

# ***Biblical Spiritual Formation: Ten Years On***

## ***Introduction:***

So! Let's remember:

***Prophetic Multiculturalism***  
***Kingdom Building Stewardship***  
***Intentional Christian Hospitality***  
***Contextual Brethren Life***  
***Needs-oriented Outreach***  
***Dynamic Corporate Worship***

These are the core values that we hold as a church that we've already talked about.

And we've noted a lot of things as we've talked about these core values. If you've missed one or two of these messages, they are all online; I recommend checking them out. I really do, you know: It is always better to be able to articulate what you're about, than not be able to do this. And this whole series is a chance for us, as a community, to really remember and remind ourselves what it is we're about.

And this morning, we're going to do more of this remembering and reminding. We're talking about "Biblical Spiritual Formation," what this means, how it relates to our lives, and the typical, normal stuff that fills them. We're talking about what it means to be formed, about what it means to bring the Bible into conversation with our lives, and we'll talk a little about the Holy Spirit, too.

But first: Let's pray.

## **Prayer:**

### **Reading through: “A”**

So. Let’s go through this thing. We’ll do the bounce back-and-forth take. First one:

***A. Biblical spiritual formation is the process by which a Christian looks more like Jesus all the time. It is the growth of a Christian from an “immature” faith to a “mature” faith. This process of formation is never accomplished; there is never a moment in the life of a Christian when one has “arrived.” However, maturation does occur; over time, greater and greater portions of the Christian’s life begin to conform to the life that Jesus modeled for us.***

### **Regarding “A”**

Let’s stop here and talk about formation. People are formed, right? Their personalities are shaped and molded by life.

Since we were born we’ve been in a process of formation. When we were little we were taught things by people--our parents, siblings, family and others. We mimicked the things we saw others do. People and experiences have intentionally or unintentionally been shaping us, but we have been in a process of formation since birth. At some point, we took over the process, we began to “live our own lives,” and to greater or lesser degrees intentionally choose to be formed in this particular way or that particular way.

At schools we took particular classes, we played particular games, we watched particular things and read particular things. We listened to some people and not others. And we all still do this, and whether or not we realize it, these things form us, they shape us, and mix and mingle to make us who we are.

And if you want to know what's formed you, you can look at certain things that are great markers: What or who do you quote? What sort of jokes do you make, and what material do you use? What songs do you hum? You can think about the things that are "wrong" for a person to do--and then think about where you learned that? Who are your friends and who are your heroes? Because like it or not, you're becoming like them. You can think about what makes you cry, or laugh, or shut down--and then consider where you learned to act these ways to these things? Too often we think that we simply "are," that who we are is who we've always been, and we forget that we have picked up things along the way, which we have pieced together or have been put on us by others, and that we were not born with the sensibilities, preferences, morals, or opinions that we all hold today. They were shaped inside us; we have been formed.

And so life is not static; we are always in the process of "becoming" a more complete--prayerfully better--version of ourselves. We have room to grow in those areas that we should grow in, and time to perfect those areas whose foundations are laid down as good as they can be.

And there is this, too: we don't grow and change for the sake of growing and changing only. That's permanent

adolescence, that's dysfunctional, arrested development. It's a sort of psychological cancer, and I'm not using that metaphor thoughtlessly.

And our Core Value reminds us that as Christians, we are called to be formed into people who in this season of our lives are more like Jesus than we were in the last season. We have been recipients of "new birth," we have been "adopted" into a new family, and we are not supposed to allow just anything to form us anymore. We'll talk more about that in a moment; but Christians are called to become people are formed into little Christs, people whose characters, intentions, and actions--characters, intentions, and actions--are like Jesus's own. This process won't be complete until Christ shows up and resurrection pours out over creation. But it will be complete someday.

So think with me: Are you more like Jesus today than you were a year ago? If not, why? Has your formation into a person who looks like Christ stalled out? Or--and this happens all the time--have you reversed course, a little? Formation is rarely instantaneous, rarely immediate; usually, it takes long times to see dramatic changes, but we should be able to look upon our the years of our lives and see that we are more like Jesus now than we were in 2015, in 2010, in 2005. And as a congregation, a body of Christians, we should be able to say the same things: Are we, Smoky Row, more like Jesus together than we were 2 or 3 or 5 years ago? What measurements do we use?

I'll keep reading.

***Reading Through "B"***

***B. There are no one-size-fits-all programs for growth into Christ-likeness. Though we offer many programs—and encourage participation in them—we do not presume that God does not work outside them, or that they will be effective for all Christians. There are, however, clear biblical mandates that aid in the spiritual formation of the Christian. These spiritual disciplines include practices such as learning and reflecting upon scripture; praying; offering sacrifices of time, treasure, talents, or thanksgiving to God; fasting; meeting together with other Christians; and participating in the life of the Church (1 Tim 4:6-16; Matt 6:1-21; 2 Cor 9:7; Heb 10:25).***

***This emphasis on the “biblical” component of our spiritual formation highlights the fact that the primary story with which a Christian aligns his or her life is the story of God’s work in history contained in the Bible. The Bible tells the story of God’s interaction with the world: God’s attempts to restore creation, deal with evil and sin, and draw humanity back to himself after we broke relationship with God and were held in bondage to sin and evil. It is the Bible’s authoritative witness to Jesus’ life—the one who calls Christians to be transformed into his likeness—that gives credence to its own authority over the life of the Christian. It is also the life of Jesus, as seen in the Bible, to which we hope to conform.***

### ***Regarding “B”***

I said a second ago that we’ve been recipients of “new birth,” we have been “adopted” into a new family, and that

in this family, formation is intentional, not accidental or coincidental.

But these things I said about us, this adoption language, this new birth language: it's Biblical language, right? This is Bible stuff: Ways to talk about what has happened to us as we've entered God's People, come under the authority of our God-who-is-King through the grace of the Lord.

The Bible, for Christians, matters. Scripture matters. The world has been telling us for a while now that the only real authority in our lives should be our own will, the only voice we need to pay attention to is our voice, or the voices of those who out of fear or passivity will rubber-stamp any decision we decide we want to make. The evil one wants us to believe this, too, because it makes it that much easier to sneak and steal freedom and grace from us.

And it is natural to gather around us people who think just like we think and perceive the world the way we perceive the world, so that we grow too used to having our perspective on anything be the correct perspective.

But for Christians, there is another perspective that overrides our own, overrides the perspectives of our friends, or families, or heroes in any area where their perspectives don't line up with its own. I'm talking about the Bible's perspective.

And what the Bible has to say about any part of life is not on an "opinion" level for Christians. It's not just one more voice out of a lot of voices that are trying to speak into our lives. It's the loudest voice, and the voice we need to most closely

listen to and obey.

But again, since we were little we've been committed to the idea that "you're not the boss of me, I am," and to say that Scripture should be, in some sense, "the boss of us" is a tricky deal.

And there are things to remember: The Bible derives its authority not simply from its uniquely true account of the way God has worked through history, but from the God who has worked through history. The Bible's authority comes from God that stands behind it and bears witness to it. The Word of God, the Word-Made-Flesh is the one who gives this Word of God its power. And so, Scripture is uniquely authoritative in our lives. It has authority to speak to us about capital-L "Life," in a way that no other person, place, or thing does. Do our lives reveal that we believe this or do they reveal that we think its malarkey?

### ***Stories:***

Let's talk about stories, for a second. Some of us have guiding family stories, right? You know what I'm talking about? The story that most of your family could recite. "Grampa worked in the coal mines for such and such a time with all your uncles, and they had one barrel of water that the whole family shared, and it was coal black by the time your aunt so and so got her chance to bathe and they bought all their stuff at the mine store and didn't get out of middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania until blah blah blah." We could make up a thousand of these, right?

These stories have heroes who escaped terrible things, and black sheep who didn't. They have morals and lessons,

spoken or unspoken: work hard, be grateful, keep secrets, protect yourself, Do be like that one, don't be like this one. Your family is cursed! Your family is destined to succeed! Things that line up with or don't at all line up with the Christian life as the Bible reveals it.

And there's the rub. Because these family stories have formed us. We have figured out where we fit in them. We have sharpied over parts, and rehearsed others a thousand times at a hundred different family gatherings. Because of course, the context for these stories has been community--it always is.

Do we get what I'm saying here about the way these stories we tell ourselves give our lives shape and form and a connection to the past and a place in the world? Great.

But when we come to Christ, we have to take the time--and it does take time--to realize first that we must bring these family stories of ours into conversation with the greater, true story that is the Bible, and then do it. The story of how hard God worked to save the world. We have to locate ourselves in that story, we have to memorize it's little, individual stories just like we do the family stories we tell ourselves, the one-sentence biographies we have about that uncle or that cousin, about how our parents met, or what their marriage is or was like.

And just like all those family stories have meaning for us, the story of how the family of God was opened up for us has to have even greater meaning.

So what am I trying to say here? I'm trying to say that the



Bible is a story of interwoven stories, that it's the truest story there is, and it is the only true story about the only true God and what that God has done for us. And we have to be formed by it, just as much--if not more so--than we are formed by the stories we tell ourselves about our families--or for that matter our cities and our businesses and our country.

You live in a world of competing stories, that are all the time making claims on you, shaping you, trying to tell you what's best and most important. And if you forget the story of God--which is the truest story in the world, the only one that fully reveals God to us, and is powerful enough to contain and correct the stories we tell ourselves--then we are in a mess of trouble. This is what it means to say that the Bible is authoritative for us. The story it tells about us, ourselves and one another, and the world, is the story we hold as most true, out of all the stories we tell ourselves. It wins, where there is conflict, it beats the others.

Is the Bible authoritative in your life? Or is it a nice idea, and made or makes for good bedtime stories for your kids, but isn't worth spending much time with otherwise? Can Smoky Row be a story-telling community, where the stories we learn, and tell, and internalize are Bible, are biblical in the purest sense?

And this part of our Core Value reminds us that the Bible seeks to form us, gives us things to do if we really want to become more like Jesus. Things like praying, fasting, giving out of whatever we've been given. We're supposed to gather together--maybe, simply so that we can share the biblical stories we know when we do, just like we always

share the same stories we share in our families at Christmas or Thanksgiving or Easter or the family reunion, however we've gathered around those times recently.

And more than this, we are supposed to learn Scripture, to memorize the Bible, and internalize its story: Because again, if you want to know what is forming you, take stock of what you've memorized, what you've internalized, and you'll know.

But we don't do all this on our own power. Let's keep reading:

### **Core Value: "C"**

***C. Calling this process spiritual does not mean that we emphasize the intangible, non-physical aspects of ourselves, but that we emphasize the agent who is responsible for such growth: the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we believe that we have been blessed with the Holy Spirit so that we might live as Jesus lived, and be conformed to his likeness (Rom 8; 1 Cor 3:16; John 14; Gal 4:6). The Holy Spirit engenders transformational growth through the bearing of virtuous "fruit" in the life of the Christian, as he or she spends time cultivating a relationship with the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16-26). The Spirit comforts and counsels Christians as they walk with God, and reminds them of Jesus' life and teachings (John 14:15-17, 25-26). The Spirit's presence in the life of the Christian encourages him or her in faithfulness and the pursuit of Christ-likeness and love (1 John 3:23-24; 4:13). Without the Holy Spirit, our efforts are exhaustible and limited. With the Holy Spirit, we***

***can do things even greater than Jesus did (John 14:12). At SRBC, we desire to do everything through the empowerment and leading of the Holy Spirit, from the most structured event to the most spontaneous time of praise or service.***

### ***Regarding “C”***

Look. We are not on our own. We have been given the Holy Spirit, who gives us power and wisdom and comfort and bears in our lives virtues that help shape us into the Christ-like people we’re trying to become.

And you know, most Christians are a little shaky on the Spirit, but it has helped me--and you can take this or leave it, but it has helped me--to remember the good old, “Holy Ghost.” Because when we think of ghosts, we think of people, sort of, right? Beings who can act and do things; they aren’t touchable, they aren’t physical, but they can affect the world that they haunt. We talk about ghosts “of” a person, that they are like and unlike that person, and we can think of the ways the Spirit acts like God the Father, like God the Son, Jesus, but does different work, in some ways.

Now: if you’re talking ghosts and haunting you’re almost always talking scary stuff, which is a bummer of an association, but, if we could push past that, and think of the fact that we are being helpfully haunted by the Holy Ghost, a being who wants to act for us, who wants to guide us, who wants to help us, and give to us what we need to accomplish this great goal of being formed into people who act and think and feel and are like Christ Jesus, then maybe we can reclaim that “Holy Ghost” language as something helpful.

We have been given a comforter and a counselor, a person who we neglect an awful lot. But if we are trying to be formed in the image of Christ, our tries are not going to go very far unless we turn to the Holy Spirit for help. And we do this by practicing those same disciplines that form us in the first place: reading Scripture, praying, fasting, practicing gratefulness, and giving out of what we've been given.

Tips and techniques and tricks are all well and good. Positioning ourselves before God through practices that we draw from the Bible, so that the Spirit might work in our lives--or rather, so that the Holy Ghost might haunt us in some holy way--is better. Doing this helps us take control over our own formation, by giving God control of the formational process, and taking it away from the world.

And there is a goal in this process; it bookends this core value. Let's read the last section.

### **Core Value: "D"**

***D. The end result of this biblical spiritual formation is that we become a community of people who as new creations take part in the new creation that God began in Jesus. We have our inner and outer lives conformed to Jesus' own, and are able to say with Paul that "it is not [we] who live, but Christ who lives in [us], and the life [we] now live in the flesh [we] live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who has loved [us] and has given himself for [us]" (Gal 2:20).***

### **Regarding "D"**

Now. With regard to section "D," I think we should just read

it again.

***D. The end result of this biblical spiritual formation is that we become a community of people who as new creations take part in the new creation that God began in Jesus. We have our inner and outer lives conformed to Jesus' own, and are able to say with Paul that "it is not [we] who live, but Christ who lives in [us], and the life [we] now live in the flesh [we] live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who has loved [us] and has given himself for [us]" (Gal 2:20).***

Have you ever met someone who is so much like the Lord that it surprises you? Or have you seen Jesus in someone you know when you didn't expect it--they acted with some extra compassion, some extra grace, some extra selflessness that you just didn't expect to see. Our biggest and best calling as Christians is to become people who are just like the Lord, who have been transformed inside and out, and whose natural inclinations and natural responses to whatever life brings, have become Jesus-like. Our default mode becomes acting and being like the Lord.

And the greatest call of a church is to be a place where Christians are like this, to be a christ-making Church, in the sense that we are group of people who form one another into the image of Christ, and reveal to the world the Jesus we have become like.

### ***Toward Reformation:***

Cast your memories back a few weeks, and remember that our denomination was born out of something called the radical reformation. Because we were totally rad.

It was called that because we were a people desperate to do anything to see the church be the powerful, holy, body of Christ that we're called to be. And as Christians who share in their story, whose lineage goes back to them, we need to remember that we were willing to do whatever we needed to do to become more like Jesus, and to do it with joy, knowing that it was good, good for us, for the Lord, for the world that was sinking like a ship in sin and brokenness and fear and evil.

Position yourself before the Holy Ghost. Acknowledge the Holy Spirit that God has given you. And do those Spirit-guided things that are formational: praying--in all sorts of ways, and in all sorts of times, giving of what God has given to us, fasting--an act that acknowledges our deep need for God's providence, meditating & reflecting on scripture, on God's love for you. And of course, of course, joining together in the name of the Lord.

And when we join together, however we do it--in person, over Zoom, over text, whatever--let's rehearse the Bible. Rehearse the Bible. Do you know what I mean by this? When we get together at those family gatherings or school reunions or conferences or camps or whatever, we rehearse those stories that have shaped us, right? We tell them again and again, we make insider jokes and references, we do these things that are formational, that remind us of the stories that stand behind us as families or communities.

We have to be a congregation that rehearses the Bible, one that draws on these true stories that stand behind this family we've been adopted into--stories about God's

faithfulness, about God's persistence, about God's mercy and love. What stories control how you view the world? What stories are most authoritative in your life?

And there's a natural process here: As we rehearse the Bible, as we allow its story to shape us, as we do the practices it calls us to do, we will become more like Jesus. There is no secret, there is no magic pill, we simply end up there, like the Lord. The Holy Spirit acts on and in us, the things we do begin to reform us into people who are more like Jesus tomorrow than we are today.

### ***Freedom:***

God gives us so much power in this relationship we have with him. We have freedom to choose to be formed by whatever we want in this world. Those things that shape us, that form us, can be things that are directly connected to our faith: The Holy Spirit, Scripture--in its whole story, in its many stories, in the practices and habits it calls us to--or the things that we give power over us can be completely against Jesus Christ.

We are making choices daily to be formed. So what have we been choosing? What have we been exposing ourselves to? Is it "biblical" in the best sense? Is the one working on us the Holy Spirit? Or is someone or something less powerful forming us?

### ***Conclusion:***

We have a motto, as a congregation. Mottos are good. They're like little word-symbols, little phrases of power that we can carry in our heads that--guess what--help form us, by directing our hearts and our wills in particular ways.

**“Becoming more like Jesus all the time”** is ours. And it’s a good motto. It’s a good motto. Because it reminds us that this is what we’re called to. We wrap it up in core values, philosophies of ministry, governance structures and strategic planning: But at the end of the day, we’ve got to ask ourselves, and ourself--as a congregation--are we becoming more like Jesus all the time?

And let me leave us with some encouragement, because I think we are. I really do. Even in the middle of all the mess we’re still very much in the middle of. I don't claim any objectivity; I'm a part of us, right? I'm vested. But I think we are, and it's from the Lord, and we have got to just keep on keeping on. Turn to the Bible, turn to the Spirit; help one another.

So.

Turn to the Bible.

Turn to the Spirit.

Who are we being formed into? How much do we care?