

THE JOURNEY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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The Trailhead: Human Persons-in-Relationship

“Where do we start from?” Metaphorically speaking, “Where is the trailhead into this territory?” I raise this question because of a basic, pervasive reality: well-meaning Christians of various stripes often say the same thing but mean something quite different. For example, there is disagreement among Christians as to the meaning and significance of the biblical word “sanctification” even though it is used in all Christian theological traditions.¹ This is because of critical differences in the “starting point”—the most basic philosophical and theological assumptions that undergird each tradition’s appropriation of the word. The same is true for the use of the term “spiritual formation.” Without intending to do so, we may find ourselves at odds and unable to meaningfully communicate with those whose opinions we value but whose assumptions about the Christian spiritual life might be different than ours. I refer here to family members, friends, pastors, academic theologians, authors. Although we mutually self-identify as Christians, in reality we may be on quite different paths of spiritual formation. Although confessing the same Lord, faith, and baptism, we may be so disconnected from each other’s way of life that we fail to recognize what is spiritually formative in each other and even sometimes discount or devalue each other.

Let me illustrate by highlighting two such starting points that Christians often take to live, describe, and study the spiritual life, each pointing the person down a different path of spiritual formation. One common trailhead sets a course to keep the focus on that which is external to the individual human person. Most often the argument goes something like this: we must begin with God—the character of God, God’s sovereign will, God’s graceful initiative to humankind—because if we don’t, we end up with a distorted, ego-centric form of humanistic spirituality, a creating of God in our own image. Or this approach may take the form of asserting that we must begin with the corporate, as opposed to the individual, expression of humanity, the community of faith—its institutional forms, its doctrine, liturgy, practices, and sociological dynamics—because if we don’t, we end up with an individualistic, solipsistic spirituality that is ultimately self-serving. Or the claim may be that we start with the “world”—the creation, the built environment, and the socio-cultural-political structures that liberate or oppress—because if we don’t, we end up with an insulated, Church-centered Christianity that may only concern itself with the salvation of “souls” and ignore the larger biblical concerns for justice, peace, and reconciliation. Regardless of expression, this path of spiritual formation keeps the focus on an exterior landscape.

Another common trailhead sets a different course, one that intentionally keeps the focus on the individual human person and her or his internal dynamics, arguing that the only way to understand God is to pay attention to the object of God’s saving actions in the world—the redeemed one, the one being sanctified, the locus of the Holy Spirit’s activity. This essentially

¹ Donald Alexander (Ed.) *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989).

inductive approach may assert the priority of individual religious experience, or the salvation of souls, or personal devotion, or psychological healing and transformation, or discerning life and vocational direction with reference to the speaking or leading of God's Spirit within. The argument asserts that if we don't, we end up with a purely cognitive spirituality ("all head, no heart"), or simple conformity to group ritual without inner transformation, or a lifestyle that excuses personal sin if one is linked with just social causes. To avoid these dangers, this path of spiritual formation keeps the focus on an interior landscape.

Although each of these two trailheads has merit each is too limited in scope to comprehend the fullness of the territory of Christian spirituality. This distinction between exterior and interior landscapes and the respective arguments supporting each claim to a "rightful" starting point may be useful for certain kinds of theological discussions, but it is of no help in the territory of spiritual theology.² In fact, either path followed exclusively will constrict the spiritual formation process, ultimately thwarting the transformative work (and play!) of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And so, I want to be clear about the starting point in this book, a trailhead that will set the course to be explored in subsequent chapters. The trailhead we are starting from is "both/and" not "either/or;"³ therefore, our vision includes both the exterior and interior landscapes. Christian spiritual formation can only be understood when *both* the external realities of God, Church, and world *and* the internal (bio-psycho-socio) realities of individual human persons are involved at the beginning, all the way through, and at the end.

Asserting the joint and mutual importance of both the external and the internal, the divine and the human in a clear and forceful way tests the limits of language. This is often the case when one is dealing with a complex and paradoxical reality. British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald W. Winnicott, illustrated this when he boldly stated at a professional meeting that '*There is no such thing as a baby.*' Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But its veracity becomes apparent when you hear his full meaning, "that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a *baby and someone*. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a

² This broad dichotomy is my way to name one of the most basic differences in paths. Others make more fine distinctions: for example, Richard Foster's *Streams of Living Water* identifies six paths; Urban Holmes III in *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (Morehouse, 2002, originally published by Seabury, 1980) identifies four.

³ This approach is often referred to in disciplinary literature as non-reductive methodology. Reductionistic methodologies, on the other hand, are a form of oversimplification that results from "the attempt to squeeze . . . data, with all their variegated content, into the limited perspectives of one science" [P. B. Gove (Ed.), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1981), 1905] while making ultimate claims about the veracity of the final product. This inevitably leads to dangerous distortion of the subject matter under study.

relationship.⁴ Whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant."⁵

Likewise, I would like to say that, from the perspective of Christian spiritual formation, there is no such thing as [just] God or [just] the human person. To put it another way, it is neither “all about me” nor “all about God!”⁶ When one looks carefully at a person, one discovers the presence and activity of God. When one looks carefully at God, one discovers a creative, loving engagement with humanity. The trailhead for living, studying, and describing Christian spiritual formation is the human person-in-relation to God and to others. Because this trailhead acknowledges the interplay of both the exterior and interior dynamics of inter-relationality, it is broader and more inclusive than some others which you may associate with Christian spiritual formation. Nonetheless, I believe it to be faithful to the biblical witness and to the unity found amidst the diversity of the Christian tradition.

The rightful beginning place for examining spiritual formation, then, is the relational matrix of the human and the divine,⁷ the with-God life.⁸ Phenomenologically, that means we start with people, God’s people, communities and individuals, real people, people who have been created in the image of God and whose very existence depends on the gracious activity of God in their lives and in the world. We begin with people, God’s people, because there we get glimpses of the relational matrix wherein spiritual formation takes place. We begin with people because it is there that we begin to see God, the Trinitarian-relational God, at work creating a people, transforming lives, renewing creation, reconciling the whole world to its Source. The primal place for Christians to see this work, of course, is in the biblical record. This is why, from a spiritual formation perspective, the Scriptures are of utmost importance to faithful Christian living.

⁴ D.W. Winnicott, “Further Thoughts on Babies as Persons” (1947), published in *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (Addison-Wesley, 1965/1987), 88 (italics in original).

⁵ D.W. Winnicott, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” (1960), published in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (International Universities Press, 1965), 39-footnote.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg affirms this in his discussion of participatory eschatology: “Indeed, the choice between ‘God does it’ or ‘we do it’ is a misleading and inappropriate dichotomy. In St. Augustine’s magnificent aphorism, ‘God without us will not; and we without God cannot.’” (*Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, 260).

⁷ Winnicott would say it this way: “The state of affairs is this: that the unit is not the individual, the unit is an environment-individual set-up. The centre of gravity of the being does not start off in the individual. It is in the total set-up.” - D.W. Winnicott, “Anxiety Associated with Insecurity” (Paper to British Psycho-Analytical Society, 1952), published in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis: Collected Papers* (Brunner/Mazel, 1958/1975), 99.

⁸ This is the term coined by Richard Foster and the Renovaré organization in their publication of *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

A Manual for the Journey: The Bible as Sacred Text

The book of Genesis, strategically placed at the beginning of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, serves as the textual trailhead for all who would ground their understanding of spiritual formation in the Bible. From the opening verse: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), we are introduced to a relational dynamic of God with not-God. The very first thing the Scriptures tell us about God is that God *created*—a fact that has significance far beyond contemporary science-and-religion debates about the origins of the universe. Theologically we learn that extending beyond Godself to create and interact with that which is not-God is fundamental to God’s identity. Spiritually, we learn that for living life in this world, God and creation (of which we are a part) are intertwined.

The centrality of the relational matrix is further emphasized in the second creation account in Genesis chapter 2 when “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ . . . So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh, and the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:18, 21-22). The relational pattern of outward extension we see in God in chapter 1 is now repeated in humankind in chapter 2.⁹

The relational matrix introduced in Genesis seamlessly interweaves exterior and interior landscapes into a territory that binds together God and all of God’s creation. We see the exterior dimensions in the creation account with its listings of the products of creation (chapter 1) and the placing of the first humans in a particular, concrete environment (chapter 2). We see the interior dimensions in Adam’s shifting emotional states (chapter 2) and in the “mind games” of both the serpent and Eve (chapter 3). A vivid illustration of the interplay of exterior and interior landscapes is found in the story of the Tower of Babel (chapter 11). Here we see “one people” devolving into increasingly differentiating individuals and people groups, the evolution of languages and cultures, the influences *on* and influences *of* the built-environment, the exposure of human motives grounded in fear and the desire for control. Even the sin problem (the *de*-formed spirituality) that has been evidencing since chapter 3 is framed in relational terms: “and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:9b).

⁹ Notice that Eve is *not* created from the ground, like Adam and the other creatures. She comes from Adam’s own flesh. Among other things, this signifies that, far from being separate individuals who happen to have some things in common with others, but essentially living on parallel tracks, as humans we share the same “stuff” and thus are bound to one other on the same track/journey. We “come from” God, but we also inevitably “come from” other human beings. No one (yet) has been able to start over, disconnected from human ancestry and history.

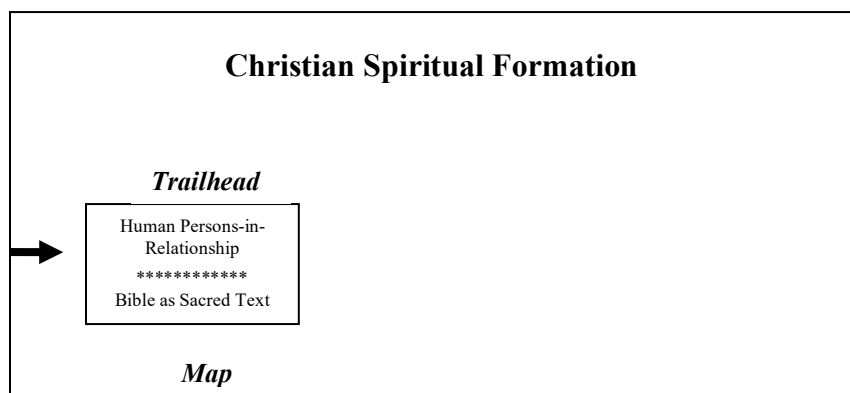


Figure 1

The Destination: Loving God and Neighbor to Full Capacity

The biblical story that leads from the dispersion of humankind in Genesis to the final re-gathering in Revelation¹⁰—the strategically-placed final book of the Christian Scriptures—is a long and convoluted one. This extended journey of God’s people is not unlike the path on which we find ourselves. Their spiritual journey is, in both its best and its worst moments, a map by which we orient and make sense out of ours. Long and convoluted as it is, however, this journey is not an arbitrary one, nor is it directionless. For Christians, it is not enough just to be “on the journey”, that is, on a path of spiritual formation. It matters where the path leads, for the destination itself shapes the twists and turns the path takes and the way that it is experienced. Theologians use the term *eschatological*¹¹ to express this perspective that embraces both present and future, journey and destination, the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’, the inbreaking and the *telos*. The destination of Christian spiritual formation is a future reality that reaches back into the “now” of our spiritual journey, informing the direction we take. So, what is that destination, that goal?

If the starting point, the trailhead, the *locus* of spiritual formation is the relational matrix of the human and the divine, the God-with-us life, then the goal, the destination, the *telos* of the Christian spiritual life must be fleshed out in dynamic relational terms. Since “following Jesus” is one of primary ways that Christians self-identify, it is only appropriate that we look to the words of Jesus for a clear statement of a relationally dynamic destination. We find such a statement in Jesus’ response to a Pharisee’s question about which commandment is the greatest: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:28-31; see also Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28). This is the heart of the Law and the Gospel, that is, the entire Scriptures. John Wesley re-iterated this central message by insisting

¹⁰ See Revelation 21:1-3 for a vision of this re-gathering.

¹¹ S.v. “Eschatology, Collective (Universal)” *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* edited by Donald V. McKim (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2014).

that the true mark of the Christian life is inward and outward love of God and neighbor.¹² Other formulations of the destination, e.g., maturity, wholeness, excellence, being-God-like, must ultimately be measurable in concrete and visible relational ways, as was the case with Jesus, who as “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

So, what is the destination of the journey of Christian spiritual formation? In its simplest terms, it is love of God and neighbor. However, if we look closely at Jesus’ words, we see that these loves are qualified, that is, it is not just *any* love of God or *any* love of neighbor.¹³ We are to love God with all our heart/soul/mind/strength, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Therefore, the destination of the Christian spiritual life must be stated with more nuance: *loving God and neighbor to full capacity*. Here we see that loving God and neighbor involves both the exterior landscape (loving actions) and the interior landscape (an expanded self-referent capacity). In other words, while love is ultimately directed outward toward God and neighbor, the expansion of that love is measured in terms of the capacities of the self-in-relation-to-others.

The destination of Christian spiritual formation understood in terms of “full capacity” has implications for the journey; namely, that there is to be increasing love of God and neighbor. That is, it is not enough simply to love—there is to be growth in the quality of love. If we already love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then the only way to increase that love is to increase our *capacity* for loving. In other words, our “all” increases as we learn new and deeper ways to love.

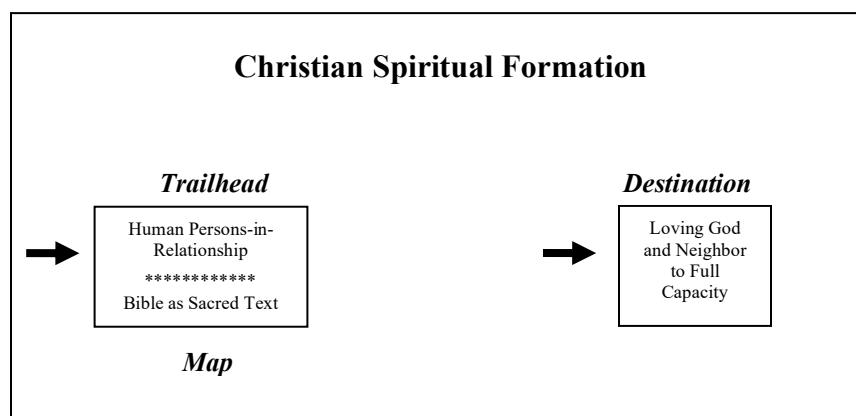


Figure 2

¹² See John Wesley *On God’s Vineyard* (Sermon 107) *Sermons on Several Occasions* 1771 (Christian Classic Ethereal Library) available online (accessed 8/11/2021) <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.all.html#ix.i-p0.3>

¹³ This is not to say that “lesser” loves of God and neighbor are not valuable or even necessary steps in the journey; rather it is to affirm that, for Jesus, they are not to be accepted as the final destination.

The Path: Being God-Taught to Love

Increasing in capacity to love God and neighbor so that we might, in fact, live a life of love—this is the central challenge of the Christian life. If loving to full capacity is the destination, then what is the path that will lead us in this direction? *How does one attain the goal of the Christian spiritual life?* Since the goal of inward and outward love of God and neighbor does not automatically develop nor is it achieved simply or easily, some consideration must be given to the *means* for achieving this goal.

How does our capacity to love increase? This is not simply of our own doing. We must *be* loved in order to increase our capacity *to* love, and we must be loved by One who loves fully if our capacity is to expand to an even greater “full”. This is why the author of the First Letter of John writes so emphatically, “Beloved, let us love one another, because *love is from God*; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God In this is love, *not* that we loved God *but that he loved us* and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:7, 10, emphasis mine). The destination and the journey of Christian spiritual formation, then, are dependent on experiencing the God of love (or the love of God).¹⁴

To affirm that our capacity to love is increased by involvement with an Other is to keep the end of Christian spiritual formation connected to the means. A relational destination can only be achieved by a relational path. The God of love does not automatically program us to increase in love, nor is the love of God simply dumped into us in one lump sum deposit. Rather, the God of love invites us into a lifelong process of learning to love as God, with us as pupils and God, the Holy Spirit as teacher. The fundamental means for living the Christian spiritual life, then, is entering into and remaining in a dynamic relational matrix where one can be “God-taught”. The apostle Paul states this very matter-of-factly in his letter to the Church at Thessalonica: “Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another” (1 Thessalonians 4:9).¹⁵ Implicated in being God-taught are *both* internal and internalizing processes in the one being taught (cf. Jeremiah 31:33-34) *and* the external and externalizing events directed outward toward those in need (cf. Isaiah 54:13-14; 58:6-10). To be God-taught, one must be attentive to the interior and exterior landscapes of the self-in-relationship-to-O/others because, “as the history of Israel and the church make clear, one cannot be taught by God unless one is willing to be attentive to God or to those who speak on behalf of God.”¹⁶ This, then, is the path of Christian spiritual formation: being God-taught to love.

¹⁴ The biblical language of “knowing” refers to an intimate, relational connection beyond simple intellectual assent. Cf. 1 John 4:16, “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.”

¹⁵ Karen Marie Yust & E. Byron Anderson, *Taught By God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation* (Chalice Press, 2006), see pages 11-15 for a summary of exegetical insights on biblical forms of the word *theodidacti* (“those taught by God”).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

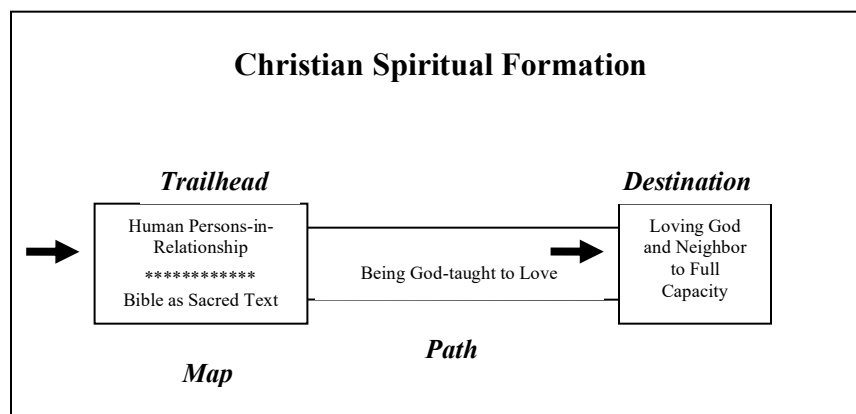


Figure 3

The Journey: Relational Prayer

A pathway does not always get one to the desired destination, at least not directly or consistently. Sometimes trails dead-end; sometimes they disappear, only to resume farther along the way; sometimes they change direction and lead away from rather than toward. The Christian targeting the destination of full capacity to love God and neighbor by means of the pathway of being God-taught to love must commit to a journey—a whole-life journey. A journey incorporates both the destination and the path, placing each step within the broader context of a larger movement, namely the movement of God’s gracious activity in and on behalf of the whole creation.

The good news of this bigger picture is that our redemption and our sanctification do not depend solely on us. Sometimes we are clearly on the pathway of being God-taught, other times the pathway is not very clear at all, and we are not very teachable. There are even times when we are, not-so-obviously-to-us, going in the wrong direction altogether. Nonetheless, in all of this we can still be on the journey, a journey that has the destination (full capacity to love God and neighbor) firmly in view, a manual (the Bible) for guidance, and a pathway (being God-taught) for forward movement.¹⁷ What keeps us on the journey even if the pathway is unclear? What keeps us engaged relationally even if we feel disconnected from God and others? Prayer—the ultimate relational practice of people of faith.

The people of God at prayer—from Adam’s confession, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10), to Abraham’s affirmation of belief in the LORD’s promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5-6), to Hagar’s despairing cry at the prospect of the death of her son, Ishmael (Genesis 21:15-16), to Rebekah’s going “to inquire of the LORD” about the struggle within her womb (Genesis 25:22), to Jacob’s persistent wrestling with God that led to a name and identity change, Israel (Genesis 32:24-28), to the Israelite slaves’ groaning and crying out to God for

¹⁷ The reason that the Bible is an authoritative guide for Christians is because its authors were God-taught. The Bible, consequently, functions as Word of God for us when we use it in the relational-matrix of being taught by God to love.

deliverance (Exodus 2:23), to Moses' plea for the healing of his sister Miriam (Numbers 12:13), to Joshua's exasperated questioning God about Israel's military defeats (Joshua 7:6-9), to Hannah's distressed prayer for a son (1 Samuel 1:10-11), to David's request for long lineage (2 Samuel 7:29) and Solomon's request for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9), to Elijah's death-wish: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life." (1 Kings 19:4), to Jabez's plea to be kept "from hurt and harm" (1 Chronicles 4:10), to the priests and the Levites blessing the people (2 Chronicles 30:27), to the Ezra-led fasting of the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity (Ezra 8:21-23) and the Esther-led fasting of those who remained in Persia (Esther 4:15-16), to Job's agonizing accusations of God's lack of justice (Job 30:20-23), to the Psalms of praise, thanksgiving, lament, anger, and repentance, to Jeremiah's plea for mercy on Judah (Jeremiah 14:7-9), to Daniel's offering of thanks for receiving from God a dream interpretation (Daniel 2:19-23), to Jonah's angry outburst at God's compassion for the city of Nineveh (Jonah 4:1-3), to Habakkuk's entreaty for justice (Habakkuk 1:2-4), to Mary's "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), to the leper's request to be healed (Matthew 8:2), to the disciples' cry to be saved from drowning (Matthew 8:24-25), to the hemorrhaging woman's reaching out to touch Jesus' cloak (Matthew 9:20-21), to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), to the plea of the criminal on the cross: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42), to the followers of Jesus' pre-Pentecost upper room prayer gatherings (Acts 1:12-14), to the dying words of Stephen, the martyr (Acts 7:59-60), to the church's prayer for an imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:5), to Paul's appeal for grace for "a thorn . . . in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9) and prayer for the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 3:14-21), to the eschatological "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" of John the Seer (Revelation 22:20), to the end-of-the-age triumphal proclamation of the multitude of the redeemed: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)—provide us with a portrait of this relational journey like no other. That is because prayer is the *method* by which we are placed in a position to be God-taught to love. Prayer is the fundamental practice for nurturing us as pupils in relation to God, the Holy Spirit as teacher.

It is not surprising, then, that the great Reformer, Martin Luther, in his essay, "The Freedom of a Christian", declared that "there is need of the prayer that the Lord may give us and make us *theodidacti*, that is, those taught by God, and himself, as he has promised, write his law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for us."¹⁸ Indeed, we must be given a prayer, be recipients of a

¹⁸ The context for this claim is found in the broader polemic of this final paragraph of the essay: "Since human nature and natural reason, as it is called, are by nature superstitious and ready to imagine when laws and works are prescribed, that righteousness must be obtained through laws and works; and further, since they are trained and confirmed in this opinion by the practice of all earthly lawgivers, it is impossible that they should of themselves escape from the slavery of works and come to a knowledge of the freedom of faith. **Therefore there is need of the prayer that the Lord may give us and make us *theodidacti*, that is, those taught by God, and himself, as he has promised, write his law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for us.** If he himself, does not teach our hearts this wisdom hidden in mystery, nature can only condemn it and judge it to be heretical, because nature is offended by it and regards it as foolishness. So we see that it happened in the old days in the case of the apostles and prophets, and so godless and blind popes and their flatterers do to me and to those who are like me. May God at last be

prayer tradition, and not simply rely on those prayers which we generate from our needs and wishes. For the purposes of Christian spiritual formation, it matters not only *that* we pray, but *how* we pray and *what* we pray for.

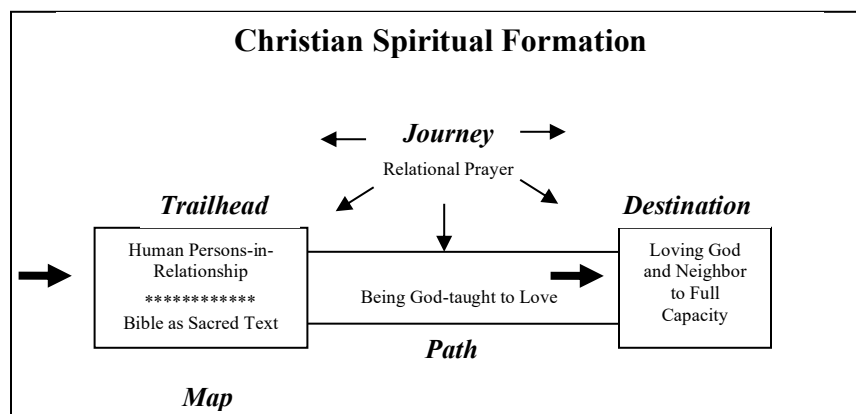


Figure 4

Jesus’ disciples were wise to ask, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). The instruction they received in response, what we know as The Lord’s Prayer or The Our Father, is the foundational, universal prayer pattern for all Christians. We need such a prayer pattern for the journey, one that will frame ongoing spiritual formation in relational ways (that is, keep us oriented to the pathway of being God-taught) with a clear focus on transformative love (that is, keep us moving toward the ultimate destination). Another way to say this is that we need paradigmatic prayers to form our praying, not simply “sexy” or convenient prayers.¹⁹ A paradigmatic prayer is one that embodies the fundamental truths of the kingdom of God and, therefore, serves as a model and pattern.

A Paradigmatic Prayer for the Journey

The Lord’s Prayer is the primary paradigmatic prayer for Christian spiritual formation.²⁰ Other biblical paradigmatic prayers that help shape the Christian spiritual life are Mary’s obedient response to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38), Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17), and Paul’s

merciful to them and to us, and cause his face to shine upon us, that we may know his way upon earth, his salvation among all nations, God, who is blessed forever. Amen.” - Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty (with a letter to Pope Leo X?)” or “The Freedom of a Christian” (trans. Harold J. Grimm). Luther’s Works, vol. 31, *The Career of a Reformer*, p. 376.

¹⁹ The popularity of the Prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:10) and its spin-off publications illustrates this distinction. This prayer is biblical (in the sense that it is in the Bible) and may prove helpful to certain people in certain circumstances, but becomes problematic as a paradigmatic prayer for Christians.

²⁰ See Roberta C. Bondi, *A Place to Pray: Reflections on the Lord’s Prayer* (Abingdon, 1998); Morris A. Weigelt & E. Dee Freeborn, *Living the Lord’s Prayer* (Beacon Hill, 2001); William Willmon, & Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer & The Christian Life* (Abingdon, 1996).

prayer for the Ephesian Church (Ephesians 3:14-21). This book, while resonating with these, is based on another prayer that I believe is especially paradigmatic for the ongoing dynamic process of Christian spiritual formation. The prayer was penned by an Anglican bishop, Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) in his personal book of devotion and prayer. From this Christian saint, whose prayer life gave voice to the relational matrix out of which formation occurs, we hear these words directed to God:

*Open thou mine eyes and I shall see
Incline my heart and I shall desire
Order my steps and I shall walk in the path of thy commandments²¹*

This prayer is not a direct quote from any one place in Scripture, but its constituent parts are drawn straight from the sacred text and the pattern it embodies is evidenced throughout the biblical narrative:

(1) *Open thou mine eyes and I shall see*

- “Then Elisha prayed: “O Lord, please *open his eyes* that he may see.” So the Lord *opened the eyes* of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17).
- “*Open my eyes*, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18).
- “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, *let me see your face*, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely” (Song of Solomon 2:14).
- “Then *the eyes of the blind shall be opened*, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (Isaiah 35:5).
- “Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ He said, ‘Lord, *let me see again*” (Luke 18:40-41).
- “The Lord answered [Saul], ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to *open their eyes* so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me’ (Acts 26:15b-18).

²¹ Andrewes’ prayer book was published after his death as the *Preces Privatae*. The words of this prayer are an English translation by F. E. Brightman (Andrewes’ original entries were in Latin and Greek) of the morning prayers for Sunday as found in an abridged edition edited by A. E. Burn (Methuen & Co, London, 1908/1953), 38. For more information on Andrewes and his prayer book, visit <http://www.afn.org/~afn52344/longer5.html>

(2) *Incline my heart and I shall desire*

- “[Joshua] said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and *incline your hearts* to the Lord, the God of Israel’” (Joshua 24:23).
- “The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he not leave us or abandon us, but *incline our hearts* to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors” (1 Kings 8:57-58).
- “*Turn my heart* to your decrees, and not to selfish gain” (Psalm 119:36).
- “I *incline my heart* to perform your statutes forever, to the end” (Psalm 119:112).
- “Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is *a matter of the heart*—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God” (Romans 2:29).
- “But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become *obedient from the heart* to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Romans 6:17).

(3) *Order my steps and I shall walk in the path of thy commandments*

- “Teach me your way, O Lord, and *lead me on a level path* because of my enemies” (Psalm 27:11).
- “*Lead me in the path* of your commandments, for I delight in it” (Psalm 119:35).
- “Truly I *direct my steps* by all your precepts; I hate every false way” (Psalm 119:128).
- “*Keep my steps* steady according to your promise, and never let iniquity have dominion over me.” (Psalm 119:133).
- “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord *directs the steps*” (Proverbs 16:9).
- “I know, O Lord, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot *direct their steps*” (Jeremiah 10:23).
- “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to *guide our feet* into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).
- “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should *follow in his steps*” (1 Peter 2:21).
- “And this is love, that we *walk according to his commandments*; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must *walk in it*” (2 John 1:6).

Together, these three petitions provide a heuristic shorthand prayer for ongoing spiritual formation that is as simple as 1-2-3: *Open my eyes; incline my heart; order my steps.*²² Its

²² This three-fold pattern is so basic that it appears in classic Christian writings of the three-fold mystical way as “Illumination, Purgation, and Union” (cf. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Dover, 2002) and in the contemporary song from the musical *Godspell*: “Day by day, day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly, day by day.”

simplicity is not to suggest that it is simplistic. Indeed, like the doctrine of the Trinity with its intricate notions of three-in-one and one-in-three, this prayer is a triplicate that reflects and re-directs us to the fullness of the Christian journey of transformation, a journey that engages us in a “full-bodied” way—as a mind-heart-body unity—and that calls for change cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally.

When I pray *open my eyes* to see that which I heretofore am not noticing, I bring to God the perceiving and thinking dimensions of my humanness. The opening of my eyes as a God-graced response to this request leads to an increase in awareness of God, self, and the rest of creation, issuing in repentance (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5).

When I pray *incline my heart* to desire that which God desires but which I may be disconnected from emotionally, I bring to God the feeling and willing dimensions of my humanness. The inclining of my heart as a God-graced response to this request leads to a purifying of desire, issuing in deepened faith & trust (cf. Psalm 51:6-12).

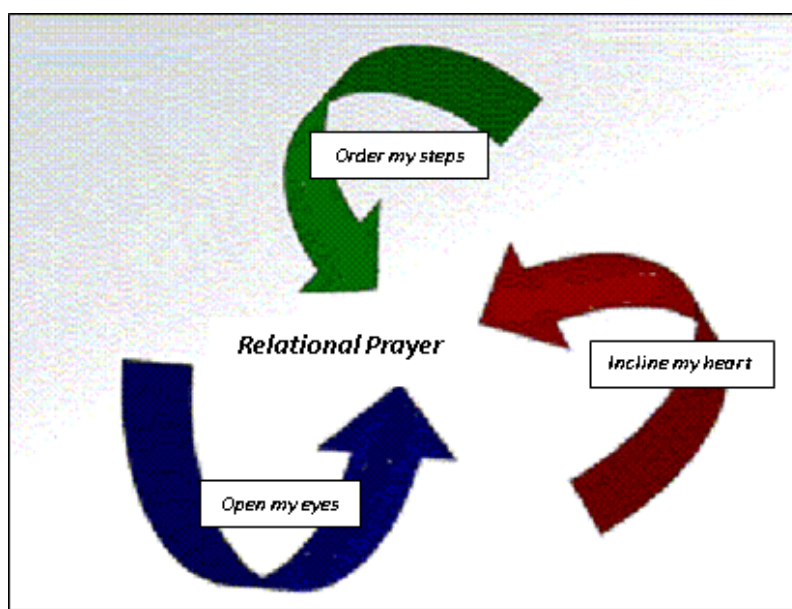


Figure 5

When I pray *order my steps* so that I live in a way that is consistent with God’s way, I bring to God the acting and behaving dimensions of my humanness. The ordering of my steps as a God-graced response to this request leads to disciplined behavior, issuing in holiness of heart and life, that is, love of God and neighbor (cf. Luke 18:18-23).

The three petitions are not really separate; nor do they need to be prayed in a particular order. Cf. Mark 10:46-52

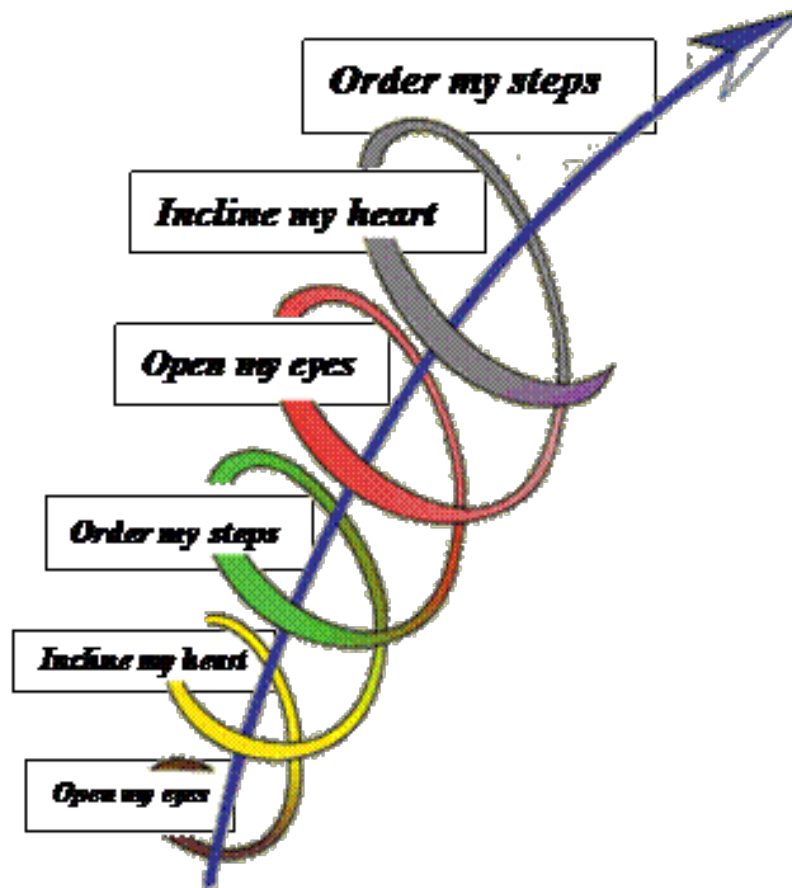


Figure 6

This prayer serves as a framework for future examinations into the field of spiritual formation.

The ultimate laboratory for Christian spiritual formation, then, is you! It is the design of this book to invite you—all of you—to enter into a prayerful process that is transforming. Your life as a human person-in-relation provides the ultimate laboratory for Christian spiritual formation!

If so, then begin to pray with me:

*Open my eyes
 Incline my heart
 Order my steps*

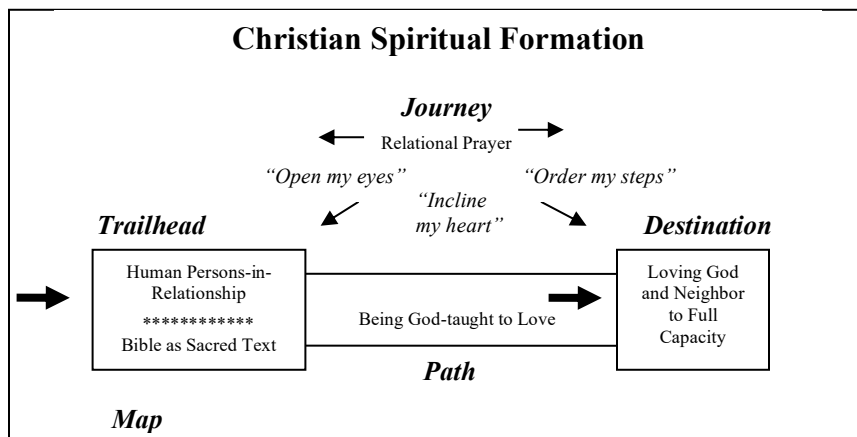


Figure 7