

Spirituality Shoppe Newsletter

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## **Reflections - A Wisdom Approach to Spiritual Formation**

If there is one thing I learned in writing this new book it is that I believe in wisdom. When I was teaching philosophy at Colorado Mesa University I wrote most of introductory text that I titled *Love Wisdom*. Ultimately, I completed all but a couple of chapters and then left the school to do this online thing. I doubt that I will ever finish it now, so I think that I will just put the chapters up on the website for folks to use. But the point is, I repeat, I believe in wisdom. The term *philosophy* literally means "lover of wisdom" and I guess that I am a lover of wisdom deep down inside whether I am teaching philosophy or other topics.

So when it came time to write a basic introduction to spiritual formation I found myself trying to tell people to use wisdom when helping others (or themselves) grow in Christ. Let me explain.

The question often confronts us soon after the turn to Christ. We have returned from that youth camp where we made a big commitment to Jesus. We have attended a revival meeting and responded to the altar call. We reached rock bottom and finally surrendered to a Higher Power. Or perhaps we have grown up in church all our lives and now, as an adult, we are finally asking ourselves what this faith is really all about. Then, not long after our moment of turning, the question pops up. I have heard it asked using different words: "So what do I do after I'm saved?" "How are we supposed to grow in Christ?" "How do Christians mature in their faith?"

I have also heard, in answer to this question, a number of prescriptions offered:

- a) Go to Church - Mainline Christianity of the 1950s type saw the Christian faith as membership in a community of faith. In church we acknowledge the God who is above and our need for a moral and compassionate life here on earth. Our growth in the Christian life--if these words

were used--was a consequence of association with the people and the programs of a local congregation. But as many people discovered, just going to church wasn't enough. They joined a club, but were not deeply formed in relationship with Christ.

- b) Do and Don't - In some circles the message was communicated--intentionally or unintentionally--that once we are saved, our growth in maturity is about changing key behaviors. It was about "Doing the dos" and "Don't-ing the don'ts." Read your Bible. Witness for Christ. Don't swear or smoke or dance. The lists were well-meaning and rooted in Scripture. But at the same time they were shallow (What about the commands regarding gossip? What do I do next?) and some felt powerless to change behaviors, like drinking, that had deep roots.
- c) Get the Big Experience - The holiness, pentecostal, and charismatic movements promoted another prescription: a life-changing experience. We proclaim that being born again is not enough for Christian maturity. We need "entire sanctification" or a "baptism in the Holy Spirit." Advocates developed both procedures and events to facilitate people having these experiences. Many Christians testified to the transforming effect of encounter with the Spirit of God. And yet some have waited and tried and hoped and never had the experience. And some who had the experience did not really mature.
- d) Accept Your Forgiveness - Some Christians, especially those with strong ties to a Protestant Reformation heritage, saw the Christian life as a matter of welcoming God's unmerited forgiveness and allowing faith to work its way out in grateful love. In these circles there was less emphasis on steps to holiness or maturity. That sounded too much like "works" and besides, Christians were also sinners and how much transformation could we expect? This message was a healing balm for those of us who keenly felt our own failures. But for others of us, we felt that this message provided a secure foundation but left us without guidance to build upon it. And then, where is the boundary between trust and laziness?
- e) Claim the Abundant Life - One prescription that was popular among evangelical Christians,

particularly from the 1870s through the 1970s, brought together a few elements of the answers above into a single prescription. Described as the "Higher Life" movement or the Keswick movement (named after conventions held in Keswick, England), this prescription emphasized both the possibility of transformation and of our need for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Yet, unlike the Pentecostals, Higher Life advocates encouraged believers to receive the filling of the Spirit not through a particular experience but rather simply by claiming biblical promises. Christians were encouraged to read Scripture, to pray, and to have fellowship with other like-minded believers. Yet at the same time we were reminded that devotional exercises could also become dangerous. It is all too easy to get trapped into trying to "do things right"--living our Christian life in a spirit of striving--rather than in a confident trust in the abundance of God. For many this message was freedom and a doorway into obedient, surrendered transformation. Others, however, claimed the promises and witnessed no change. And still others began to explore a wider range of means through which the Spirit works transformation.

- f) Celebrate the Disciplines - The publication of Richard Foster's landmark *Celebration of Discipline* in 1978 gave birth to a new season of discovery regarding Christian maturity. Foster, and the evangelical "spiritual formation movement" that emerged during this season, saw the Christian life as not merely "trying" (dos and don'ts) or "trusting" (forgiveness or blind claiming), but also providing means for us to "train" in maturity. We discovered that the Holy Spirit can work through our own practices. Furthermore, when we looked back to the history of the Christian Church, we found that our fellow Christians have employed a number of means (or "disciplines") to facilitate the transforming work of God. Some of us experienced the celebration of discipline as a feast, a smorgasbord of untasted and nutritious delights. Those of us with lots of curiosity, time, and will-power were able to explore many of these and consider ourselves "spiritual discipline pharisees" (though we would never really admit this). Others of us, however, got lost at the table trying to decide what to sample and how much, and for how

much time. Or we hit the wall trying to succeed at fasting or solitude and gave the whole thing up.

By now you can see that this kind of discussion ultimately leads us nowhere. In every case, some are helped while others are harmed. When a prescription is rightly applied with the right people and the right perspective (and it often is), we grow in Christ and find a measure of maturity. But where a prescription is mis-applied to the wrong people or with a faulty perspective, people can find themselves trapped or worse.

This is where I begin to think about wisdom. In the first chapter of my *Love Wisdom* book I defined wisdom as *an expertise in the art of living, gained through a synthesis of personal experience in the details of life with a careful reflection on the larger issues of life*. So what would happen if we took a wisdom approach to our growth in maturity in Christ? What might a wisdom model of Christian spiritual formation look like?

First, a wisdom approach to spiritual formation acknowledges that people are different. As I notice and synthesize my experience of the details of life (Scripture, history, and Christians around me), I see this everywhere. Some people are extroverts and have a hard time with solitude. Some people just don't seem to have powerful experiences. Some people settle comfortably into their faith by serving their local church -- and this is right for them. Some believers grow when they are surrounded by a comforting community while others mature through reading challenging books. Some seem to need to try. Others seem to need to trust. Others seem to need to train. What this means is that we who lead others into maturity (or we who consider our own growth in Christ) need to pay attention to *context*. We can't simply hand out a "formula for formation" and expect believers to mature without first attending to whom we are serving.

Second, a wisdom model of spiritual formation *aims* somewhere. Both my experience with the details of life (watching other Christians) and my reflection on the larger issues of life (Scripture and

tradition) confirm that growth in maturity can actually be gained by Christians in this life and that we would do well to aim there. There are debates about "perfection." There are no debates about improvement. Furthermore, both empirically-based research on goals and common sense suggest that if we set good goals we are more likely to make progress. If we aim at nothing we are sure to reach it. The way a wisdom approach to spiritual formation should operate is that a group or individual would identify the larger (and perhaps ultimately unreachable) aim: holiness, deification, perfection, the kingdom of God, or another. Then they would ask themselves, "What does this look like for me right here and now? What piece of this can possibly I aim for with God's grace?" The rest is that mysterious synthesis of divine and human action.

Third, a wisdom approach to spiritual formation draws appropriately from a *wide range of means*. When we attend to the details of life we find that different people use different means. Some people are eager beavers and love to explore the latest spiritual practice. Others are suffering so much that simply getting through the day alive (fasting from suicide) is spiritual practice enough. Some are readers others are doers. The means vary. But--reflecting on the larger issues of life--we recognize that some means are encouraged in Scripture and history more than others. Prayer, meditation on Scripture, relationships of encouragement, participation in sacrament. It is not enough just to give believers a programmed list of dos and don'ts or framework of forgiveness. A wisdom approach to spiritual formation expresses love for God by the intention to use means to grow and to pay attention to those means which are most encouraged. But a wisdom approach that expresses love for others also makes sure to tailor means to best serve the people using them. And of course, these may change over time as people change and develop.

That is why, finally, we must learn to experiment, to *PLAY*. Christian spiritual formation--particularly in a wisdom-based approach--is not a program to be mastered but a loving relationship with God to be lived. Just as you would not want your relationship with a spouse or close friend to grow stale through lack of growth, so God longs to share with you a life of ever-maturing intimacy

with Christ and the Gospel. A figure skater must repeat a move time and time again, exploring just how it feels, checking with her coach, knowing that a few falls along the way are not "failures" but rather are the path to greatness. In the same way we explore what it might mean for us to love strangers, to follow God's will, to pray. We do something (or refrain), we explore how it feels, we check with others, we adjust, all the while knowing that a few falls along the way are not "failures" but rather are the path to greater maturity in Christ.

So what do we do after we're saved? How are we supposed to grow in Christ? How do Christians mature in their faith? We step forward with the step that is appropriate for each of us. We aim for the fulfillment of all that God longs for us insofar as we can accomplish this by God's grace here and now. We employ those means that are best suited to our own context. And we experiment, we *play*, knowing that the Spirit of God is joining us in the play for our own joy and for God's own glory.

May our God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--make all things new in your life and in the lives of those you love.