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Christian Formation: Reconceptualizing Christian Education and Spiritual Formation

*Paul Bramer, associate professor of Christian formation,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

The Christian church and the academy are in need of a field theory capable of blending the increasingly overlapping disciplines of Christian education and spiritual formation. Modifying and reframing the current paradigms invites movement from present inadequate forms and categories to a reconceptualization, proposed here as “Christian formation.” Daniel Aleshire has called for a broad definition in this field which “does not require us to change what is done at church, so much as it causes us to look at it differently.”¹ A broad definition will help us see our church ministries in a varied but integrated way while providing a direction and scope for the development of Christian formation as a scholarly pursuit. We need a way to address the current needs of soul and society and open the door to new vision without forsaking the lessons learned in the past century.

In the twentieth century the Christian formational mandate was implemented under various banners including Christian nurture (the title of Horace Bushnell’s book² which raised to consciousness many of the recurrent themes in Christian education and formation), catechesis (favored by Catholics and Episcopalians), religious education (popular in the liberal wing of Protestantism), religious instruction, discipleship (especially used by evangelical parachurch organizations), Christian education (preferred by evangelical and neo-orthodox), faith formation, spiritual formation, etc. Recently, Protestants in North America have been using the term *Christian formation* to redefine and reinvigorate this central purpose and activity of the church.

The name of the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Department of Chris-

tian Education and Discipleship was changed at the 2001 Annual Meeting to the Department of Christian Formation. Some programs in Christian education and ministry at North Park Theological Seminary are now called Christian formation. These are not solitary events but part of a broader movement that is reframing Christian education and spiritual formation. What are some limitations in the Christian education movement and how might the reconceptualization of Christian formation address them? How does Christian formation differ from spiritual formation? What would be included in the notion of Christian formation? How might this viewpoint invigorate and integrate the ministry in North American Protestantism?

Christian Education

Most of us are familiar with the term *Christian education*. When I ask seminarians what associations they have with “CE,” I often get responses such as “Sunday school, board meetings, staff ministers, Bible study curriculum, children, Christian schools, and a course required in seminary.”

The Christian education movement (with the Sunday school movement as the core) has been a strong arm of the church for the past two centuries, taking a lead role in instructing in the faith, enlisting millions in leading and teaching programs that nurture faith, and often invigorating the church with its initiatives and programs. Eugene Roehlkepartain concluded from the results of Search Institute’s major study of churches that “Christian education is the most important vehicle within congregational life for helping people grow in their faith. Done well, Christian education—in all its many expressions—has more potential for promoting spiritual growth than any other area of congregational life.”³

However, Christian education as a discipline, as a cohesive movement, and as a source of vision for church ministry has been running out of steam for some time.⁴ The two founding disciplines, theology and education do not give the guidance and sense of mission they once did. The educational movement in general lacks the “missionary” zeal of a century ago and church education has long been divorced from secularized general education, though it still draws on some of its methods and findings. And theology, while still very important, is usually unpalatable in dogmatic and propositional forms. Postmodernists do not as readily learn didactically taught doctrines and “beliefs” and now come

with the strong filters of psychologization and personal relevance. The “new” field of Christian formation must continue to look to the disciplines of education and theology, but spirituality (including depth psychology) needs to join the foundational triumvirate.

Christian education carries other handicaps. First, the concerns of Christian education have become broader and more numerous than its ability to integrate and nurture them all. Nor has Christian education overcome some of the weaknesses that have dogged it as a movement over the past century. Those weaknesses include the alienation of many pastors from the process, the low level of competency and commitment of many workers, a reductionistic tendency toward cognitive understanding, a primary association with Sunday school, and the secondary status of those with a Christian education vocation. These six problems will be briefly discussed.

Plethora of Concerns. The number and range of concerns in Christian education at the academic, professional, and programmatic level has grown unwieldy for the discipline and the practitioner. Perry Downs comments, “Over the years I have watched Christian education lose its direction as a discipline, becoming diluted by a wide variety of important, but not essential, concerns.”⁵ The contents of a recent textbook *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century* includes chapters on evangelism, discipleship, psychological development, moral development, faith development, spiritual formation, the teaching-learning process, learning styles, teaching methods, the role of the Spirit, organizing church programs, volunteers, small groups, ministry to families and children and youth and adults and singles and multiple generations, counseling, camping, school choice, and parachurch ministries. And this list is abbreviated. Any subject or endeavor can, of course, be broken into innumerable parts and facets. The difficulty lies more in the loss of integration and a driving center in the midst of this plethora of interests. Further, while the Christian educator is interested in these multiple concerns, the specific fields often do not look to Christian education for sustenance or direction.⁶ Christian formation can provide an orienting framework for the variety of formational activities and programs in a church.

Alienation of Pastors. A significant number of pastors have felt alienated from, disinterested in, or overwhelmed by the Christian education “program.” The Sunday-school movement which morphed into Christian education had as its virtue strong lay involvement. But lay leader-

ship coupled with vestiges from its early parachurch character often meant the pastor seemed to belong to a different world, one of scholastic theology, adults, sacraments, and sermons. Thomas Hawkins comments that, “During the nineteenth century, the Sunday school acquired almost total responsibility for religious education. Since the Sunday school was a lay-led institution, the pastor’s role as an educator become marginalized and slowly faded away.”⁷ However, Christian formation can become a common meeting ground; this is territory that is properly owned and shared by both professional ministers and lay leaders.

Inadequate Training. The voluntary and lay nature of Christian education programs has also meant that too often the teachers and superintendents have been untrained theologically and pedagogically. Ted Ward states, “The Christian who has accepted responsibility for educating others should bring more to the task than amateurism.”⁸ While the competencies needed should not be overestimated, many Sunday-school classes and programs are unpleasant and counter-productive experiences for the participants. This is only compounded by the reticence of many, especially in recent decades, to commit to the significant work of being a teacher or leader in a Christian education program. While merely using the concept of formation, rather than education, will not change this situation, it may break the sometimes debilitating comparison of the roles in church ministry to those of a school teacher. We are all to be involved in formational work to the capacity we have, and it must go beyond mere technical competency to be formational (e.g., good worship leading goes beyond being a good musician). Formation is finally a matter of life and spirit.

Bias Toward the Cognitive. Christian education has had a tendency to focus on cognitive knowledge. Comprehension is seldom put forth as an end in itself, but there has been the naïve expectation that if knowledge is present then faith, virtue, compassion, justice, worship, and so on will automatically follow. While knowledge is important, it has not proven sufficient in the growing of Christ-ones. The Apostle Peter’s counsel on development toward Christlikeness goes beyond “adding knowledge”:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things

are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹

Christian formation much more deliberately brings in the affective domain,¹⁰ with its concerns of receiving/listening, responding (note the similarity to the oft repeated “hear and obey” of the Bible), valuing, prioritizing (e.g., “Seek first the kingdom”), and characterizing (for the Christian), Christlikeness. In considering the domains of Christian formation, the cognitive is seen to be only one part of the picture.

Over-association with Sunday School and Children. Children and the institution of the Sunday school are both important, but Christian education is sometimes thought of solely in terms of these. While “life-long learning” has been a corrective to thinking of education as for children, it should be obvious that Christian formation is life-long and accomplished in a variety of venues and means.

The Sunday school, in its earliest stages a parachurch and evangelistic movement, became fully institutionalized in the past century. In a survey David C. Cook, publishers of Sunday-school curriculum, found that 98 percent of all churches in the United States had a Sunday school.¹¹ However, the Sunday school is no longer the sole vehicle (excepting the weekly congregational service) for Christian nurture in the church; it has now just one of many ways that churches provide instruction and encouragement. Weeknight clubs for children, weekend youth gatherings, and weeknight small group meetings all often have a higher number of participants than Sunday school. In a Christian formation context there may be more freedom to develop or conceptualize programs and events in the church as formational, and to see this as a life-span experience.

Low Status. Many who have committed themselves full-time to Christian education have found themselves perceived in a relative dim light vis-à-vis other ministers, other professionals, and other disciplines. Those who have felt called to professional Christian education ministry in the church have usually (with notable exceptions) experienced the symptoms of lower status, including lower pay, lower visibility, low level of collaboration with pastor, minimal support for professional development, and job insecurity. A reconceptualization of much of the ministerial task as formational may give those who are general pastors and those who have specialized ministries (e.g., small group minister, Christian education director) more common ground.

These areas of concern paint a partial picture of Christian education and therefore inadequately and unfairly portray it. The intent has been to point out handicaps that may be overcome by a reconceptualizing of the mandate of Christian education as formation. It is essential that the best of Christian education continue to function under the new rubric.

Spiritual Formation

After commenting on the dissipation of Christian education, Downs concludes, "The loss has been the care of our souls."¹² Spirituality and spiritual formation as a self-conscious movement in Protestantism have arisen in part because of the inadequacy of Christian education to address the care of our souls. It has been the source of spiritual renewal for many people, as they have found new and deeper wells than they have previously known.

Spirituality and spiritual formation have become common terms, even buzzwords, in evangelicalism and seminary life in the past two decades. A report thirty years ago to the American Association of Theological Schools included the observation, "There is a growing insistence throughout education that institutions must honestly face the question of spiritual formation. . . . It appears to many that this will loom as a priority issue of the early seventies in theological education."¹³ The call has been heeded: Carl A. Volz of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary observed in 1989 that "The sounds of spiritual formation appear to have reached a crescendo of interest on seminary campuses."¹⁴ North Park Theological Seminary has been addressing this concern deliberately and commendably for the past quarter century.

Spiritual formation is the deliberate cultivation of spiritual sensitivities facilitated by the practice of spiritual disciplines. At present, there seem to be at least three discernible though overlapping sources for our understanding on how to proceed. There is a kataphatic¹⁵ stream in spirituality, which has theology as its home base and Bible study as an prominent discipline. J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and Alistair McGrath illustrate this approach.¹⁶ There is the more apophatic Catholic mystical or contemplative current, which draws strongly on monastic and classical devotional writings such as John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila and emphasizes the classical disciplines such as fasting and meditation. Thomas Keating and Richard Foster take this approach.¹⁷ A third current is influenced by depth psychology and includes paying attention to one's shadow side and archetypes, and using such aids to growth as dream work,

journaling, and spiritual direction. Morton Kelsey and John Sanford¹⁸ see this as an important perspective for spiritual growth. Contemporary evangelicalism often adopts the findings but not necessarily the explicit assumptions of these three streams.

Christian spiritual formation is an important aspect of seminary training and the church's ministry and a major contributor to the Christian's growth, but like Christian education it also has some limitations to which Christian formation provides a corrective. For example, spiritual formation has a bias toward introversion and individualism. While the best of spirituality is not snared in these, the danger remains present. Interiority seems to be emerging as one way of defining the primary concern of spirituality¹⁹ and this could be misconstrued in wholly subjective and isolated terms. Christian formation seems to implicitly include the extraverted dimension of life. Further, spiritual formation, while using various methods to facilitate growth (e.g., contemplation, fasting, journaling, spiritual direction, etc.), does not have a very pedagogical tradition in which people are taught how to teach and form. Spiritual direction is an exception to this. Wedded to the larger field of Christian formation, especially in the church, these limitations of spiritual formation may be offset.

Christian Formation

Let us consider something of what we might mean by Christian formation,²⁰ a term that does not occur as such in the Bible but is assumed in various ways, for example: Romans 8:29 "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son"; Romans 12:2 "be transformed by the renewing of your minds"; 2 Corinthians 3:18 "we are being transformed"; Galatians 4:19 "in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

Christian formation is a way of speaking about fulfilling the great commission. The mandate of Jesus to his followers was to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you . . . [and to] remember I am with you always."²¹ Here is a recognition of the involvement of three parties. There is the agency of third persons, that is, persons who facilitate formation ("going, making, baptizing, teaching"), the need for the person being formed to understand, change, commit, and act ("obeying"), and the need for awareness and dependence on Christ ("remembering"). Implicit in this injunction also is the telos of Christians—to become like their

Lord, characterized by the love and light and righteousness which are the “commands” of Christ²² and aspects of the “name” of God.²³ Jesus wanted people formed for the kingdom of God, imaging God in their actions and attitudes, bearing fruit to the glory of God, fulfilling our first and deepest purpose.

This commission also implies “three intentional, interrelated, lifelong processes conducted by a faith community through which Christian character receives its distinctive shape and orientation and through which the church itself is more fully initiated into the realm of God.”²⁴ The three implied are worship, study, and ministry. Community and leadership/administration are two other venues by which Christian formation is accomplished. These aspects characterized the life of the church in its early days as the Lord’s commission was enacted: worship in praising God, baptisms, breaking of bread, prayer and gladness, study with the apostles’ teaching, ministry with healing, distributing to those in need, sharing the gospel, and a community of fellowship and sharing. Leadership and administration issues arose quickly thereafter.²⁵

Worship. The formational objective in worship is for participants “to assimilate the church’s liturgy [basic attitudes and expressions] leading to the worship of God as a pervasive style of life by immersing persons in the means of grace and other spiritual disciplines.”²⁶ Although worship has the glory of God as its end, it has our formation as a necessary by-product. Worship is formational at many levels and in many ways, not least of which is the ability of the Spirit of God to reach into our minds and hearts with a word of warning or comfort or insight during our time of openness. Although there may be instruction about the spiritual disciplines, whether prayer, *lectio divina*, solitude, or praise, it is in a worship modality that we actually practice them.

Instruction. The formational objective in instruction is for those in attendance “to learn the Christian story and to acquire skills ingredient to living it as one’s own story by intentionally and imaginatively retelling, rehearsing, and reinterpreting that story.”²⁷ This has been the traditional domain of Christian education. The objective as stated emphasizes the narrative over the propositional, but both are ways of coming to know the pattern of God’s dealing with societies and individuals and then committing to cooperating with God. Biblical literacy is important, but only as a prelude to “living it.”

Ministry. There is a formational process that can only take place in the “doing.” The formational objective in ministry is for people “to

engage concretely and daily in the quest to notice and alter conditions that exploit or dehumanize any of God's children; to read and resist culture; to realize justice and radical equality,"²⁸ and to share the good news of Christ and his reign with those who are willing to hear. This "doing" needs to be connected with all the other formational processes, informed by instruction and debriefed in critical discussion, bathed in prayer and issuing in worship, and done with the discernment and support of the community. Liberation theology and praxis pedagogy have given us some helpful ways to approach ministry formationally.²⁹

Community. The formational objective in community is for members to bond and interact so that there is mutual encouragement and edification expressed in shared worship, learning, ministry, governance, and the common concerns of daily life (Colossians 3:13-17). With the waning of neighborhood communities and the increase in mobility and fragmentation of life in the past century, a sense of community in local churches can no longer be assumed. This needs to be fostered and built. The small group movement has been helpful but we need to go beyond small group ministry to even deeper and more meaningful community.³⁰

Administration. The formational objective in leadership and administration is for the group to discern calling, develop vision, build supportive infrastructures, and coordinate activities in order to facilitate the church and its members in their worship, learning, and ministry. Although this may seem to be facilitative rather than formational, it is an important aspect of living and working together and one that we must learn. Helping people participate in the leadership functions of the church is essential to the growth of the individual and the community and church business meetings should not be bracketed out from the purposes of the church.

Definition. Others have suggested similar models for understanding the scope of church life³¹ or Christian education,³² though none of the models cited is identical to the one proposed. These five domains seem sufficient to clarify differences but simple enough to be integrational. These are not exclusive domains; rather, they are overlapping, interpenetrating, and mutually supporting. And from them may be built a draft definition for Christian formation: Christian formation aims at the spirit, attitudes, and purposes of Christ coming to characterize and be expressed in individuals and groups through intentional efforts to facilitate learning the good news and Christian tradition foundational-

ly articulated in the Christian Scriptures, learning ministry through the critical-reflective engagement in various constructive actions, and learning the awareness and power of God through worship and spiritual practices.

Dimension and Discipline. As such, Christian formation may be thought of as a *dimension of church life*, a ministry specialization and an academic discipline. We have already explored the sense in which it is a dimension of church life. While not everything in the church will be intentionally formational or part of an educational program, everything in and about the church is formational. We can echo Maria Harris's remark that "The church does not *have* an educational program. It *is* an educational program."³³ As a dimension of church life, Christian formation is also a way of describing various *programs* in the church, including worship, sermons, age groupings on Sundays, groups and clubs through the week, initiating sessions such as confirmation, marriage preparation, or church membership classes, seasonal events such as camping, conferences, and retreats, and occasional events such as seminars, film series, short missions, and training sessions. It may also be construed as a *ministry specialization* though all ministry would seem necessarily to be formational. It would include people with more specific mandates such as youth pastors, ministers of Christian education, small group coordinators, church administrators, and camp directors, but it would also include all pastors of congregations.

Christian formation may also be viable as an *academic discipline* or field. An academic discipline is a tradition of scholarly endeavor that focuses on understanding a particular aspect of reality. To this end a discipline asks certain questions, employs appropriate methods, publishes the findings from its research, and gradually builds a theory. Along the way there usually develops a technical vocabulary, history, professional associations, literature, interfacing with other disciplines or fields. Whether Christian formation can become a discipline or even a field remains to be seen. It will necessarily be multi-disciplinary, needing to incorporate Christian education and practical theology, spirituality, developmental and depth psychology, and theology. Christian formation's mandate would be to discover the processes by which individuals and groups grow toward Christlikeness and to make those findings available to those in ministry.³⁴ As Suzanne Johnson comments, "Talk about spiritual formation transports us into concern with what it means for people to be formed as Christians over the course of a lifetime and how that happens.

Our concern is not only with how a person becomes Christian but also with how one person helps another become Christian, and how we teach Christianity.”³⁵

Endnotes

1. Daniel O. Aleshire, “Finding Eagles in the Turkeys’ Nest: Pastoral Theology and Christian Education,” *Review and Expositor* 85 (1988): 699.

2. Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

3. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 3.

4. This is less true in the African-American and Asian-American communities.

5. Perry G. Downs, “Editorial: Spiritual Formation,” *Christian Education Journal* 4NS, no. 2 (2000): 1. Perry Downs has been the director of the Ph.D./Educational Studies program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

6. For examples, youth ministry often distances itself from Christian education and the small group movement has developed without much of the language and guidance of Christian education.

7. Thomas R. Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation: A New Vision for Leadership* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 64., builds on a thesis by Janet Fishburn, “Leading: Paideia in a New Key,” in *Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform*, ed. C. Ellis Nelson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988).

8. Ted Ward, “The Teaching-Learning Process,” in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 117.

9. 2 Pet. 1:5-8 NRSV

10. David R. Krathwohl, Benjamin S. Bloom, and Bertram B. Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals: Handbook II: Affective Domain* (New York: David McKay Company, 1964).

11. Marlene D. LeFever, “Programming with a Capital C (Creativity),” *Youth Worker*, (1992).

12. Downs, “Spiritual Formation,” 1.

13. David E. Babin, et al., *Voyage Vision Venture: A Report by the Task Force on Spiritual Development* (Dayton: American Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 1972), 1.

14. Carl A. Volz, “Seminaries: The Love of Learning or the Desire for God?” *Dialog* 28, no. 2 (1989): 103.

15. Kataphatic traditions emphasize the “knowability” of God and God’s revelation. Apophatic, in contrast, stresses the essential mystery and “unknowability” of God.

16. Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); J. I. Packer, “An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality,” *Cruce* 26, no. 1 (1990); Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1971).

17. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th Anniversary Edition ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998); Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

18. Morton T. Kelsey, *Transcend: A Guide to the Spiritual Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); John A. Sanford, *Dreams: God’s Forgotten Language* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

19. Mary Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no. 1 (2001): 70.

20. It should be noted that the broadest definitions of Christian education and spiritual formation are often similar to my proposal for Christian formation.

21. Matt. 28:19-20 NRSV.

22. E.g., these are themes in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:44 "I say to you, Love your enemies"; 5:16 "let your light shine before others"; 6:33 "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

23. Cf. the attributes of God in I John 4:8 "God is love"; 1:5 "God is light"; 2:29 "God is righteous."

24. Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 143.

25. Acts 2:41-47; 6:1-6.

26. Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 144.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

30. cf. Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

31. E.g., Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

32. E.g., Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation*; Robert W. Pazmiño, *Principles and Practices of Christian Education: An Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church*; John H. Westerhoff, III, "Fashioning Christians," in *Schooling Christians: "Holy Experiments" in American Education*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff, III (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

33. Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 47.

34. "Christian education is a reverent attempt to discover the divinely ordained process by which individuals grow toward Christlikeness and to work with that process." Nevin C. Harner, *The Educational Work of the Church* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1939) quoted in Kevin Lawson, "Introduction: Spiritual Formation," *Christian Education Journal* 4NS, no. 2 (2000): 3.

35. Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 21.