

Spiritual formation is the process of *apparent* spiritual development through engaging in a set of behaviors, termed *disciplines*. Advocates believe these disciplines help shape the character of the practitioner into the likeness of Christ.

Though superficially similar to discipleship, spiritual formation is not merely concerned with biblical exhortation and instruction in orthodox doctrine, but also with the teaching of “many practices that opened [the believer] to the presence and direction of God, and nurtured the character traits of Christ into fruition” **1**

The *Renovaré* website states:

Spiritual formation is a process, but it is also a journey through which we open our hearts to a deeper connection with God. We are not bystanders in our spiritual lives, we are active participants with God, who is ever inviting us into relationship with him. **2**

Spiritual Disciplines

According to proponents of spiritual formation, various “spiritual disciplines” must be practiced in order to experience true spiritual growth:

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.

Properly employed...these disciplines help us attain increasing levels of spiritual maturity so that we respond to our life circumstances with the mind of Christ. **3**

In his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, as well as on his *Renovaré* website, Richard Foster lists these disciplines as: **4**

- **Meditation** Entering into a “listening silence” in order to “hear God’s voice.” Similar to the meditation of Eastern religions.
- **PRAYER** An “interactive conversation” with God. Practiced as contemplative prayer.
- **Fasting** “The voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.”
- **Study** “The mind taking on an order conforming to the order of whatever we concentrate upon.”
- **Simplicity** “The joyful unconcern for possessions we experience as we truly ‘seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (Matthew 6:33).”
- **Solitude** A “state of mind” for one to be “found by God and freed from competing loyalties.”
- **Submission** Letting “go of the burden of always needing to get our own way.”
- **Service** “A pattern of service as a lifestyle...At the center is found a contentment in hiddenness, indiscriminancy.”
- **Confession** Confession of sin to other professing believers.
- **Worship** “Entering into the supra-natural experience of the Shekanyah, or glory, of God.”
- **Guidance** Learning to “heed the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Jesus.” “It is the perception that we have heard the Kol Yahweh, the voice of God.”
- **Celebration** Celebrating God in all facets of life. Since the disciplines are not defined in Scripture, no concrete, definitive list is available. Consequently, Willard notes that we should not “assume that our particular list will be right for others. **5** This confirms the subjective nature of these practices.

Unbiblical Origins

Despite assertions that the spiritual disciplines are “God-ordained,” **6** they are in fact derived from the practices of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics. **7**

These practices are contrary to the biblical theology fought for in the Reformation.

Gary Gilley asks: 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? **8**

In other words, are we to turn to mystical, subjective ascetic practices, or do we rely upon the objective truth of God’s Word?

Bob DeWaay contends: The Bible nowhere describes an inward journey to explore the realm of the spirit. God chose to reveal the truth about spiritual reality through His ordained, Spirit-inspired, biblical writers. **9**

Unbiblical view Of Man’s Condition

Spiritual formation teaches that man possesses innate goodness, but that his fallen state of sin is a result of “deprivation” or “spiritual starvation.” Thus, the disciplines help to feed, mature and grow man’s spirituality. In his *Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard states:

*The evil that we do in our present condition is a reflection of a weakness caused by spiritual starvation. When Jesus prayed on the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” he was not just being generous to his killers; he was expressing the facts of the case. They really did not know what they were doing. As St. Augustine so clearly saw, the deranged condition of humankind is not, at bottom, a positive fact, but a deprivation. It is one that results in vast positive evils, of course, yet depravity is no less a horror because it stems from a deficiency, and people are no less responsible for it and its consequences. **10***

Rather than having an innate ability for good, Scripture teaches that, due to the Fall, man is innately depraved (Romans 3:11-18, 23,5:8; Ephesians 2:1) and his heart is wicked (Jeremiah 17:9).

Possibility of Real Spiritual Experiences Not From God

Richard Foster himself has offered warnings when it comes to practicing some of the disciplines. In regard to the practice of contemplative prayer, which is a type of meditation, Foster, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, writes:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as a supernatural guidance. While the Bible does not give us a lot of information on that, there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way!....

*...But for now I want to encourage you to learn and practice prayers of protection. **11***

When seeking to “hear from God,” there is no biblical guidance as to how one may determine exactly who or what is communicating. Foster himself notes that not only could one be deceived by Satan, but one may also mistake one’s own imagination or “human voices” for the voice of God.

Learning to distinguish the voice of God...from just human voices within us...comes in much the same way that we learn any other voice. Satan pushes and condemns. God draws and encourages. And we can know the difference. **12**

Though Foster provides criteria for determining just who or what is speaking, there is no biblical support for the specifications he provides. He implies that God will always speak in a positive manner, yet there are multiple instances in Scripture when God speaks negatively to His people. About Foster’s comments in the above-referenced *Be Still* DVD, Pastor Larry DeBruyn writes:

Assuming that God speaks Soul to soul today, what if Foster’s paradigm for determining “the voice” were reversed; that the negative voice is God’s, and the positive is Satan’s? It happened that way in the Garden. God

warned Adam and Eve that for disobedience to God, “you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17), but Satan reassuringly told Adam and Eve, “You surely shall not die!” (Genesis 3:34). The point is that when engaging meditative spirituality, the contemplator can never be certain who will speak, and as a consequence, the experience can become the spawning ground for myriads of flashy ideas based solely upon, “he heard this,” or “she heard that.” And at that juncture, Christians and the church will have turned aside “to myths” (2 Timothy 4:4). **13**

Deception is rampant, and unbiblical, mystical practices may offer people an actual spiritual experience, though not one that originates from the true and living God. To ignore the boundaries of Scripture is to open oneself up to danger.

Leaders:

- Ignatius of Loyola
- Henri Nouwen
- Thomas Merton
- Dallas Willard
- Richard Foster
- Rick Warren
- Ruth Haley Barton
- Ken Boa
- Eugene Peterson
- Larry Crabb
- John Ortberg

Footnotes:

1. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (NavPress, 1999), 24.
2. <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/WhyBecomeLikeJesus/Whatisspiritualformation/tabid/2572/Default.aspx>, accessed 16 May 2012.
3. Richard J. Foster and Gayle D. Beebe, *Longing for God: Seven Paths of Christian Devotion* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15, 16.
4. All quotations within these definitions are from <http://www.renovare.us/SPIRITUALRENEWAL/PracticingLikeJesus/WhyPracticeLikeJesus/tabid/2518/Default.aspx> and linked pages, accessed 16 May 2012.
5. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 157.
6. Richard Foster, *Renovaré Newsletter*, <http://www.renovare.us/ViewNewsLetter/tabid/2404/Default.aspx?ID=71>, May 2003.
7. Gary Gilley, [Spiritual Formation](#).

8. Bob DeWaay, Richard Foster – Celebration of Deception.
9. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 63–64.
10. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (HarperCollins, 1990), 68.
11. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperCollins, 1992), 157.
12. Richard Foster, *Be Still, Fear of Silence* (DVD © Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC, 2006). Transcript courtesy of Larry DeBruyn, Who Goes There?
13. Larry DeBruyn, Who Goes There?