

May, 2004 Ten More Steps Towards Christian Maturity

Perhaps the most significant thing that has happened to me over these past few months, however, has been my settling into a Rule of life. After seven years of playing with this here in Montrose, I think I have “found it.” And in reflecting on how this happened, I think I have learned something about how we all might find holy order in our lives. I call this process my “Ten More Steps Toward Christian Maturity.”

1) CLEAR VISION - When we realized that we would be moving to Montrose, I did not know what I would be doing “for a living.” What is a PhD in Spirituality going to do in a town of 10,000? But Cheri gave me a word from God. She simply said, “dream.” So I did. I had spent time studying spirituality and I knew what holiness/maturity looked like in a general way. But what would it look like in *my* life? Concretely in Montrose? Two months later I found myself with a sample “weekly planner” with a blend of prayer, manual labor, study and ministry and a list of habits I needed to cultivate. At that point I had a sight of God’s call, not just for what I was to do, but also for who I was to become. I have never lost that dream.

2) The next step was to cultivate a STRONG DETERMINATION not to give up the process of growth - even if things don’t seem to “work.” I had already learned, having played with New Year’s resolutions, personal disciplines, and such, that sometimes my first ideas don’t succeed. In fact I had learned that, like Edison, who made numerous failed attempts at finding the proper filament for the light bulb, I was likely to attempt all kinds of useless arrangements of my personal life before finding one that “worked.” But I needed to be determined, like Edison, to see it through to the end. I shared my intentions with others, thus strengthening my intention to press into this vision.

3) Then one needs COMMUNITY SUPPORT. The fact is, sanctification doesn’t come easy. Here is my latest soap box: the singularly independent holy Christian is truly a rare breed. The rest of us need community. Through community we find co-discernment of God’s will (my own sense of things is not always right). Through community we find support through the ups and downs of growth (sometimes its hard to get up after I fall) . Through community we find accountability to keep us on track (I’m not always honest about my spiritual life). So when I moved here (and since), I have cultivated key relationships that could provide the support I needed for my spiritual formation. Earlier in life I felt embarrassed to ask for help in my spiritual growth, to admit I wasn’t “spiritual” enough to master everything on my own. I was wrong. Now I celebrate the community of the King that together enables each other to glorify God both individually and corporately.

4) With vision, determination, and community support in place I was ready to IDENTIFY key areas of growth. If Christian spiritual formation is about *re*-orientation and *re*-habituation toward God, then it is necessary for me to discover where I may be suffering from *de*-

formation, *dis*-orientation, wrong habituation. If transformation is about my response to the invitation of God, I must discern where God may be inviting me to. What aspects of experience are in need of attention? What must I “put off”? What must I “put on,” not just generally, but here and now? Am I in need of repair of a basic “passion”? Are there patterns of thinking that stand in the way of perfection of love? Is my relationship with nature undergoing a conversion? Identification of areas of attention for spiritual formation is a tricky business (which is one reason we need community). Just because one might see an area of need does not mean that it ought to be addressed *now*. As any good counselor or spiritual director knows, there is a difference between perceiving a problem and perceiving that this problem needs to be treated now. The step of identification is a step of recognizing the ministry of God’s Spirit.

For example, I identified my use of time as a “cutting edge” issue as Moved to Montrose. Not only was it central to my vision, it was also a critical expression of my insecurities. I knew that my formation in Christ would be fought on the battlefield of my schedule. Thanks to my time of dreaming, I had gained a sense of what the ideal might look like, but I had no clear sense of how to get there. And I knew that my own personal issues often kept me from the best I had to offer God.

5-6) SELECTION/ATTENTION - I list these next two steps together. One is an action and the other is an attitude. They must work as a team. Indeed, the attitude must pervade the entire process of spiritual formation. The action is *selection*. The attitude is *attention*. In selection, we choose (or someone chooses for us) disciplines, practices, rules, circumstances, relationships, experiences and the like which are aimed at introducing or reinforcing a new and God-ward orientation (or a new and God-ward habit). In my case, I would choose schedules of prayer, study, manual labor, and ministry that I might want to accomplish each week.

Selection, however, is meaningless if it is not done in an atmosphere of *attention*. It is not enough to schedule x amount of prayer at certain times of the day just because this is what a “good Christian” ought to do. Indeed, if our practice of prayer does not flow from the real rhythms of our own life, it can be actually be harmful. As I addressed my own schedule, one thing I learned was that I tend to operate in seasons of tension and rest: physically, emotionally and relationally. If I did not provide for appropriate expressions in each of these areas when I was likely to need it, things would go wrong. It took a long time to discover (or to admit) this fact. Once I admitted and discerned my seasons, however, the selection of the kinds of elements to include in my schedule was more appropriate to my own context and I could persevere longer and with a freer spirit.

7) Once we have selected some means of grace (or combination of means), we then move to IMPLEMENTATION. Here we simply do what we have set out to do. Ultimately I found myself keeping track daily and weekly of how many hours I spent in each of the categories and reported this to a spiritual friend each week. Sometimes the emphasis was on trying to meet certain quota of hours. At other times, we were just paying attention to what was normal, noting why I spent time doing this or that.

8) The next stage is called TRANSMUTATION. The term “transmutation” refers to the changes that take place within us. Theologian Don Gelpi clarifies the notion of transmutation (not an easy concept to grasp) as follows:

An experience undergoes transmutation when a new feeling is integrated into it in such a way as to modify the experience’s constitutive relational structure. . . . The term “transmutation,” therefore, means change, but change conceived on an aesthetic model. When, for example, an artist adds a dab of color to a painting, the result goes beyond the old painting plus the new dab. The added color changes the way the other colors relate to it and to one another. The whole painting changes because the felt constitutive relationships of the colors that comprise it shift. . . . The inclusion of a new feeling changes the entire experience into a different kind of experience

As we introduce new means of grace into our lives, we become different people. I introduced, for example, a new schedule of study into my life--a systematic investigation of the character of God. And as a result of this study I became not simply the old person plus a few new insights about God. These new insights forced me to rethink the ways I have been praying. I am drawn more and more to explore intercession. My expanded view of God causes me to experience new feelings of awe (or confusion). And the changes continue. Our implementation leads to transmutation: transmutation in terms of our own growth and in terms of our availability in love for others.

9) Once the means of grace have had a chance to work, it is time for attentive revision and joyful EXPERIMENTATION. Like I said above, it is not about trying to look like some other model Christian. It is about finding out how our life can bring the greatest glory to God in the concrete realities of our own context. This can come only by what the ancients call “watchfulness”: careful attention to the movements of the Spirit, the patterns of our life and responses to God, and the circumstances wherein we live. We notice, adjust, and try again. For me, this process of experimentation and revision was a six year process in accountable relationship with my spiritual friends. Through this time I discovered my own addictions to certain kinds of activity. My sense of intimacy with God waned and waxed. I tinkered with my career rather than performing surgery on my schedule. And so on. And in the end, with a combination of the accidents of circumstance (being laid off by Mesa State, and discovering how much better I study when not divided between many topics), one more experiment with my schedule inspired by my pastor having a blessing ceremony for calendars and day-timers to celebrate the new year (where I learned not to think in terms of “this [rigidly] is what I do on Tuesday,” but rather to construct the rhythm of each day more flexibly in light of what arises, keeping my aim not on each day but on the developing week or so as a whole), and the accountable support from my community (who affirmed certain aspects of my life and ministry), I bumped into something that worked. And I could feel it the moment it happened. Finally, in January, I found that my schedule (and a re-affirmed sense of calling) was “there.”

10) The final step toward Christian maturity is RE-HABITUATION. This is where the means of grace accomplishes increasingly permanent work in our lives. In the case of my schedule, the discovery of the “schedule that works” has served as the refined selection of a means of grace. I’m finding, in my new approach to schedule, a means of both expressing and fostering God’s work in my life in a way I had always “dreamed” of but never really experienced fully. The longer term effects remain to be seen, but I am hopeful. The application of this means of grace, over time, then serves (hopefully) as a vehicle through which God can foster habits of devotion, of thought, of embodied life in relationship with nature, of ministry with others and so on.

So here you have my story. I feel like I am more of a “monk” than I have ever been. And I love it. Furthermore, I have a feeling that I will be of more use to God’s kingdom as some kind of monk than as a “teacher” or a “pastor” or “consultant.” And on top of it all, I think I have learned some principles of growth in Christ that may be of help to others.

May God the Father bless you with the riches in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.