

Just What is Christian *Spirit-ual* Formation Anyway? A Biblical Inquiry.

This is a draft, with footnotes added, of a presentation I gave to the Evangelical Theological Society section on Christian Spiritual Formation November 14, 2108.

“Spirit-ual Formation”: that’s what we call it. And so I want to ask – again – Just what *is* spiritual formation, anyway? Last year I gave a presentation on “Christian Spiritual Formation: Where Has It Been? Where Must It Go?” and in the midst of that presentation I briefly suggested that a renewed grasp of the term *spiritual* might help us take a step toward nurturing the “all things new” vision of the Gospel.

In January my *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* was released. In that book I specifically treated the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation. In this presentation I would like to review a few of those points and to suggest a few others unaddressed in the *Guide* as a way of further exploring what we might mean when we talk of Spirit-ual formation.

Let us begin by looking at three comments. The first is taken from Richella Parham’s, *A Spiritual Formation Primer*, published by Renovaré in 2013. In this booklet Parham defines spiritual formation as, “the process in which believers cooperate with God and one another so that their souls are nourished and their characters are transformed into Christlikeness.”¹ The second is from Gordon Fee’s keynote address at the 2009 Wheaton Theology Conference on Spiritual Formation and Theological Foundations. There Fee proclaimed that “the only real question that should be raised *biblically* about “spirituality” has to do with who the Spirit is and what the Spirit is doing.”² The final quote is from John R. (or Jack) Levison’s devotional guide, *40 Days with the Holy Spirit*. After introducing his readers to the problems of translating the words for spirit, he writes: “All of this may seem confusing, but the Hebrew word *ruach* actually opens the window to a world of mystery, a vista of possibilities

¹ Richella Parham, *A Spiritual Formation Primer* (Englewood, CO: Renovaré, 2013), 6

² Gordon Fee, “On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality,” in Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 41.

that encompass breath, winds, and divine Spirit. It's like the wardrobe that opens to the world of Narnia . . . It's like the passageway Alice falls through to enter Wonderland—into which you are now invited to tumble.”³

These very different comments expose the challenge of understanding just what spiritual formation is all about, a challenge that arises in part from our underdeveloped understanding of “spirit.” My conviction is that each of these comments should be both affirmed and integrated, and this because Scripture affirms and integrates them. Only by doing this work of pneumatological integration can we hope to offer the kind of grounding that can support an “all things new” approach to spiritual formation.

I offer three recommendations. The first is this: ***Spiritual Formation is and ought to be about us.*** This is what I learned in my contemplative conversion back in the early 80s. Christianity is not just about right doctrine and successful evangelism. The trans-formation of my character, my spirit, matters.

We see this in the Old Testament, for example, in Ezekiel 11:19 as Ezekiel proclaims the promise of God: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them.” The same grammatical construction appears in David’s confession (Psalm 51:10, 17), “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. . . . My sacrifice, O God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” The Hebrew parallelism clarifies the meaning of spirit and spiritual formation. As we offer our spirits to God, God is in the business of making us new.

The New Testament makes similar use of *pneuma*. Paul, for example, wonders how we could possibly know our thoughts apart from the existence of a spirit, which processes these thoughts (1 Corinthians 2:11). Paul also urges the Corinthian believers to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates both body and spirit” (2 Cor 7:1).⁴

³ Jack Levinson, *40 Days with the Holy Spirit: Fresh Air for Every Day* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2015), Kindle loc 178.

⁴ Two other passages to consider here are Romans 8:10 and 1 Peter 3:18. Versions differ whether to translate *pneuma* with a capital or lowercase S, but I (differing from Fee on this point) would argue that the parallelism of the passages make it

In the light of passages like these, I think it is legitimate to think of spiritual formation as the Godward development or maturing of the essential core of a person's being which also involves our other "faculties" in the process. I think this is something like what Dallas Willard was trying to get at through his approach to the transformation of will, heart and spirit.⁵ Furthermore, given the distinctions between mind and spirit suggested by 1 Corinthians 14:13-16, I also think we have reason to follow the lead of the Jesuits in distinguishing intellectual formation, practical formation, and spiritual formation, spiritual formation being the development of that dimension of our life which integrates our connection with God.

Yet, this is certainly not the whole story of Spirit-ual formation, for, as Fee rightly observes, the majority of references to *pneuma* in the NT are references to the Holy Spirit. And thus, my second recommendation: ***Christian spiritual formation is and ought to be about the Holy Spirit.*** I identify this in the definition of spiritual formation I provide in the *Guide*. There I see spiritual formation as "A Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and Gospel of this God."⁶ When I say Spirit- and human-led, I mean that humans do have some responsibility in our own maturing, our own growth in the Gospel. But our own responsibility as Christians is just that – a *response ability*. The Spirit of God initiates. The Spirit of Christ invites. We respond.

This is something I worked out during my "charismatic" conversion in the late 80s. At that time I was confronted with Pentecostal problems and resolved to settle this by examining the notion of

clear that through the Spirit of Christ though our body is dead because of sin, our spirit is now alive because of righteousness.

5 See Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (NY: Harper and Row, 1988), 64-65; Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 141-58.

6 Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2018), 18.

pneuma in the NT. Through this exploration I saw just how central a role the Holy Spirit plays in Christian spiritual formation.

The Holy Spirit is the Initiator of a new divine-human relationship. Spacial metaphors are employed (filled, poured out) or the Scripture speaks of God making a transfer, “giving” the Spirit to us. The Holy Spirit triggers spectacular events (Acts 2) and initiates new ways of life (Luke 1:15). The Spirit justifies, seals, and regenerates, giving new life to those who receive the Spirit. The introduction of the Spirit of Christ inaugurates a covenant-conforming life for individuals and communities. The righteousness shown in the law is now appropriated through the Spirit. The Spirit provides enlightenment of mind and conviction of heart. The Spirit provides a supernatural dimension to our evangelism and service, manifesting the love and power of God through signs, wonders and the healing of bodies, souls, and relationships.

I can go on and on. We can talk of prayer. The Spirit of God gives birth to prayer; when the Spirit moves, prayer happens. The prayers of God’s people mediate the presence and activity of the Spirit, which we see for example in those passages where the Spirit is communicated to people through the laying on of hands or when the Spirit visits as people gather to pray. Perhaps the paramount biblical passage of the relationship of *pneuma* and prayer is Romans 8:14-16 where we hear that the Spirit of God brings us into a state of adoption whereby our hearts cry “Abba, Father,” God’s Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are God’s children.

We can talk about community. The Spirit is by nature community: member of the Trinity, sent from the Father, glorifying the Son. In Ezekiel 37 we read a promise of the Spirit giving life to dry bones which are identified as Israel and then in Acts 2 we read of the fulfillment of this promise as the Spirit of God is poured out and the Church of Christ is born. The Spirit not only forms communities but also forms individuals *through* community. This is the point of the gifts of the Spirit described in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. Finally, we are ultimately formed *into* the Spirit, as the Spirit indwells the body and as the church stands together in the one Spirit (as TNIV translates Philippians 1:27).

And we can talk about mission. The Holy Spirit inspires the church into mission as Holy Spirit filling leads to Holy Spirit boldness and Holy Spirit prophesies lead to missionary sendings. The Spirit of God also orchestrates mission. The Spirit sends Philip to an Ethiopian eunuch, Paul is sent to Ananias and Peter to Cornelius. The settling of a serious doctrinal and missional controversy is settled with the phrase “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” The Holy Spirit also empowers the mission of Christ. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you . . .” Thus Paul summarizes his ministry to the church at Rome as “what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God” (Romans 15:18).

So, we see that Christian spiritual formation – whether or not our own spirit is front and center – emerges from our own engagement with the Spirit of God. In this sense Gordon Fee is spot on. We cannot—indeed, must not—promote any form of Christian spiritual formation that is not bathed in conscious engagement with the Holy Spirit of Christ. Christian spiritual formation is the Christian community being formed in the Spirit.

For this very reason, our own views of, and engagements with, the Spirit (or, to be Biblical, I should say “with spirit”) should concern us greatly. Thus my third recommendation: ***that Christian spiritual formation is and ought to be an exploration of mysteries both natural and supernatural.***

I had noticed a few hints in the 90s and early 2000s, but it wasn’t until a few years ago that I really acknowledged, and then began consciously to examine for myself the *new perspectives on Spirit*. Yes, you heard me right. I did not say “New Perspectives on Paul.” I said, “New Perspectives on Spirit.” I think I am coining a phrase here – I googled the phrase just to check – so I had better explain:

What we know of today as the New Perspectives on Paul, emerged as scholars like E. P. Sanders, and James Dunn re-examined the ways in which Paul's writings had been interpreted.⁷ Based on (1) studies of second temple Judaism, and (2) a critique of cultural paradigms governing Pauline hermeneutics since the Protestant Reformation, these scholars and those who more or less followed their lead stimulated an important debate about our understanding of the Pauline corpus and indeed, about our own Christian faith. Discussion and revisions are still developing, and from our vantage today, we might say that the greatest contributions Sanders bequeathed to our understanding of Paul were not the conclusions he offered, but the questions he raised.

I believe a similar shift is taking place within the study of the Spirit. I am not alone. Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, for example, in his *Spirit and Salvation* reflects on Jürgen Moltmann's own comments on the development of pneumatology. "Moltmann laments that 'a new paradigm in pneumatology has not yet emerged,'" writes Kärkkäinen. And then he states that while Moltmann's "own proposal breaks new ground on more than one count . . . the process of paradigm shift is still to be completed."⁸ Like the new perspective on Paul, this new perspective on Spirit is rooted in examinations of the OT and Judaism and in a critique of modern (and Western) ways of seeing things. Furthermore, I think that the most important contributions have to do with the questions being raised.

I had seen hints of this shift in the works of George Montague, Donald Gelpi, Jurgen Moltmann, Clark Pinnock, Amos Yong and others, but the gauntlet was thrown in 2009 by John R. (or Jack) Levison in his *Filled with the Spirit*. Amos Yong compares Levison's book to Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* in terms of the impact of this work on the study of the Holy Spirit. Similarly Max Turner, a well-respected New Testament scholar and theologian of the Holy Spirit, claims that "Anyone writing

⁷ See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977); James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

⁸ Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, Volume 4 of *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 10.

seriously on the spirit in the biblical literature needs now to start with this book – and will probably keep it as a constant dialogue partner.”⁹

This is precisely what I did and am still doing today. I accidentally encountered Jack’s ideas when, a few years ago, I attended a Society of Vineyard Scholars gathering where he spoke. I had not heard of Levison before and was struck by (1) the depth of his scholarship, (2) the challenge he presented to our view of the spirit and, consequently, the spiritual life, and (3) a few serious concerns I had about his proposal. I went home and read *Filled with the Spirit* and a couple of his other works. After reading these works I knew – I had to open my Bible again.

What I did, for the most part, was this: I went to the First Testament first. I listed the instances of *ruach* and began looking them up one by one. I pondered the meaning of the word and the nature of the concept of spirit suggested by its use in different passages. I investigated the significance of the presence or absence of the article, of genitive constructions or parallel terms, and of the verbs used to describe the activities of S/spirit. I took note of the results of the influence of *ruach*, trying to get a sense of what the work of S/spirit looks like. Finally, I noted other observations, appropriate bibliography related to this passage or some associated idea, and reflections integrating my work with New Testament pneumatology.

This work has become, once a week, the form of my personal devotions as I have felt the Lord inviting me to – as Star Wars might say – “learn the ways of the Force.” I am currently about half-way through this study. What I am learning from this study is softening, though not overturning what I gained from my more “charismatic” earlier exploration of *pneuma*. What I am finding is that through a deepening understanding of *ruach* (and therefore, of *pneuma* as well), as stimulated by my dialogue with the new perspective on Spirit, I am invited into mysteries both natural and supernatural.

First - The biblical terms for spirit appear to communicate a range of meanings.

⁹ Back cover, *Filled*. See also Kärkkäinen where he states that Levison “has helped reorient pneumatology”

This is the linguistic question: just what did (or does) *ruach* (and *pneuma*) mean? Levison, for example, argues that instances of *ruach* which speak of the human spirit – given by God at birth – and those which speak of charismatic endowments of God “were understood to be one and the same.”¹⁰ Gordon Fee, on the other hand is convinced that *pneuma* nearly always refers to the third person of the Trinity.¹¹ Each tends to comprehend S/spirit within a single (though different) meaning. My own studies, however, support the conclusion of Max Turner who argues that the biblical writers put a single lexical form to distinct (polysemous) uses.¹² *Ruach* is used to identify wind, as a synonym for life itself, as a name for the essence of a person – parallel to “heart”, as a power distributed by God. We read of “spirits” in the plural and of the spirit of the Lord. Though there are connections between these meanings, I think we are best when we respect the, at times ambiguous, semantic range of *ruach* and *pneuma*.

Second – *The biblical accounts of the influence of S/spirit describe a variety of activities that are both natural and supernatural.*

Throughout the OT, just like in the NT, God’s spirit is often described through verbs. What I have seen in my examination of *ruach* is a full and rich presentation of the work of God’s spirit. The Spirit is the divine creative force, the giver of life. God’s spirit hovered over creation (Genesis 1:2). When God removes his *ruach* from creatures they return to the dust and when God sends *ruach* they are created and renew the face of the earth (Psalm 104:29-30). God promises a new creation to Israel by speaking of life given to dry bones through *ruach* (Ezekiel 37:5-9).

The Spirit not only creates life of all types, the Spirit also distributes particular manifestations, gifts, or powers that express God to the world. The Lord fills Bezalel with “spirit of God,” with skill, ability, and knowledge (Exodus 31:3). Joshua was filled with “spirit of wisdom” when Moses laid

10 Levison, *Filled*, 12.

11 This is a theme argued throughout Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*.

12 Max Turner, “Levison’s *Filled with the Spirit*: A Brief Appreciation and Response” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011) 193-200, see especially p. 196.

hands on him (Deuteronomy 34:9). “Spirit of YHWH” comes upon Samson and he tears apart a lion. The source of Joseph’s character was perceived by Pharaoh, as he declares, “Can we find anyone like this man, in whom is the spirit of God?” (Genesis 41:38). You can see that influence of the Spirit of God arises variously: through the laying on of hands, through a special divine act, perhaps – if we include John the Baptist – before birth. Both what we might call natural and supernatural phenomena exhibit the work of God’s spirit.

The NT simply reflects the OT view of the Spirit’s work, with special emphasis on the supernatural and upon the special connection which believers have with the Spirit of Christ. The promise of the dry bones is fulfilled by a new creation through the sending of God’s spirit in Acts. The Spirit gives gifts to the Church of both a spectacular and more natural variety (1 Corinthians 12, but see also Romans 12, where again, spirit-language is not used, but obvious). And in the end the Spirit will give life to our mortal bodies as well, just like in the beginning (Romans 8:11).

Third and finally - *I think the biblical terms for spirit can be understood more clearly within a conceptual paradigm other than Western modern substantialism.* When we put on new conceptual glasses I think we are able to perceive and live in the Spirit in ways we had not (though I suspect the Scriptures had) imagined. Two matters have pushed me into this: first is the analysis of the texts. In numerous places *ruach* or *pneuma* is used without the article “Divine spirit (or wind) was moving over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2). “I have filled him [Bezalel] with divine spirit, with skill, ability, and knowledge” (Exodus 31:3). “Then spirit lifted me up” (Ezekiel 3:12). “In a few days you will be baptized with holy spirit” (Acts 1:5). E. W. Bullinger (a nineteenth-century descendent of the Swiss reformer), in his *Word Studies on the Holy Spirit* argues that those instances without the article usually refer to the gift (a manifestation of God) rather than the giver (the God who is manifest). Gordon Fee, on the other hand, argues that Paul’s anarthrous use of *pneuma* “only and always means the Spirit of

the living God, the Holy Spirit himself.”¹³ My own examination of *ruach* inclines me to think that Bullinger may have been on to something. I am not comfortable reducing anarthrous instances of *ruach* or *pneuma* merely to stylistic considerations.

But then that leaves me trying to make sense of this vague “divine spirit.” And that is where the second matter - metaphysics - steps in. To put it briefly, I think that many Christian theologians are suffering from an understanding of spirit as intangible substance. This, when combined with a view of the third member of the Trinity as *personal* (which I would affirm), can leave us thinking of the Holy Spirit as some kind of an invisible Jesus. And while this image is faithful to portraits of the Comforter in John, I do not think this image comprehends S/spirit as presented in the whole of Scripture. Furthermore, over my years of teaching philosophy and world religions I have come to appreciate less substantialist ways of comprehending reality. When I – along with theologians like Donald Gelpi, Amos Yong, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and others – examine the cognates for “spirit” in other languages and cultures (*chi* for example), and consider “divine spirit” (or spirits) in dialogue with the metaphysics of someone like Charles S. Peirce, or with recent scientific notions, I find that the nuances of *ruach* and *pneuma* are displayed more fully and I grasp God’s S/spirit better.

So what does this have to do with spiritual formation? My re-examination of Scripture in light of the new perspective on Spirit is giving me a greater respect for both the mysterious and the “ordinary” in life as manifestations of divine Spirit. I find myself teaching people to recognize what is life-giving for them when they are at their best. I suspect that when we identify this, we may be witnessing the Spirit. I am helping those to whom I offer spiritual counsel to consider that “experience of the Holy Spirit” does not necessarily involve remarkable feelings or happenings. God’s spirit might be experienced through a life-long maturation in wisdom. Discernment, in particular, becomes an art of navigating the mysteries of the ordinary and the extraordinary. How do we identify “God’s will” in the

13 Fee, *Empowering Presence*, 24.

midst of the confusion of life, when we refuse to privilege the unusual as the chief sign of God's leading? How do we recognize Spirit? By acknowledging the bankruptcy of our modern metaphysical paradigm for spirit I simply admit that Christian formation as S/spirit-ual formation is necessarily mysterious. I was not entirely joking when I speak of growing in relationship to the Spirit of Christ as "learning the ways of the Force." While I have no intention of denying the personal nature of God's Spirit, I wonder if it is not time to permit a bit of mystery and allow ourselves to explore holy spirit afresh.

If we are to view Spirit-ual formation from the viewpoint of the Biblical theology of spirit, Spirit-ual formation is about us, the transformation of the core of our being as individuals and communities in a Christward direction. Spirit-ual formation is also about the Holy Spirit, our sincere response as individuals and communities to the initiative of God's spirit in every area of life. And spirit-ual formation is also a bit mysterious. I am just not sure we moderns have really grasped *spirit* as the biblical writers did. Perhaps that is the passageway into which we are invited to tumble.