

A Model of Christian Spiritual Formation

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Abstract

Spiritual formation can be understood through the use of an analogous comparison to natural or biological ecology. As in nature with plant life, spiritual formation involves growth. In contrast, spiritual formation is fostered by the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian community. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the vital role that the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the members of the body of Christ play in the spiritual formation of Christians. Spiritual formation is a work of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of love, worship of Christ, and Christlike faith are all evidence of spiritual formation in the life of Christians. Community, specifically the Christian community, plays an important role in the spiritual maturation of believers. Two sections are included on how to apply this model in the daily life of believers and how it translates in digital communities.

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I. Introduction

Just as with seed planting in the natural or physical realm, spiritual formation also requires various elements to facilitate the process of growth. Some elements are more essential than others; however, most elements working in harmony with each other foster the best growth. This is true with natural seed and plant growth, as well as in the spirit with the formation and growth of believers. In nature, the right combination of seed, good soil, sunlight, and water produces healthy, desired plants. Similarly, in spiritual formation, there are various elements like the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the members of the body of Christ that foster growth, both individually and collectively. When developing a biblical model of spiritual growth for Christians, it is apparent that one must first have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Equally as important is hearing and obeying the Word of God, allowing the work of the Holy Spirit, and recognizing one's role in being a part of the body of Christ. This article will demonstrate the role of the essential elements, such as the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, and others, in the spiritual formation of Christians.

Originally, man (Adam and Eve) knew God in an unrestricted spiritual manner. They were created in the image of God and were formed spiritually and physically by God. This is the original and desired plan of God for man. However, original sin separated man from God, leaving subsequent humans with the need for spiritual formation and growth. Lowe & Lowe (2018) write, "human sin infected the connective harmony that permeated the pristine ecology God created. The entire web of connections and interactions that made God's original ecology hum along in perfect harmony was suddenly off-key and discordant" (p. 22). Jesus Christ, the second Adam, and His work is the starting point for Christians' spiritual formation. First Corinthians 15:20-22 says, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man *came* death, by Man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." These Scriptures are biblical support that spiritual formation begins with a relationship with Jesus Christ. On this point Pettit (2008) says, "a lifelong transformation is set into motion when one places his or her faith in Jesus Christ and seeks to follow him (discipleship, apprenticeship)" (p.21).

There is cultivating work that takes place before a person comes to Jesus. God must first call or draw a person into a relationship with Himself (John 6:44). There is general revelation of God through such things as nature that testifies to God's existence. The sowing of the seed of the Word of God through God's Spirit moving upon others is a testament to God's existence for the unconverted. God uses members of the body of Christ to draw people into a relationship with Himself. Salvation is not only initiated by God, but subsequent change and growth are likewise. Pettit (2008) explains, "the process of spiritual formation (the believer becoming more like Christ) is a mysterious outworking of both God's initiative and involvement over time and a concerted response or action plan by the individual believer who understands that growth graciously proceeds from God" (p. 23).

After drawing into a relationship with God by God, a newly converted believer begins the journey of spiritual formation and growing in the knowledge and understanding of God. The goals of this journey include strengthening one's relationship with Jesus and developing the fruit of the Spirit. These goals are accomplished through various means, and they are facilitated individually and collectively in the body of Christ. Ultimately, one's concern should be to remain in a relationship and connected with God. John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." Abiding in God includes remaining spiritually connected with His Spirit and members of the body of Christ.

Developing and growing spiritually happens individually and collaboratively as members of the body of Christ. As each individual grows, so does the body grow, and as the body grows, so does each individual. Pettit (2008) writes, "By using the term spiritual, we are referring to the dynamic, holistic, maturing, relationship between the individual believer and God, and between the individual believer and others (both believers and unbelievers)" (p. 20). Jesus is the head of the body of Christ, who guides and nurtures the body. This often happens through the work of the Holy Spirit and through the spiritual gifts of the members of the body used to edify and equip the body.

There is a responsibility that each member of the body has to ensure that they are striving to grow and operate at their best capability. Individual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, worship, studying, and obeying the Word of God are conducive to healthy growth. This individual's integrity and discipline equip Christians to be productive and positive examples and contributors to the body. These disciplines, such as prayer, can be and are practiced corporately as the body of Christ. When practiced corporately, there is public acknowledgement and accountability.

Spiritual Formation is Spiritual

It seems obvious to say that spiritual formation is spiritual; however, it must be stressed that often growth happens spiritually that is not observable or is only observable by the effects of spiritual growth. God is a spirit, and believers primarily connect with God through the Spirit. John 4:24 says, "God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Man is a three-part being. Man is a spirit, has a soul, and lives in a body, where our primary connection to God is through the spirit. Genesis 2:7 says, "and the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." The usage of the word breath in this Scripture is *ruah* in Hebrew, meaning wind or spirit. Similarly, in Greek, the word breath is translated as *pneuma*, which means spirit. Pettit (2008) says, "'spirit' in Scripture can refer to either the whole immaterial part of a human being or to some element of it, especially the inner conditions and dispositions of the person" (p.55). These Scriptures support the notion of the spirit being an inner, hidden, indirectly observable component of God and man. John 3:6-8 says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." When placing importance on specific components that comprise man, the emphasis should be placed on the spirit because it is eternal, whether ultimately unto eternal life or spiritual death. Second Corinthians 4:16:18 expounds,

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

This Scripture and others refer to the spirit as the inward or inner man, which is the focus for the life of a believer as they relate to Christ. Sheffer (1994) writes about the Reformers' view on spirituality, "Zwingli emphasized two elements which relate to spirituality. He insisted on the centrality of Scripture, which brought about a spirituality that was largely inward" (Sheffer, 1994, p. 169). Most denominations agree on the inward aspect of the spirit, while holding that spiritual growth is multifaceted and happens both inward and amongst a community of believers. Sheffer (1994) provides the Methodist point of view on spirituality. John Wesley "saw the Christian life as inward spiritual growth as well as active discipleship in the world" (p. 174). Many believe that spiritual formation and growth are initiated and facilitated by outward influences of the community of believers, thereby placing the emphasis upon the external experience rather than the inward change. Webber (2004) provides, "another principle of Christian formation in the early church recognizes that external rites have the power to order an inner experience" (p. 86). Webber (2004) continues to argue,

the sevenfold process of Christian formation is the external agency through which the belief of the Christian community is handed down to the new believer. All forms of formation require an external agent that will break in upon the recipient, distress that recipient with a sense of sin, and arouse that person to faith (p. 87).

Based on Scripture and according to these provided viewpoints, the focus must be placed on the spirit in the process of spiritual growth and less so on other components, such as those dealing with the flesh. Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it." The inner, hidden, and unobservable aspects of the spirit apply to the individual spiritual growth of a believer. Spiritual

growth is ultimately caused by the Holy Spirit. Armstrong (2004) explains, “We believe that as they (Christians) grow, they become more and more like Christ by and through the work of the Spirit” (p. 8). Even though things like faith, baptism, and repentance are necessary, they are insufficient on their own without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. It is our responsibility to sow the seed, tend the soil, and have faith in God's enigmatic transformational work during the discipleship process. This job frequently takes place in ways that are beyond our control or prediction. It is a process characterized by trust, prayer, and patience as we collaborate with God, who is the only source of progress (Činčala, 2025). Dunlow (2014) says, spiritual formation 'is human effort working with the Holy Spirit or 'cooperation with the Holy Spirit'" (p. 75). It must be noted that the Holy Spirit often uses other believers to facilitate that growth. First Corinthians 3:6-7 says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.” This Scripture is evidence that other believers have a role in spiritual growth, whether individually or corporately as the body of Christ.

Much of the spiritual growth in the community of believers is not directly observable in the macro sense of the body of Christ. Lowe & Lowe (2018) use a forest analogy to explain, Certain ecologists have drawn our attention to the underground network that lies beneath the surface. She (Dr. Suzanne Simard) and others have discovered a vast underground interlocking fungal and root network that connects all of the trees together. Through these vast, hidden networks, the trees share nutrients, exchange carbon, and provide life-giving water to each other in a highly mutualistic interchange” (p. 138).

This example of the forest ecology supports the unobservable effects that aid spiritual growth in believers and the body of Christ. Lowe & Lowe (2018) continue, “when we observe the beauty and breath of the body of Christ, we can miss the hidden connections and interactions that function like the underground network Dr. Simard describes” (p.138). However, it can be argued that in the local church congregation, spiritual connections can be more observable.

Despite the inner, hidden, and directly unobservable nature of spiritual growth, the effects of the work of the Spirit are observable. One can observe the effects of the spirit just like with the effects of the wind. With the wind, one cannot see it directly, but they can observe the effects of it, such as by the wind blows leaves on a tree. In the believer's life, the effects of spiritual growth are observed through one possession, the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such, there is no law.” Jesus specifically pointed out the fruit of love as being an observable effect of spiritual growth and discipleship. John 13:35 says, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Love is Evidence and Promotes Spiritual Formation

Love is not only evidence of spiritual growth as being the fruit of the Spirit, but it is one of the primary elements that promote and cultivate spiritual growth. God is love. First John 4:7-8 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” God's nature of love gives people the ability to love. People are capable of loving because God is love, and He initiated the ability to love in us. First John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us.” Christians, by having a relationship with Christ, have what this writer calls the capability for true love. First John 4:16 says, “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” First John 3:1 says, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.” These Scriptures allude to the nature of God and true love being equivocated, indicating that to know God is love and to love is to know God. Our quality of love matures as we develop more Christlikeness. Transformation into the likeness of Christ occurs as individuals develop a heightened awareness of God's presence and influence in their lives, thereby embracing the power and direction of the Spirit to love God and others as they love themselves (Wang et al., 2023).

Having now established that God is love and is the catalyst for love. God has commanded Christians to love. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus says,

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Christians demonstrate their love for God and others in various ways. One of the primary ways that one shows love for God is through obeying His word. This is the foremost and essential way that God says that people are to love Him. In John 14:23, Jesus says, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” Throughout the Old and New Testaments, people are instructed that obeying God's commands or His Word is showing love for God. It is the ultimate way that people show love for God. Obeying God's Word not only promotes spiritual growth but is evidence of spiritual maturation.

Christians not only love others because it is one of the two greatest commandments, but when we love others, we are showing love for God by obeying His Word. Pettit (2008) writes, “the prerequisite for loving others is receiving love from the Father” (p. 173). First John 4:11 instructs, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Loving others not only promotes spiritual growth, but it is also evidence of being a part of the body of Christ. John 13:35 says, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Pettit (2008) argues, “spiritual formation must never be a private experience or entirely interior experience. It should express itself in active love for others” (p. 175).

Having established that loving others is evidence of spiritual maturity and essential for spiritual growth, it is necessary to provide what it looks like biblically to love others. It is very common to use the words I love you very loosely. But to use those words and to think one actively loves others is very different from what true love is. First John 3:18-23 says,

My little children, let us not love in word or tongue, but in deed and truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence in God. And whatever we ask, we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

Jesus points out the use of such vain words in Matthew 15:8 when he says, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with *their* lips, but their heart is far from Me.”

A major display of love is through action. Scripture points out the greatest act of love in John 15:13, which says, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” There are various ways that love is observable both individually and in relation to others. First Corinthians 13:4-7 says,

Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

These displays of love are mostly inner qualities but are witnessed in response to others.

Loving others, practically speaking, can be observed in innumerable ways. Oftentimes, love is expressed in the service of others. Spending time with people, listening to them, and helping them out in needed areas are just a few of the practical ways we can show love to people. The church has many ministries that facilitate meeting the needs of people, which are tangible ways of expressing love for others. Pettit (2008) explains, “the body of Christ expresses love in the world in countless ways: adoption services, feeding the poor, shelters for the abused, health care, and educational efforts, just to name a few” (p. 175). Participating in any of these or various other activities is a visible expression of love towards others. These activities are correlates of love in action to God and others. Loving God and other people is evidence of and promotes spiritual growth.

Worship: The Heart of Spiritual Formation

Worship is an expression of reverence or adoration that Christians show towards God. Worship not only promotes spiritual formation, but it is both self-evident and evidence to others of a life devoted to Christ. Pettit (2008) argues, “worship of the triune God is the most spiritually formative practice available to us as Christians” (p. 52). It is consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments that people are to worship only God, and to worship any other person or thing is idolatry. One of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God” (Exodus 20:4-5). In Matthew 4:10, Jesus says, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

True worship is a spiritual expression of inner conviction about God’s nature and one’s relationship with Jesus Christ. John 4:23-24 says, “but the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Pettit (2008) writes, “worship is at the core of spiritual life” (p. 51). A common example of a misunderstanding of what constitutes worship is two slow songs in a Sunday morning church service. Although that may be acts of worship, however, worship is broader, more encompassing, and can be expressed in various ways. True worship is just a posture of the heart towards God and away from anyone or anything that would take priority over God in one’s life. Ellsworth (2004) adds,

True worship is not a confirmation of our culturally derived desires and pleasures. True worship is an unrelenting worth reassessment that drives out our idolatries and our greed. True worship illumines our lives and drives us into the disciplines of spiritual formation. It is in this struggle that the passions and desires that drive us beyond our capacity to love God and neighbor are brought into captivity. True worship teaches us the mission of private and corporate love (p. 148).

The Holy Spirit knows what true and acceptable worship is. The Holy Spirit can distinguish between the vain worship Jesus described in Matthew 15:8, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me

with *their* lips, but their heart is far from Me.” However, the Spirit knows what true worship is according to 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, “for the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”

Worship can be expressed individually or corporately, either through individual disciplines or corporate liturgy. Pettit (2008) writes,

whether its private and personal, or public and communal, it is worship that keeps us most directly engaged with God in life through meditation on his Word (Ps. 1:2), prayer (Ps. 3), penitence (Pss. 32; 51) praise (Pss. 146-150; Heb. 13:15a), thanksgiving (Ps. 100; Heb 13:15b), lament (Ps. 137), self-sacrifice (Rom. 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5), ministry (Rom. 15:16; Phil 2:17), doing good works (Heb. 13:16), and more (p. 52).

Renihan (2004) provides Foster’s argument on the spiritual disciplines’ relation to spiritual formation,

Frankly, no Spiritual Disciplines, no Spiritual Formation. The Disciplines are the God-ordained means by which each of us is enabled to bring the little, individualized power pack we all possess – we call it the human body – and place it before God as “a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). It is the way we go about training in the spiritual life. By means of this process, we become, through time and experience, the kind of person who lives naturally and freely in “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22, 23). [italics Renihan]

What are these spiritual Disciplines I am speaking of? Oh, they are many and varied: fasting and prayer, study and service, submission and solitude, confession and worship, meditation and silence, simplicity, frugality, secrecy, sacrifice, celebration, and the like. *The commonly identified public religious activities are important to be sure, but the less commonly practiced activities like solitude and silence and meditation and fasting, and submission to the will of others as appropriate are in fact more foundational for Spiritual Formation.* All Disciplines should be thoughtfully and resolutely approached for the purpose of forming the life into Christlikeness, or they will have little or no effect in promoting this life. [italics Renihan] (p. 77).

As an extension of the individual or a subset of the communal, worship should be expressed and practiced in the family. Duncan (2004) argues, “the family ought to be in corporate worship faithfully and in it together” (p. 8). Parents should be a model of the practices of worship mentioned above by Pettit to the rest of the family. Duncan (2004) writes, “Instead of spiritual concerns contributing to an already frantic pace of life, the family should commit itself to the time-proven, biblically based means of spiritual nurture—public and family worship. In these settings great psalms and hymns are sung, children are catechized, sins are confessed, and the Scriptures are read and taught” (p. 15). Whether expressed individually, in the family, or corporately, worship promotes spiritual growth. Pettit (2008) explains, “spiritual formation, in turn, is about how to go about engaging with the presence of God, walking with him day by day, moment by moment, in worship, prayer, obedience, witness, spiritual disciplines, or whatever” (p. 64).

Christlike Faith: Evidence of Spiritual Maturity

Many of the elements that have been shared up to this point, such as love and worship, not only promote spiritual growth but are also evidence of spiritual maturity and being more Christlike. This writer shared in the first section of this article that an emphasis must be placed on the spiritual in the spiritual formation process. Much of spiritual growth is not directly observable. This leads to the discussion of the role that faith plays in the spiritual formation process. Faith not only promotes spiritual growth, but it is evidence of spiritual growth and indicates one’s Christlikeness. Hebrews 11:1-3 says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a *good* testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” As mentioned earlier, spiritual growth commences when one has a relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship is facilitated by one’s faith in Jesus and acknowledging that He exists. After the initial establishment of a relationship, a person’s desire should be to develop that relationship. One of the vital ways of developing this relationship is having a heart to please God. Hebrews 11:5-6 says, “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, ‘and was not found, because God had taken him’; for before he was taken, he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Choices and actions motivated by a desire to please God promote spiritual growth.

Another aspect of faith is that everyone is born with some degree of faith. It is just a matter of what they choose to place their faith in. Romans 12:3 says, “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” God has not only given people the capability of a measure of faith, but He has also made it known that placing one’s faith in Him is what He desires for Him to be pleased. Developing one’s faith and growing in faith in God is evidence of spiritual growth. Since everyone is dealt a measure of faith, one’s responsibility is to exercise their faith for it to grow and for them to grow. The Word of God informs Christians of the power and capability of faith. Things in nature that seem impossible become possible if one uses their faith without doubting and uses it in line with the Word of God. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus says, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have

faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." In Luke 17:6, Jesus says, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." These Scriptures demonstrate that faith is powerful when you place it in God and do not doubt His Word. In Mark 11:22-24, Jesus says,

'Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore, I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*.

These instructions by Jesus to His disciples were responses to questions about increasing their faith, or examples where they were unable to heal people. However, Jesus wanted to teach them the power of placing their faith in God and not doubting.

There were numerous other occasions where Jesus would call the disciples faithless or tell them they had little faith. These examples are indications that God's desire is for Christians to grow in faith and have great faith. Jesus tells the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 that her faith is great when she responded to Jesus in an effort to get Jesus to heal her daughter. She responded, "The dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Also, in Matthew 8, Jesus says that the Centurion has great faith when he wanted Jesus to just speak the word of healing for his servant at home.

Every man is dealt the measure of faith, yet there are some, according to Scripture, who demonstrated no faith, little faith, and great faith. Since by faith, one pleases God, it can be deduced that God wants us to grow in and have great faith. Samra (2008) explains that Paul makes the connection between 'strong' and 'mature' by describing mature believers as strong or steadfast (p. 70). Samra (2008) adds, "Paul uses similar language in Rom. 4.20 to describe Abraham as one who 'was made strong' in his faith (Rom 4.20). This contrasted with weakening in faith (4.19) and wavering in unbelief (4.20), and Abraham is held up as a model for those who live in faith (4.12) Those who are strong in their faith and do not easily waver or stumble are considered by Paul to be mature believers" (p. 71).

So, how do Christians develop in faith? One way is by exercising it and putting it to use without doubting the Word of God. Another way that Scripture instructs is in Romans 10:17, "So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The Word of God comes in many ways, and the one mentioned in Romans 10 is through the preacher. Additionally, the fivefold ministry gifts are some of the other ways the word of God comes. Ephesians 4:11-13 says, "and he gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." These ministry gifts play a vital role in the spiritual development of the body of Christ.

One has matured in faith when their faith resembles Christ or has become Christlike. This occurs when one exercises one's faith without doubting or wavering. When one's exercising of faith lines up with the authority of the Word of God, then one's faith is operating as God originally designed. When one acknowledges their Christlikeness and begins to operate in it, they will demonstrate mature or great faith. This operating in Christlikeness is evidence of spiritual maturity. Samra (2008) explains, "Paul's affirmation that believers have the mind of Christ indicates that he thinks that a mature believer is one whose thoughts and corresponding pattern of behavior conform to their status as having the mind of Christ" (p. 71). When recognizing one's status as Christlike, they will conduct themselves accordingly and demonstrate spiritual maturity in elements such as love, worship, and faith

The Role of the Church/Christian Community in Spiritual Formation

Throughout history, the people who were set apart and who are considered distinctively God's people have been labeled using various terminology. Most of these referential terms are biblically derived. Some of the arguably synonymous terms include assembly, the children of God, people of God, congregation, the body of Christ, among others. References such as community, people of God, and assembly can be found in the Old Testament. Similar references, such as the church or the body of Christ, can be found in the New Testament. Usually, these terms refer to people who have been designated as people uniquely connected to and identified with God. Erickson (2013) writes, "the church includes all persons anywhere in the world who are savingly related to Christ. It also includes all who have lived and been part of his body, and all who live and be part of his body" (p. 957). New Testament use of these terms, specifically the "Church," is established by one having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Pettit (2008) explains, "Paul countered that Jews and Gentiles enter the new covenant community based on faith in Christ alone" (p. 77).

For the most part, the Church refers to the universal and entire group of people who have a relationship with Jesus Christ and commonly, a building or assembly of people who gather to worship God. One can argue against the view of referencing the church as a specific building by suggesting that such views are a misinterpretation and that it is more accurately viewed as a spiritually connected assembly of people. It can be

said that the differences in these views are derived from the distinction between the church and the body of Christ; one can be viewed as a physical place, while the other is viewed as a spiritual connection, the church and the body of Christ, respectively. Samra acknowledges a similar implication with the terminology of the body of Christ and the people of God. Samra (2006) explains, “although the first metaphor (body of Christ) is spatial in nature and the second (people of God) is temporal, they refer to the same thing- the actualization of the realm of God/Christ in the ‘here’ (apocalyptic in-breaking) and ‘now’ (eschatological in-breaking). This happened as a result of the Spirit” (p. 134). One thing is for sure: the church cannot be solely relegated to a physical place because Christians are still a part of the body of Christ even when they are not assembled in a building referred to as the church. Samra (2006) writes, “thus believers as individuals who have the Spirit (Rom. 8.9-11; 1 Cor. 6.19) are already declared children of God (Rom. 8.14-17) and are rightfully declared righteous and holy (e.g. 1 Cor. 6.11), whether they are assembled in community or not” (p. 135). Also, Matthew 18:20 alludes to this idea that the Church is not solely a physical place when Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” This Scripture indicates the Church is where Christ's presence is, and not necessarily a physical place. For the sake of argument, these terms will be viewed as synonymous, acknowledging that they refer less frequently to a physical place and mostly to a spiritually connected group of people. First Corinthians 12:12, 20, 27 says, “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also *is* Christ. (v. 20) But now indeed *there are* many members, yet one body. (v. 27) Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.”

In some instances, the New Testament refers to the spiritual aspect of believers being temples of the Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 6:19 says, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?” This Scripture supports the spiritual nature of these terms when referring to the assembly or connectedness of the group of believers. Erickson (2013) says, “the church is now indwelt by the Spirit, both individually and collectively” (p. 962). Now that the various terminology has been provided that refers biblically to the Church and how these terms are mostly spiritual, the discussion will advance to providing the role that the church or Christian community plays in spiritual formation.

The subtopic of the individual's role in spiritual formation has been addressed up to this point in various parts of this article and more thoroughly in the section on “Worship.” However, a major component of spiritual formation involves the church and/or Christian community. Pettit (2008) explains, “spiritual formation demonstrates its presence not only in how we relate to God, but also especially in how we relate to others, particularly those in our community” (p. 106). Spiritual formation is facilitated by the Church individually and corporately. The church allows the individual to be edified, equipped, and to exercise the knowledge of God they have obtained. Likewise, the church is edified and equipped collectively and is a place for fellowship and the building up of one another. Samra (2006) writes, “when believers assemble together, the Spirit is not only in each one of them but also becomes manifest through them (1 Cor. 12.7) and dwells among them (1 Cor. 5.4, 11.17-34), becomes present in the assembled community in a unique way” (p. 135).

God has provided certain gifts to the Church, and He utilizes various people as conduits of those gifts. Ephesians 4:11-13 says, “And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” The Church facilitates spiritual growth because it has the benefits of fellowship, comfort, and builds up Christians. First Corinthians 14:1-5 says,

“Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation, and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Despite this Scripture talking about prophesying, the purpose for which this writer mentioned this Scripture is to support the idea that assembling together edifies the body of Christ. Likewise, Samra (2006) utilizes the related passage of Scripture “to point out that Paul's expectation for gathered community is that it will be built up” (p. 151).

The role of these gifts or leaders includes facilitating the spiritual maturation of the body of Christ. Cox (2000) refers to this spiritual growth or maturation as formative discipline. Cox (2000) writes, “Formative discipline relates to the educational framework established by the church to aid believers in this process of learning and maturation” (p. 45). Formative discipline is carried out by the role of the individual, the church leaders, and the church as a whole. This discipline is taught and shared by the church and Christian community and is exercised by the church individually and corporately. Cox (2000) provides Findley's explanation of church formative discipline,

Formative church discipline is that process of teaching and training by which the Christian is increasingly formed in the image of Christ.... In Christian nurture, disciples subject themselves to the discipline of Christ. This

process is lifelong in scope and is not optional in nature. The purpose of this discipline is to equip individuals [sic] to fulfill the missions for which they were called as Christians. Formative discipline is exercised in the Christian community as the members express genuine concern for one another and become dynamically involved with one another in deep interpersonal relationships, recognizing that all are held accountable by God for their stewardship of life. Its purpose is to enlighten, encourage, stimulate, support, and sustain one another and the group in the discipline under which they live and in the fulfillment of their divine mission. (p.45).

The church and Christian community provide an environment that facilitates formative discipline and spiritual growth. This growth is ultimately aimed at becoming more Christlike. The church provides opportunity for Christians to fellowship, edify, equip, build up, and comfort one another. Clemons (1988) writes, “if the local church is not a place where people learn to know God- and to formulate our thoughts about God, ourselves, the world, and life from a godly point of view—we are failing in one of our basic tasks: to enable believers to “love God with all our minds” (p.16). The Christian community is an avenue by which the Word of God is spread, through preaching, teaching, and applying it. The church is a means by which understanding of Scripture is facilitated and wisdom is obtained. The Christian community affords one the opportunity to love and serve one another. These opportunities, such as serving one another, facilitate spiritual growth and are also evidence of spiritual maturity.

Applying this Model: Hearing and Obeying

As expressed earlier, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit play vital roles in the spiritual formation process. One must hear and receive the Word of God, and with the help, guidance, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they must obey what the Word is saying to do. The Holy Spirit is involved throughout this process, and He helps in receiving and understanding the word of God. John 16:13 says, “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.” It is indicated throughout the New Testament that the assistance of the Holy Spirit is necessary in understanding the Word of God. First Corinthians 2:10-14 says, But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.

This Scripture, amongst others, demonstrates that the role of the Holy Spirit is vital in understanding and applying the Word of God. Furthermore, this writer acknowledges the importance of the Holy Spirit in applying this model of spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit plays a fundamental role in helping a person hear the Word of God, love God and others, worship God, exhibit great faith, and engage with others in community.

Now that the role of the Holy Spirit has been established in applying this model, it is important to address how receiving the Word of God is equally important. There are innumerable ways in which people can receive the Word of God. God can use whomever or whatever He so chooses to communicate His Word or to accomplish His purposes. With the advancements of modern-day technology, people are not just limited to print or typical face-to-face engagements. There are various digital and virtual platforms where people can hear the Word of God through means that include streaming Bible studies, online devotionals, blogs, social media posts, including many others. Digital and virtual technologies can be used to supplement the traditional face-to-face engagements, such as gathering in physical church buildings. New technology supports extensive engagements with fewer limitations by distance and time. People are able to receive the Word of God from various means, not restricted to just once on Sunday at a particular location. Campbell and Garner (2016) write, “technology allows members to access church services at different times through podcasts and video feeds, and it helps maintain regular and extensive pastoral support networks” (p. 30). Buchanan (1997) writes,

“Through the Internet, the local church may provide care and prayer for its members. A prayer site may be maintained. Direct contact with missionaries in a matter of seconds is possible, and members may become related to the mission program in our world. Members who need to be away from church on a Sunday may keep up with the events and news of the church. It has great potential for the local church (p. 42).

Technology is only advancing, and the church must utilize those advancements to accomplish God’s purposes, such as communicating the Word of God.

After hearing the Word of God, it is the responsibility of the hearers to obey the Word of God. James 1:22-25 says,

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it and* is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

Christians must obey and apply the Word of God in their lives for God's will to be accomplished in their lives. Applying the Word of God is necessary in this model of spiritual formation. One must appropriately apply the Word of God in loving God and others, worshiping God through spiritual disciplines, exhibiting great faith, and engaging in community. God says that our love for Him is demonstrated by obeying His Word. John 14:23 Jesus says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him."

Loving and worshiping God directly requires individual and personal commitment and disciplines. Appropriate application of the model of spiritual formation in loving and worshiping God requires the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As one's relationship with God grows and becomes more intimate, God through the Holy Spirit can lead, guide, direct, speak, comfort, including various other relational aspects. Specific direction and conviction can occur similar way to relating to another person. At this point, God can commune with you, as though He were a physical person sitting in a room with you. This happens as a result of fellowshiping with God and the Holy Spirit through prayer, fasting, studying Scriptures, etc. The use of technology can prove helpful in illuminating Scripture and God revealing more of Himself through online study resources and devotionals. Campbell and Garner (2016) provide an example: "Gospelcom provided Christians with access to online Bible study tools and various interactive devotional and fellowship groups" (p. 63).

Fellowship groups lead the discussion into the role that technology plays in applying this model of spiritual formation in loving others and engaging the community. New technology has opened up numerous ways that loving others and engaging in community can be expressed. Christians can encourage, edify, equip, pray for, and comfort one another through many different means, utilizing new technology. Blogs, podcasts, streaming, and video mediums can be used for these types of engagements in the community. These capabilities broaden connections from just the local community to a global community where people can connect virtually and digitally with anyone in the world. This has proven useful in evangelism and helping to spread the Gospel across the world. This indicates that new technology is helpful in initiating spiritual formation in the lives of people. Also, it has been provided that technology is helpful to extend the arms of the physical and local church, but it also helps in an academic educational setting. Asumang (2016) provides Bernard and colleagues' assessment on technology involvement in distance or online learning, "their insights indicate that distance education has immense strengths capable of application in spiritual and moral formation" (p. 11). Therefore, as God can accomplish his purposes in unlimited ways, it follows that spiritual formation can occur in various ways, which include individually and corporately, privately or in community, in a physical church/school, or globally using new technology methods.

Applying This Model to Current Digital Realities

Lowe and Lowe (2018) write, "ecology, properly understood, recognizes not just the parts of the system but how those various parts interact with one another to contribute to a larger whole" (p. 106). Likewise, when looking at the components of this model (love, worship, community, etc.), it can be asserted that they, too, are parts that must be viewed as contributing to a larger whole. Additionally, following this premise, Christian individuals are a part of a unique whole, the body of Christ, and can equally contribute to each other and the whole body corporately. Also, following this premise, digital technologies and physical or face-to-face assemblies are parts of a larger whole that work best when they complement each other in accomplishing a larger purpose.

As stated in an earlier section, the interaction between these components may not be directly observable; however, they supplement and complement each other in the process of spiritual formation and maturation. This can be applied to current digital technologies. For example, the effects of the use of social media in the process of spiritual growth may not be directly observable; however, people may testify to the impact that a social media post or streaming church service had in introducing them to Christ or encouraging or comforting them spiritually. One may never know the extent of the impact that digital technologies have on the spiritual formation process, but they can have some idea based on their own experiences or the stories of those who may have been impacted through current digital technologies. Lowe and Lowe (2018) provide an example,

As we see in nature, plants depend on a variety of elements from a number of systems for their survival. We would be remiss to think that plants don't occupy a certain space in their need of light from the solar system or nutrients from the soil. There are nutrient exchanges between ecological habitats that enable each to grow and thrive. Similarly, humans exchange resources across various sectors of our human ecologies (p. 109).

When viewing spiritual formation similar to that of a natural seed or plant, it is easier to understand that various elements contribute to the growth process, and it may not be clear how they contribute. With the advancing use of and popularity of current digital technologies, it is advantageous for individuals, churches, Christian schools, and the Christian community at large to employ such resources for spiritual growth. Using these resources can supplement the spiritual growth process, realizing that God is the primary facilitator of the growth. First Corinthians 3:6-8 says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."

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