

# Spiritual Formation:

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## What does God expect of me now?

Dr. Douglas A. Blanc, Sr.

When you consider the so-called “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19-20, one phrase stands out as the hallmark of our progress in Christ. That is, having been saved, God intends for His children to progress in this new life. ***The requisite for progress is obedience.*** The “standout phrase” is, “and teaching them [disciples] to obey everything I have commanded you” (v. 20a). Due to the failure of God’s people in this regard, this has sometimes been called, “the Great Omission.”

The corresponding promise of Jesus, “and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (v. 20b, TNIV) is a reference to the Holy Spirit (see John 14:16), who’s agency serves as **the necessary resource:**

1. to facilitate obedience (non-feeling based), e.g. Romans 8:12-14, and
2. to produce results in keeping with our root-fruit union with Christ, e.g. Colossians 2:6-7; John 15:5; Galatians 5:16-25; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18.

The goal of this new life is “the formation of Christ” (Galatians 4:19<sup>1</sup>; Romans 8:29; see also, Philippians 3:10-14; Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 3:17). This involves a process whereby we live by (in accordance with) an inner intuitive witness (Romans 8:16; see also, 2 Peter 1:3-4) that has captivated our natural tendency to self-determine our own course (Galatians 2:20, “faith of Christ,” His faith in us that guides our surrendered will into responses and decisions that our consistent with His own, see Psalm 37:4; John 15:7).

There is, therefore, an active and a passive response to this new life. If the formation of the life of Christ in me rests upon my obedience (active, see Ephesians 3:20-24), then it seems that God responds to our surrendered pliability (passive, see Jeremiah 18:1-10) by transforming us (thinking and doing; belief and behavior; attitudes and actions) into the likeness of His Son (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 3:14-19; Colossians 1:9-14). Does this make spiritual formation dependent on my obedience? The apostle Paul seems to answer this in Philippians 2:12-13.

### The reasoning is as follows:

1. I have been reborn and am now “genetically” a child of God capable of manifesting the traits of my Father (John 1:12-13, “children of God”).
2. My will must choose conformity with God’s internal witness (Spirit, Galatians 5:16, 25) and external standard (Word, Psalm 119:11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12) in order to experience a transformation of my character.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul has begotten the community (1 Corinthians 4:15) and is molding it in the form (μορφώω) of Christ through his preaching and teaching. This is not Christ-mysticism whereby the formation is automatic apart from the believer’s participation. Here, Paul desired to begin the process again in order to bring the Galatian believers back to authentic Christian living. They had become infected by false teaching (see at Galatians 3:1-6).

3. When I practice obedience (Spirit-Word), through a deliberate act of my will, God yields the corresponding power to follow through on the path of obedience (note: in Joshua 1:1-9 obedience to the Word was set in context of God's abiding presence; also, the disciples' "observing all things" is set in the context of the abiding presence of Jesus through the Spirit, John 14:16-17).
4. The result is spiritual growth that is identifiable and measurable (2 Peter 1:5-11; 3:17-18); it is the product of a convinced mind, a surrendered will, and an available body (Romans 6:11-14; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10).

So, then, the will is critical. The mind (1 Peter 1:3f) can assent to truth, but until the will yields no obedience has occurred (and consequently no growth). Instead, there is what Dallas Willard<sup>2</sup> calls an "epidermal" (skin deep) or superficial faith. Such a faith is not deeply rooted. It is not the result of a transformed will that is evidenced by a changed life (body, e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Willard described **the "will" as three dimensional:**

1. *Vital or Impulsive will:* This is basically the "me-oriented" approach to things that determines one's course based on what "I want" or what "pleases me." Will is here identified with me and all of life's events revolve around my interests. This is contrary of a will that measures personal identity by a life in subjection to Christ.
2. *Reflective will:* This is the will that is interested in what is good for the person, not just selfish desires. It takes time to consider the proper course or reaction. In the case of the believer, when it is instructed by the Word of God and led by the Spirit of God, the result is a life of ongoing transformation into the image of Christ (Colossians 3:17).
3. *Embodied will:* This is when either of the above is manifested in the deeds of the body. It has "sunken down" in the spirit to the point that we automatically do what it dictates. Transformation is the fruit of the reflective will taking root in our body (belief-behavior, attitudes-actions, and thoughts-deeds).

So, Willard defines spiritual formation:

***"Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will."***

Here's an illustration I heard this week from Adrian Rogers (1931-2005) on his radio broadcast, *Love Worth Finding*.<sup>3</sup> Rogers spoke of an automobile that was dilapidated (four flat tires, dented fenders, cracked crankcase with no oil in it, gas tank with a hole in it, and a dead battery). A man was pushing the car into a gas station and up to the fuel

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pumps. He calls to the attendant, "Fill it up, please." What would you be thinking if you were the attendant?

Yet, says, Rogers, this is who we do God. We cry out to Him to know His will for our lives, but are totally ill-equipped to perform His will.

Before God can use us, we must be useable to Him. Therein lies the balance between the active and the passive. I must engage God at the point of obedience. He will transform me at the point of surrender and compliance.