary outflow of our transformation is to wholly embrace his mission in the world. As deeply formed disciples, we can then go forth and make disciples who are likewise formed deeply into the image of Jesus.

Relevant Scriptures

- Romans 12:1-2
- Galatians 4:19
- Romans 8:1-17

Application

1. What is an area that you need to think more deeply about how you're being formed? (i.e. social media, shows/movies, news outlets, music, etc...)
2. Where do you need to ask "what difference does the Gospel make here?"
3. What is one cultural narrative that you want to grow in resisting? What spiritual discipline do you think will help you grow in this area?

Relevant Reading

- *The Deeply Formed Life* by Rich Villodas
- *Beautiful Resistance* by Jon Tyson
- *Live No Lies* by John Mark Comer
- *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster

¹ State of the Mobile Report 2022

