

# Ten Counsels: Richard Foster on Spiritual Formation

**RICHARD J. FOSTER**

*What does spiritual formation have to do with worship? Everything. Our dialog with God in worship moves us through the same formation, conformation, and transformation process as Richard Foster suggests takes place in spiritual formation. As you read the following article, consider how your worship supports spiritual formation. Brainstorm with your worship committee or another group about how your worship can better lead congregants through the process of formation, conformation, and transformation.* —JB

The tendency today is to think of spiritual formation exclusively in terms of practices of one kind or another. We get all excited about *lectio divina*, for example. But then we think that this is *the way* . . . the only way to be formed spiritually . . . and we begin to think that anyone not doing *lectio* is not experiencing spiritual formation.

Such an attitude will only produce legalism and bondage, and it utterly defeats spiritual formation.

The Christian idea of spiritual formation is, very simply, the *formation* and *conformation* and *transformation* of the human personality—body, mind, and spirit—into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 4:19 (NRSV) Paul says, “. . . I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is *formed* in you.” In Romans 8:29 he says, “For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed* to the image of his Son. . . .” And in Romans 12:2 he speaks these famous words, “Do not be *conformed* to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds. . . .”

And so I want to share with you several counsels in the work of spiritual formation. Ten counsels, in fact. I got the idea from the Bible and its Ten Commandments. Three of them are stated in the positive: “You shall” and seven of them are stated in the

negative: “You shall not.” I know that depends on whether we view the first commandment as a positive or a negative, “you shall have no other gods before me,” but you get the idea. Three positives, seven negatives.

For my counsels in spiritual formation I want to switch the ratio and give three negatives and seven positives. Three “do nots” and seven “do’s.”

## 1. Do not define spiritual formation in terms of various practices.

In another era those practices were things like “quiet time” and Bible study of one sort or another. Today it is *lectio divina* and “journal writing.”

May I say as clearly as possible: Christian spiritual formation has nothing essentially to do with such practices. Many of these practices are useful, to be sure, and some are more useful than others. *But none is essential.* What is essential is life with Jesus, interactive relationship with the great God of the universe, inner transformation into Christlikeness.

We all are to walk with the living Christ and then “in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

This reality can happen with *lectio* and with “journaling”—and it can happen without them. Remember, as far as we know Jesus did not keep a journal . . . and he turned out OK!

## 2. Do not focus on curriculum-based solutions.

Curricula of all sorts are important in the work of spiritual formation. But they are not the most important. First comes the *relationship* with Jesus, our living Head. All the classical language on prayer is relational, even erotic: think of Augustine, Julian, Richard Rolle, and Charles Wesley. Like them, we are to fall in love with Jesus, our living Lord, over and over and over again.

Second come the *ideas*. We must distinguish Christian spiritual formation from formation in general that is everywhere in the culture. Christian spiritual formation is the redemptive process of forming the inner human world so that it takes on the character of the inner being of Christ himself. We must think carefully and experience fully the Christian spiritual disciplines. And we must understand how that functions in conjunction with human effort, but how it also goes far beyond human effort.

In *The Divine Conspiracy* Dallas Willard (rightly, in my estimation) has a chapter entitled “A Curriculum for Christlikeness.” However, this is chapter 9 and comes only after both a careful delineation of the unique qualities of the interactive relationship between Jesus and his apprentices and a careful explication of the central ideas related to life in the kingdom of God. Far too many people rush to the curriculum program of chapter 9 without first establishing into their lives the foundations set forth so carefully in all that comes before.

## 3. Do not aim at outward action.

There is a hidden dimension to every human life, one that is not visible to others or fully graspable even by ourselves. At its conscious center is the human spirit. God is Spirit; God’s creative will creates and governs the universe. And within us the “spirit” is the creative element in human nature—the *imago Dei* in us. The human spirit is primarily what we today call “the will”—the capacity of choice and resolution—and what biblically has been called “the heart.” It is the radical source of our life; the stream of actions and influences and contributions we make to our shared, visible world and its history.

It is the renovation of the heart we are after in spiritual formation. This

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inward work is much harder than mere outward conformity. It is harder because we cannot see it, test it, control it. We cannot program the heart of another human being. We cannot program our own heart.

But this is also what makes it easier. God is the One who sees the heart. God is the One who tenderly programs the heart, always allowing time and space for our will to turn, turn, turn—responding in a thousand ways to God’s divine Love. We are part of God’s great renovation project for human beings. We work, but we work resting. We worship and labor under God’s abiding grace.

And now on to the seven “do’s” of the work of spiritual formation.

**4. Do root spiritual formation in the Great Commission.**  
“Go therefore 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 . . .” (Matt. 28:19-20).

We are to disciple the nations—that is, all peoples, all ethnic groups; to immerse them in the Trinitarian life and teach them to obey all that Jesus has commanded.

A disciple is an apprentice, a follower of Jesus. Therefore “discipling the nations” must be rooted in Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom, succinctly stated, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is an expanded commentary on that gospel of the kingdom.

**5. Do think internationally.**  
Thinking internationally with respect to spiritual formation involves thinking geographically of the whole world. But primarily it means that we are to be thinking always of the whole human family.

Thus we respect *diversity*. We honor the necessary human/cultural vessel that must always go with the “treasure” of Christ in us. Paul says that “we have this treasure in clay jars” (2 Cor. 4:7). The treasure is “the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (v. 4). The jars of clay represent the human body and the various cultural forms we use to enshroud the treasure. We receive every person within the context of their unique vessels, both personally and culturally. We never try to impose our own culture upon them. Nor do we mistake our own or others’ cultural vessel for the treasure.

At the same time, our work of spiritual formation must focus on our *commonality*—the things the human family holds in common:

- our common deformity—we are all sinners
- our common need of a Savior to free us from sin
- our common need to be a good person
- our common desire to know how to live well, including such questions as
  - how to love our husband or wife well
  - how to raise our children well
  - how to study well
  - how to face adversity well
  - how to run businesses and financial institutions well
  - how to form community life well
  - how to reach out to those on the margins well
  - how to die well.

**6. Do think in terms of the Church universal.**  
Sectarian reform movements that cement an eternal split only become ends in themselves. Those involved in the task of spiritual formation work instead for the transformation of the whole Church, the whole People of God in all her multifaceted expressions. Traditional. Contemporary. Liturgical. Charismatic. Emergent. Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant. Big church and little church; house church and Crystal Cathedral. We attempt no end run around the Church. God is with his people in all their waywardness and silliness, and so are we. What we are after is life in the kingdom of God—a life that all can live.

We are today in the middle of a spiritual centrifuge. Old densities are breaking up, new densities are forming. We are learning new ways to do church:

- The new ways may not involve buildings the way it has in the past.
- The new ways may not involve liturgies in the same way it has in the past.
- We may have to learn ways of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land.

Likely we are in for lots of changes in the days ahead. But the point is we are *for* the People of God—all the People of God—whatever form that takes.

**7. Do give sustained attention to a balanced vision.**  
Another tendency today in spiritual formation work is to focus attention only on the Contemplative—because that tradition has been sorely neglected. But we need to remember that that is only one dimension of the spiritual life; other traditions include Holiness; Charismatic; Social Justice; Evangelical; Incarnational.

We seek a balanced vision of Christian life and faith:

- a people of cross and crown, of courageous action and sacrificial love
- a people who are combining evangelism with social action, the transcendent lordship of Jesus with the suffering servant Messiah
- a people who are buoyed up by the vision of Christ's everlasting rule, not only imminent on the horizon, but already bursting forth in our midst.

Can you see it? Even though it feels like peering through a glass darkly, can you see a country pastor from Indiana embracing an urban priest from New Jersey and together praying for the peace of the world?

Can you see a Catholic monk from the mountains of Colorado standing alongside a Baptist evangelist from the streets of Los Angeles and together offering up a sacrifice of praise?

Can you see social activists from the urban centers of Hong Kong joining with Pentecostal preachers from the barrios of São Paulo and together weeping over the spiritually lost *and* the plight of the poor?

Can you see laborers from Soweto and landowners from Pretoria honoring and serving each other out of reverence for Christ?

Can you see Hutu and Tutsi, Serb and Croat, Mongol and Han Chinese, African American and Anglo, Latino and Native American all sharing with and loving one another?

Can you see the sophisticated standing with the simple, the elite standing with the dispossessed, the wealthy standing with the poor?

Can you see people from every race and nation and tongue and strata of society joining hearts and hands and voices, singing,

Amazing grace—how  
sweet the sound—  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost but now am found,  
was blind but now I see.  
(John Newton, 1779)

## 8 Do draw wisdom and insight from The Great Tradition.

Let's reject the heresy of the contemporary. The People of God throughout history instruct us in the way eternal.

We learn from Moses. We learn from Luther. We learn from Joseph of Arimathea. We learn from Catherine of Genoa. These are our teachers, our models, our inspiration.

And so we draw wisdom and insight from The Great Tradition of the Devotional Classics: among them Brother Lawrence; Thomas à Kempis; Julian of Norwich; Jean-Pierre de Caussade; Thomas Kelly.

## 9 Do take the long view.

In our culture, we're in a hurry. We want quick results. We think in terms of lifetimes and centuries. But the soul will live forever. It is precious beyond imagining. Thus investing deeply in even a few folk will count for all eternity.

In fact there are vast numbers of people who are committed to the long haul. They really want to be like Jesus with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. And, believe me, investing in these precious lives will take all the energy and all the time and all the prayer and all the weeping and laughing and singing and hoping we can possibly muster.

## 10 Do develop the highest possible Christology.

Our task in spiritual formation is to hold up the wonder and the majesty of this Jesus who is "tops over all"—to use a phrase from the Cotton Patch translation of the Gospels. There simply is no one to compare with this fully human, fully divine person who strides across the pages of the Gospels. "Very God of very God," and yet human, as the creed declares. Quite clearly, Jesus

is the single most important person in all of human history.

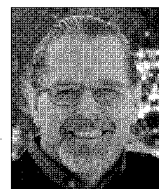
Let me make this as straightforward as I possibly can: Jesus is the absolute maestro of life. He is the Master of every situation: in teaching, in human relationships, in all of life.

And the wonder is that this very Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee and who died on the cross of Golgotha—this Jesus also rose from the dead, victorious over all the powers of death and hell and is now alive and here to teach his people himself! Jesus will teach you and me how to live, really live:

- in the midst of our life circumstances
- facing our life problems
- answering our life dilemmas.

This is the very Jesus we read about in the Gospels, the master teacher who could reveal the hearts of his hearers with such tenderness and care; of whom it was said, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Matt. 12:20). Jesus would never crush the needy . . . never snuff out the smallest hope.

The good news we share in spiritual formation is this: Jesus the Master Teacher has come to town and is giving master lessons in how to live life well! ■



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numerous books that emphasize personal spiritual renewal, including *Celebration of Discipline, Prayer, and The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*. This article is based on the text of a speech he delivered to the Evangelical Press Association in May 2007.