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WILLOW Magazine, Issue 4, 2007

REDISCOVERING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

by Keri Wyatt Kent

From monastic communities to the emergent church, spiritual formation continues to shift and change a whole new generation of Christians

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg writes about the benchmarks by which we measure our spiritual growth, and the methods we use to try to facilitate that growth. He asserts that the method of simply trying really hard doesn't always work, and the benchmarks that we use are not necessarily accurate measures of real life change.

Growing up evangelical, I learned that one's "walk with God," which well-meaning people asked me about all the time, was measured by the benchmark of how often you had a "quiet time" which consisted of careful Bible study and prayer, and how well you were able to avoid certain sins. While study and prayer are admirable disciplines, and sin-avoidance is certainly preferable to going looking for trouble, I still have to ask: did these practices form me into the image of Christ? I remember, even as a teenager, deeply desiring to grow spiritually, and wondering if I was, and if so, how would I know?

I think they did form me spiritually, but eventually, I found myself hungry for more.

Thirty years ago, most evangelicals had never heard the term "spiritual formation." Today, it is the subject of Christian conferences, retreats, even an emphasis in countless seminary programs. It is a hot category in Christian publishing, and cyberspace is crowded with Web sites and blogs wearing "spiritual formation" Technorati tags.

Scot McKnight, New Testament scholar, author and professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago, says even the acceptance of the term "spiritual formation" represents a shift in thinking, especially among evangelicals.

"We went through a period of Christianity, in say the 1960s to the 1980s, where the operative word was 'discipleship.' Then in the mid-1980s Richard Foster awakened the evangelical community to understand the Christian life in a new way. People found something profound and deeper in the idea of spiritual formation," McKnight says.

Richard Foster's 1978 best-seller *Celebration of Discipline*, and Dallas Willard's 1988 *Spirit of the Disciplines*, re-introduced evangelicals to classic spiritual disciplines such as solitude, silence, and fasting, and offered a more contemplative approach to Scripture and prayer.

Such spiritual disciplines had been a part of the Catholic tradition for a long time, although they were often practiced primarily within the walls of the monastic community. Foster and Willard brought them to the evangelical community, although it took a while for mainline and evangelical churches to embrace them.

"The evangelical movement was introduced to things they had not previously practiced — or perhaps some had practiced them, but had done it quietly," McKnight says. "Eventually, these became accepted and even more institutionalized. Evangelicals began to think out loud about these things."

Renovare, an organization founded by Foster, hosts conferences and publishes a host of spiritual formation resources, including guides for small groups. The organization has been written up in such mainstream publications as *Christianity Today*. Foster and Willard, who both teach at Renovare conferences and help run the loosely-organized network, have become informal spokesmen for the topic of spiritual formation, and been both praised and criticized.

Writers like Ruth Haley Barton, John Ortberg, and Dr. David Benner have contributed to the dialog on this topic. Willard, a professor at USC, has been a leader in many ways, teaching and writing extensively on the topic. In his 2002 book *Renovation of the Heart* he notes that "spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself."

The term itself comes from Galatians 4:19, where Paul writes "I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you," and also draws from the biblical imperative in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

WILLOW MAGAZINE

ISSUE 4, 2007
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