

# Spiritual Formation

-Dr. Gary Gilley

Almost everyone on the cutting edge of Christianity is talking about spiritual formation. From books to magazine articles to sermons to seminary courses, spiritual formation is a hot topic. What is spiritual formation? What does it teach? Is it something to embrace, ignore or fight? With this edition of *Think on These Things* I want to begin an examination of these questions and more. Lord willing, all of the *TOTTs* articles in 2012 will be devoted to detailing and evaluating some aspect of what some have called the “Spiritual Formation Movement.” In this lead article I intend to offer a definition of spiritual formation, trace its origins, mention a few of its practices, illustrate its recent popularity, and briefly identify its strengths and dangers.

## In Search of a Definition

When the average person speaks of spiritual formation they assume that it is a modern or trendy synonym for discipleship. Throughout church history, in obedience to the Lord’s command found in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20), the church has dedicated itself to the task of making disciples, or followers of Jesus Christ. Perhaps growing weary of using the same word all the time, some more creative people have substituted other words such as mentoring, although that word is taken out of a secular context rather than a biblical one. Mentoring usually implies a one-on-one effort in which a more mature Christian is training a less mature believer as in, “I was mentored by Joe.” I think the word mentoring, simply because of its implications, common use, and background, is not the best word to describe what Scripture calls “making disciples.” When we examine the New Testament we find that disciple making is not the prerogative of individuals only, but also of the church. That is, disciples are made not by one-on-one relationships so much as by the ministry of the fuller body of Christ. While we can all point to special people in our lives who have been instrumental in our spiritual growth, and while we should all be actively involved on some level in discipling others, and while most dedicate their discipling

efforts to a few people, potential disciples need the balance of the wider membership of the church to become the followers of Christ that the Lord intends (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Cor 12). It is best, it seems to me, to stay with the biblical terminology which serves us well in understanding the task before us.

While the term “mentoring” is still used by some, it would appear that “spiritual formation” has supplanted both it and “discipleship” in the vocabulary of many. However, spiritual formation is not equivalent to discipleship, or mentoring for that matter. Some trace the roots of the Spiritual Formation Movement to 1974 when Father William Menninger, a Trappist monk, found an ancient book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the library at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. This 14<sup>th</sup> century book offered a means by which contemplative practices, long used by Catholic monks, could be taught to lay people. As Menninger began teaching these contemplative practices, his abbot, Thomas Keating, along with Basil Pennington, another Trappist monk, began to spread the concepts Menninger was teaching.<sup>[1]</sup> But it was Richard Foster’s 1978 book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, that launched the popularity and present interest in spiritual formation. It was by this landmark book, described by *Christianity Today* as one of the ten best books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that Catholic and Eastern Orthodox disciplines, practiced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers<sup>[2]</sup> as well as monks and hermits, were introduced to evangelicalism. These disciplines were not completely unknown to evangelicals who were familiar with church history, but they were now being repackaged and offered as a means of spiritual growth and maturity. In fact, the implication was that without the use of these ancient contemplative methods true “spiritual formation” was not possible. Long accepted biblical disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer, were framed as quaint and simplistic. Worse, believers were told that these biblical disciplines were forged from a Western “worldview of the head.” If the believer wanted to move deeply into the things of God, such practices were not enough, for they never really reach the heart, leaving the unsuspecting Christian with little more than a superficial intellectual knowledge of the divine with no depth. Bruce Demarest, long time Professor of Christian Theology and Spiritual Formation at Denver Seminary states, “The heart discovers and experiences God; reason demonstrates and explains God.”<sup>[3]</sup> The same

author quotes Brennan Manning as saying, “The engaged mind, illumined by truth, awakens awareness; the engaged heart, affected by love, awakens passion.”<sup>[4]</sup> The rather explicit implication throughout spiritual formation literature is that Bible study feeds the head, but if one wants to feed the heart they must turn to the spiritual disciplines.

As more and more authors, teachers, publishers and schools began to echo the same refrain evangelicals became intimidated. They did not want to be left out of the newest, and supposedly best, means of discipleship and so they began to read and listen to these new contemplative teachers. As they did so they found that almost every spiritual formation book and sermon opened by tapping into the innate dissatisfaction that all believers recognize. It goes something like this: “Are you not tired of the Christian life you have been living? Don’t you grow weary of reading the Bible, praying, and going to church? Wouldn’t you really like to enter into the very depth of your soul and encounter God in indescribable experiences that will radically change you forever? If so, then you must learn and live out the disciplines that have been used by the historic church almost since its inception. Read this book (or take this course or go to this renewal retreat or work on this degree, etc.) and we will teach you what the spiritual masters of the past knew but that we have long forgotten.”

On the basis of such promises the modern Spiritual Formation Movement was birthed and now flourishes. It sometimes goes by different handles such as Contemplative Spirituality or simply the Spiritual Disciplines, but they all refer to the same thing. Bruce Demarest offers this definition in his book *Satisfy Your Soul*, “Spiritual formation is an ancient ministry of the church, concerned with the ‘forming’ or ‘shaping’ of a believer’s character and actions into the likeness of Christ.”<sup>[5]</sup> Richard Foster would agree, “Christian spiritual formation is a God-ordained process that shapes our entire person so that we take on the character and being of Christ himself.”<sup>[6]</sup> This sounds much like the definition of discipleship as found in Scripture, but before we relax let’s return to Professor Demarest, who tells us that spiritual formation is not only concerned with orthodox doctrine but with “many practices that open [us] up to the presence and direction of God.”<sup>[7]</sup> This rather benign comment actually unlocks the door to the Spiritual Formation Movement and how it differs from biblical

discipleship. **What distinguishes spiritual formation from discipleship is not in its basically similar definition, but its source, its practices, and its philosophy.**

### Source

Perhaps one of the most important factors to understand when analyzing spiritual formation is its source or origin. Its teachers are fond of stating that their disciplines have old roots, going back to the earliest days of the church. Dan Kimble, in his book *The Emerging Church*, calls this the vintage church, while Robert Webber, author of *Ancient-Future Faith*, refers to it as the classic stage of church history (approximately the second through the sixth century). Such men have grown tired of superficial church life that has dominated much of Christianity since the insurgence of the “seeker-friendly” model. They desire something with more substance and more historical connection than what the modern church experience offers. They suggest we study the past and pattern our lives and churches after the rich and vibrant spiritual dynamics that we supposedly find there.

I believe these men almost get it right – almost. In fact, we do need to look to the past to see how we should live and function in the present. The problem is that the spiritual formation leaders do not go back far enough. In their march into the past they stop at the classical or vintage age of church formation instead of returning to the New Testament Scriptures. This is the fatal flaw in the whole movement. The early church (post-apostolic, not New Testament church) did many things right and many things wrong. Its pronouncements, views, rituals, organizations, and structures can be examined with profit, but they were not without error. I recently taught a course on the history of Christian doctrine using as a textbook John Hannah’s excellent book *Our Legacy*. In that course of study I found it most discouraging to discover how very quickly the early church departed from the teaching of the epistles. Both doctrinally and ecclesiastically the church, during the “classical” stage, moved beyond the inspired Word of God to establish its own views, doctrines, philosophies, rituals and formats.

On a doctrinal level all one has to do is read a few pages in the highly acclaimed (by those who promote spiritual formation) *Ancient Christian*

*Commentary on Scripture* series. This 27-volume set (including the Apocrypha) is designed to enlighten this generation concerning the views of the early church fathers and theologians. The need for such a series is stated in the flyleaf of each volume, "Today the historical-critical method of interpretation has nearly exhausted its claim on the biblical text and on the church. In its wake there is a widespread yearning among Christian individuals and communities for the wholesome, the deep and the enduring." In other words, it is time to abandon the historical-grammatical hermeneutical method and return to the fanciful and allegorical methods of the early church fathers. When you read the interpretations found in these volumes, you begin to wonder if some of the early church fathers are even reading the same Bible. Many (not all, of course) of the comments on the various texts are so whimsical and imaginative that any hope of a normal understanding of Scripture is lost. What this commentary series demonstrates very well is why and how the church went astray early in its history. When you twist Scripture to mean anything you want it to mean, where you end up can be quite bizarre.

A good example of what emerged from this type of hermeneutic is the monastic movement in which the so-called Desert Fathers and Mothers migrated to the Egyptian wilderness to live as hermits and supposedly contemplate God. In misguided zeal (and without direction from Scripture) these men and women would often starve themselves, expose their bodies to the elements, go as long as possible without sleep and live isolated from civilization. Under these peculiar and extreme conditions many of them claimed to have visions and encounters with the Lord that normal Christians did not have. As a result, some declared these individuals super-saints and their visions and dreams as revelatory words from the Lord. They were elevated to the status of Christian celebrities. These are the very ones that Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Bruce Demarest call "spiritual masters" and from whom they draw their understanding of spiritual formation. As we will see time and time again, the teachings, methods, and concepts behind the Spiritual Formation Movement are drawn from these early contemplative hermits, as well as the medieval monks and nuns, principally from the Counter-Reformation period, not from Scripture.

It is absolutely essential to get this connection early in our study. Many, if not most, of the disciplines and instructions found within spiritual formation are not drawn from Scripture; they are drawn from the imaginations of men and women passed along through tradition. Demarest tells his readers that for help in spiritual formation we are to “turn to our Christian past – to men and women who understood how the soul finds satisfaction as we grow in God, and how His Spirit finds a more ready home in us.”<sup>[8]</sup> And just who are these people to whom we are supposed to turn?” Demarest suggests John of the Cross, Henri Nouwen, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, the desert fathers and mothers, and the Christians mystics.<sup>[9]</sup> Other highly touted mystics include Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, Francis De Sales, Thomas Kelly, Madame Guyon, Theophan the Recluse, Ignatius of Loyola, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich. Virtually every author who has written a book on spiritual formation draws his understanding of the Christian life, and especially Christian experiences, from this stable of mystics. In other words, spiritual formation is not founded on the New Testament Scriptures but mostly on the experiences of Roman Catholic mystics, with a few Eastern Orthodox and Quakers thrown into the mix. This is important to understand from the beginning of our study, so I will repeat: the Spiritual Formation Movement is not based on Scripture but on the experiences, writings, and imaginations of those who teach a false gospel and misunderstand the Christian life as detailed in God’s Word.

With this in mind, we need to turn to the practices deemed absolutely essential by the mystics for spiritual formation. These are usually termed spiritual disciplines. What disciplines are we talking about?

## **Disciplines**

John Ortberg, a former teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, describes spiritual disciplines as “any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it. How many spiritual disciplines are there? As many as we can think of.”<sup>[10]</sup> Is this the case? Can virtually any activity be turned into a spiritual discipline? Does God sanction all spiritual practices and endorse them as means of progressive sanctification? Biblical disciplines, which are indispensable for spiritual growth and discipleship, are, of course,

positive things. But man-made disciplines are at best optional and are certainly not essential for spiritual growth, or else God's Word would have commanded them and provided instruction for their use. Scripture clearly speaks of the discipline of Bible study (John 17:17; Psalm 1; Psalm 19; 2 Tim 3:15-4:6) as necessary for sanctification. Likewise prayer is mentioned as being a source of spiritual development (Heb 4:15-16). And the need for the body of Christ, both in the teaching of truth and mutual ministry (Eph 4:11-16; Heb 10:24-25), can be clearly found. But when we stray much beyond these we run into trouble. Nevertheless, the Spiritual Formation Movement offers long lists of disciplines that are essential for spiritual development.

Foster, in his *Celebration of Discipline*, provides a chapter each on the following disciplines: mediation, [contemplative] prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. InterVarsity Press has a line of books it calls *Formatio* which offers individual books designed to teach each of the above disciplines plus the sacramental life, silence, journaling, spiritual mentoring, pilgrimage, Sabbath keeping, sacred reading (*lectio divina*), and the need for spiritual directors. Thomas Nelson Publishing has recently published an 8-volume set they call "The Ancient Practices Series." The first book, written by Brian McLaren (which ought to tell the discerning reader something), is *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. The other books in the series are: *In Constant Prayer, Sabbath, Fasting, Sacred Meal, Sacred Journey, The Liturgical Year and Tithing*, all teaching spiritual disciplines derived from the mystics rather than from the New Testament. NavPress offers its "Spiritual Formation Line" to promote the spiritual disciplines. Many other major Christian publishers are following suit including Zondervan, which links with Youth Specialties to offer books aimed toward teaching young people and adults the contemplative life. Even from the pens of more conservative authors it is almost rare to read a recently published book that does not quote at least a few mystics. Some of the more prominent authors in the field include: Richard Foster (of course), Dallas Willard, Phyllis Tickle, Robert Benson, Dan Allender, Scot McKnight, Nora Gallagher, Adele Calhoun, David deSilva, Ruth Barton, Jan Johnson, Lynne Baab, Diana Butler Bass, Helen Cepero, Leighton Ford, Larry Crabb, Calvin Miller, Tricia McCary Rhodes, Mindy Caliguire, Albert

Haase, Eugene Peterson, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Gordon Smith, Brian McLaren, John Ortberg, Mark Yaconelli, Brennan Manning, Bruce Demarest, and Kenneth Boa. And this might be barely scratching the surface.

Future *Think on These Things* articles will directly address and critique many of these disciplines but for now it is important to note that Scripture does not teach that any of these (as defined in most spiritual formation literature) are a means of spiritual growth, sanctification or discipleship. Some of the spiritual disciplines encouraged are mentioned in the Word, yet very little specific detail is given on how they are to be observed or their purpose. Take fasting for example. Every reader of Scripture knows that fasting is mentioned on numerous occasions, but few comprehend its purpose and function. At no point in the Bible are we told that fasting enhances spiritual growth, or produces spiritual formation, although it has spiritual implications (we will look specifically at fasting in a future article).

If the spiritual disciplines, as are being taught by the leaders of the Spiritual Formation Movement, are not actually found in Scripture, how can Christian authors be so assertive in recommending them? They often do so because they are convinced that the human authors of Scripture were strong practitioners of the spiritual disciplines, but the disciplines were so much a part of first century life that the inspired authors saw no need to mention them in the New Testament. Dallas Willard, the “mentor” of Richard Foster, writes that Paul, for example, lived out the spiritual disciplines but did not write about them in the epistles for, “Obviously...for him and the readers of his own day, [there would be] no need to write a book on the disciplines for the spiritual life that explained systematically what he had in mind...But quite a bit of time has passed – and many abuses have occurred in the name of spiritual disciplines [since that time].”[\[11\]](#)

What Willard is saying is that the only reason Paul and the apostles did not write about the disciplines is because they were already being practiced and modeled by the apostles to such an extent that no one at the time needed more information and insight into them. This is of course not only an argument from silence but a bit ludicrous as well. Did not the believers see Paul modeling prayer, preaching, body



life and the study of Scripture? If so, why did he bother to write about the importance of these while completely ignoring many of the disciplines about which spiritual formation leaders are excited? The answer to this question is of extreme importance. Willard believes that, if Christians today are to live as the apostles and early disciples did, it is important that they somehow share in their experience but since, of course, we do not live with them, all we can do is read about their lives. This leaves us alienated from the lives of early disciples and therefore lacking in their spirituality. What can we do? “The only way to overcome this alienation from their sort of life,” Willard suggests, “is by entering into the actual practices of Jesus and Paul as something essential to our life in Christ.”<sup>[12]</sup> By this he means that we must engage in the spiritual disciplines that he **assumes** the early believers practiced (although we are never told so in the New Testament, nor mandated to do so).

This leads us to a fork in the road early in our studies. Do we, as believers in *sola Scriptura*, take our marching orders from the written Word, or do we look to the “white spaces” in Scripture to determine how we live? Do we actually believe that the Lord has given us in Scripture the teachings and practices He wants us to follow, or do we believe that we must supplement the authentic words of God with our imagination and traditions of men? This is increasingly becoming an issue within almost all branches of evangelicalism. Once it is accepted that we can enhance the Christian life by augmenting the inspired words of Scripture there is no limit to where we might end up. Take Bruce Demarest for example. As a lifetime conservative professor at a strong evangelical seminary, when he was first exposed to spiritual formation he resisted but in time he claimed he got over his biases and accepted the teachings behind it. He writes, “Admittedly I found that certain beliefs and traditions remained foreign to me, being based more on tradition than solidly on Scripture. All denominations have their blind spots. But I also found that, once I got past my old prejudices and misunderstanding, I accepted more than I rejected.”<sup>[13]</sup>

## **Philosophy**

The Spiritual Formation Movement is concerned more about individual experience than biblical knowledge or truth. This does not mean that

adherents are totally uninterested in the Bible, and some would know it well. But the emphasis is on what a person experiences through the Bible more so than what they learn. Contemplatives, such as Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, will strongly encourage Bible reading and prayer but they mean something different from what most Christians mean when they reference the same terms. As we will see in future articles, contemplative prayer is not the same as prayer defined biblically; “sacred reading” (also called *lectio divina*) of Scripture is not the same as Bible study; meditation (mystically encountering God) is not the same as knowing God and so forth. Many of the same terms are used, but as the classical liberals, and the more recent emergents, are fond of doing, they take our terms, including biblical ones, and give them new definitions and twists.

Many of the spiritual disciplines that are supposedly necessary for spiritual formation are either not found in the Bible, or have been redefined to mean something foreign to the scriptural meaning. We are being told that disciplines such as silence, journaling, or observing the liturgical calendar will transform our lives even though God’s Word does not advocate these things as means of spiritual growth. This puts the sincere Christian on the horns of a dilemma: Does Scripture actually “equip [the believer] for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17) as it promises, or does it not? If the Word is in need of being supplemented by the traditions, practices, and methods of people, which ones are we to choose – and, more importantly, how would we know which ones would be helpful? Do we determine such things by looking to the past and decreeing a particular set of hermits or mystics, who claimed visions and dreams and supernatural encounters with God, as our guide? And if so, which of the mystics get the nod as “spiritual masters” since many of their claims were mutually contradictory and highly fanciful? Or perhaps we should look to pragmatism as our guide. In other words, if it works for you then go for it. This seems to be the collective wisdom of spiritual formation teachers – if it works it must be from God, even if not sanctioned in Scripture.

There are at least two ways spiritual formation leaders attempt to establish a biblical foundation for the disciplines. The first has already been alluded to: ancient people were already practicing disciplines and so direct revelation from God was not necessary. Willard writes,

Thoughtful and religiously devout people of the classical and Hellenistic world, from the Ganges to the Tiber, knew that the mind and body of the human being had to be rigorously disciplined to achieve a decent individual and social existence. This is not something St. Paul had to prove or even explicitly state to his readers – but it also was not something he overlooked, leaving it to be thought up by crazed monks in the Dark Ages. It is, rather, a wisdom gleaned from millennia of collective human experience.[\[14\]](#)

In other words, the wisdom of collective human experience has recognized the need for religious disciplines, therefore a word from the Lord was unnecessary in biblical times. But the reality is that “collective human experience” and wisdom, especially in regard to religion, is self-deceiving (Prov 14:12). Man cannot comprehend God apart from divine revelation. The wisdom of collective human experience has resulted in every sort of human-created religion, all of which ultimately lead people astray. The wisdom of man never draws people to God or His ways (James 3:13-18). This was one of the key reasons that Jesus Christ came to earth; it was necessary for Him to “explain” God to us, otherwise we could never understand Him (John 1:18).

This takes us directly to the second way spiritual formation leaders attempt to lay a biblical foundation for what they teach. They make the claim that spiritual disciplines were practiced by Jesus and the apostles followed suit, therefore we are to do the same thing. Willard tells us, “The key to understanding Paul is to know that...he lived and practiced daily the things his Lord taught and practiced...Paul followed Jesus by living as he lived. And how did he do that? Through activities and ways of living that would train his whole personality to depend upon the risen Christ as Christ trained himself to depend upon the Father.”[\[15\]](#) What kind of practices does Willard have in mind? Here is a sample, “It is solitude **and solitude alone that opens the possibility of a radical relationship to God** that can withstand all external events up to and beyond death.”[\[16\]](#) None of us would deny that Jesus went away on occasion to pray or rest, as did Paul and the other apostles. Nor would any doubt the benefit of spending time alone with the Lord. But when we are told that “it is solitude and solitude alone that opens the possibility of a radical relationship to God,” I think it would be nice to have at least one proof text that actually says this. Where in Scripture

does God make such a statement? One of the problems facing the evangelical church today is that too many men and women are setting themselves up as the final authority on the Christian life. We need to remember that no matter how famous, successful or popular Christian leaders may become, their authority rests solely on the revealed Word of God, not their own personality or intellect.

One of the points that spiritual formation adherents miss is that the New Testament does address their approach to spirituality. In Colossians 2:20-23 Paul clearly tells us that many of the disciplines that were being promoted then, as well as today, have no spiritual value at all. He asks the Colossians, “Why do you submit yourselves to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

The essence of the Spiritual Formation Movement is that through the use of their recommended disciplines our fleshly nature will be tamed and we will grow to become like Christ. Willard writes, “[Paul’s] crucifixion of the flesh, and ours, is accomplished through those activities such as solitude, fasting, frugality, service, and so forth, which constitute the curriculum in the school of self-denial and place us on the front line of spiritual combat.”<sup>[17]</sup> But the inspired apostle says the exact opposite. Bodily discipline does not control “fleshly indulgence.” Victory over sin and spiritual growth is the work (fruit) of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16-26) which is cultivated when we make use of the means that Scripture specifically prescribes, not the practices that have been invented or distorted by men.

### **Strengths and Dangers**

On the positive side, we applaud anyone who sincerely wants to become more like Christ. The Spiritual Formation Movement has recognized a genuine lack in the spiritual lives of many who claim to follow the Lord. Many have gone to church, read the Bible, spent time in prayer, and have a good handle on doctrine, but they have no quality of spiritual life. Admittedly, all of us experience dry spells in our spiritual journey

and at such times we are vulnerable to a charismatic speaker, a well-written book, or a moving retreat. None of this is negative, unless what is being taught lacks biblical authority. At times these dry seasons are instruments of God to prepare our hearts for lessons He will teach. At other times we need to recognize that we may very well have left the path of true discipleship and need to return to the way laid out for us in the Word. The real danger is that we will turn to the wrong sources for our answers. This is what spiritual formation is doing.

Richard Foster wrote in 2004,

When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term “Spiritual Formation” was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction.[\[18\]](#)

This demonstrates well the popularity and spread of spiritual formation. Something that was only known in esoteric Roman Catholic circles less than 40 years ago is now demanding a front row seat in evangelical life. What has changed? The doctrines and teachings of Catholicism have not budged, but the willingness of evangelicals to compromise with the theology and practices of Rome have. As a matter of fact, even those who are soundly in conservative evangelical camps are willing to ignore huge doctrinal differences in order to experience a vitality of life that they, for whatever reason, have come to believe the Catholic contemplatives have to offer. Yet I believe that Michael Horton is correct when he warned,

We want to have direct, intuitive supernatural experiences. But God has determined that we derive all our knowledge of Him, not through direct encounters, but through the written Word, the Bible, and in the Person and work of His incarnate Son.[\[19\]](#)

What Scripture offers in the way of Christian experience and what spiritual formation offers are two different things, as I hope to demonstrate in the articles to come.

## Conclusion

While some use “spiritual formation” as a synonym for discipleship, this is a mistake. However spiritual formation is officially defined, the means of spiritual formation within the movement is always spiritual disciplines drawn almost entirely from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics. Some evangelicals attempt to clean the disciplines up and redeem them for non-Catholic use, but the fact remains these disciplines are not taught in Scripture as channels for spiritual growth and discipleship.

Many are turning to spiritual formation at this time due to their own disappointments with their spiritual lives. When someone recommends the spiritual disciplines “which the church has always practiced throughout its history” (without mentioning that this is a reference to mystics within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions), some will naïvely jump at the opportunity. But as John MacArthur warns in another context,

Lifeless, dry orthodoxy is the inevitable result of isolating objective truth from vibrant experience. But the answer to dead orthodoxy is not to build a theology on experience. Genuine experience must grow out of sound doctrine. We are not to base what we believe on what we have experienced. The reverse is true. Our experiences will grow out of what we believe.[\[20\]](#)

Spiritual dry spells and dead spots are an inevitable part of the Christian life. Sometimes they are just normal mood cycles, at other times they are rooted in true spiritual concerns and sins. The disciple of Christ should pay attention to such times, for the Lord is at work. But the solution is not to turn to experiences and methods springing from the traditions of the past; it is found in returning to Scripture and through the power of the Holy Spirit living out the revelation the Lord has given us.

I must caution that the position I take will draw heavy criticism. Demarest attempts to ward off critiques of the Spiritual Formation Movement by saying, “The criticisms levied against the renewal of evangelical spirituality today reflects a lack of humility and charity. The excoriation of many Christian movements and leaders

communicates the message that ‘I alone have the truth’ and ‘the majority of faithful Christians today are wrong.’” [21] But this constitutes no argument at all, rather it is an attempt to silence and intimidate those who challenge spiritual formation. The proper rebuttal to Demarest is to argue that anyone claiming that “I alone have the truth” would be truly arrogant and lacking in charity. However, to claim that the Lord alone has the truth and He has revealed that portion of truth He wants us to know in Scripture (Deut 29:29) is a different matter. If in fact the Lord has given us the authoritative Word to teach us that which we should know and how we should live, it would seem the wisest, kindest and most God-honoring thing we could do to believe, teach and live exactly as He has instructed us. In fact, it is the height of arrogance to do otherwise. Instead of chasing after the experiences and traditions of men we should rather delve deeply into the Word of God and live out the experiences He has designed for His followers.

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[1] James D. Maxwell III,  
[www.faith.edu/seminary/printerfriendly.php?article=../faithpulpit/2009\\_03-04](http://www.faith.edu/seminary/printerfriendly.php?article=../faithpulpit/2009_03-04).

[2] Desert Fathers and Mothers were hermits, ascetics, monks and nuns who lived in the desert of Egypt during the third and fourth century A.D. Their ascetic lifestyle was viewed as an alternative to martyrdom which previously has been seen as the highest possible sacrifice for the Lord

[3] Bruce Demarest, *Satisfying Your Soul, Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), p. 84.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Bruce Demarest, p. 23.

[6] Richard J. Foster and Gayle D. Beebe, *Longing for God, Seven Paths of Christian Devotion*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 12.

[7] Bruce Demarest, p. 26.

[8] Ibid., p. 23.

[9] Ibid., pp. 26-27, 34.

[10] John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted, Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 48.

[11] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 95.

[12] Ibid., p. 97.

[13] Bruce Demarest, p. 35.

[14] Dallas Willard, p. 99.

[15] Ibid., p. 106.

[16] Ibid., p. 101 (emphasis mine).

[17] Ibid., p. 109.

[18] <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=744>

[19] As quoted in Demarest, p. 79.

[20] John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 65.

[21] Demarest, p. 89.