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## Cultivating A Cross-Shaped Heart for a Broken World

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# Cultivating A Cross-Shaped Heart for a Broken World

Sara Barton

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I begin with a negative. When people in our congregations think about spiritual formation, they think first and primarily about a personal relationship with God and/or with Jesus. At least that has been my experience for the last ten years; people engage the topic of spiritual formation in terms of personal relationship. Good definitions of spiritual formation do not, however, emphasize personal or individual relationship only for the sake of relationship. Good definitions extend beyond a relationship with Jesus to *conformity to his image*. Good definitions acknowledge the mystery of the *Trinity*. And good definitions emphasize relationship with *others*. These are important distinctions. Listen to Marjorie Thompson in her book *Soul Feast*: “*In Christ, we are reshaped according to the pattern we were created to bear. This reshaping is the basic meaning of spiritual formation in the Christian tradition. It should be clear that Christian spirituality begins with God, depends on God, and ends in God.*”<sup>1</sup>

Or listen to M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. when he states that spiritual formation is “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”<sup>2</sup> Or, finally, Paul Petit affirms that “spiritual formation is the holistic work of God in a believer’s life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ”<sup>3</sup>

Yes, I have a relationship with Jesus, and with God, and with the Holy Spirit that bears fruit in relation to others. But when I hear Christians, even close friends, talk about their relationships with Jesus, I’m sometimes suspicious, even cynical. What do we mean when we use such language?

There’s a song that has been transforming my relationship with Jesus. In 1989 Depeche Mode recorded “Personal Jesus.” Johnny Cash did a cover of the song you may have heard. The song was originally inspired by the book *Elvis and Me* by Priscilla Presley, and it’s ultimately about how we make people into our gods—we make other human beings our “Jesus.” Listen to the words:

Feeling unknown, and you're all alone,  
flesh and bone, by the telephone,  
lift up the receiver, I'll make you a believer  
take second best, put me to the test,  
things on your chest, you need to confess,  
I will deliver, you know I'm a forgiver.

Reach out and touch faith.  
Reach out and touch faith.

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1. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 7–8.
  2. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 142.
  3. Paul Petit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008), 19.

Someone to hear your prayers,  
 someone to care,  
 your own personal Jesus,  
 someone to hear your prayers,  
 someone who's there.

Reach out and touch faith.  
 Reach out and touch faith.  
 Reach out, reach out,  
 Reach out and touch faith.

Ladies and gentlemen,  
 reach out and touch faith,  
 personal Jesus,  
 your own personal Jesus.  
 (*Depeche Mode, 1989*)

The point is that we give others our hearts, faith, beliefs, and confessions. We make people our forgivers and put our hope in them.

It's one of the most broken parts of humanity that we cannot fully experience the relationship with God for which we were created. We struggle to relate to God and each other in real community. We struggle to be known and heard. We struggle because we want to be cared for, but obsessive autonomy is a thorn in all our relationships. It's brokenness that creates a bit of the Priscilla and Elvis dynamic in all of us.

So, when I listen to this song, I not only hear lament or critique that a human being might make another human being their god but also lament that our relationships with God are so broken, our experience of faith is so difficult, that we are not sure how to relate to Jesus properly. The song not only reflects a misunderstanding of human relationships; it reflects a misunderstanding of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus did not become human just to make me feel personally better about my sins and give me someone to fill a hole in my heart or give me a best friend. Rather, Jesus became human to show us how to be human, how to relate the way we were created to relate.

It's a broken world, and Depeche Mode is not the only voice lamenting that brokenness. Our son, Nate, wrote a piece for the Pepperdine student newspaper at the opening of the year to welcome students back after the summer. He noted:

There is something about the air. The curvature of the rock. The impossible blue of the Pacific. It represents the dawn of so many things—notebooks rising to page one, faces reclaiming the plaza, new names, a new microwave oven, a speech, a dance, Malibu population 13,042. It is a welcome for some and a return for others. It is a place to tie the hammock and a meeting ground for friends. It looks the same as we left it. But that sameness is an illusion. Since the close of the old year, fathers of your classmates have died. Children in Palestine and Iraq saw the death of peace. Human beings committed suicide. Oceans rose. Governments tanked. Democracy bled in a summer-long binge of violence and illiberalism. Sickness spread. “Genocide” language circled like sprayed hornets above the ivory towers of international politics. A dead teen in Missouri confirmed the rigor mortis of American exceptionalism. A mother in Syria depleted her tears like ammunition as floods blasted Detroit. The world is not the same. It is dangerous, bloodied, blistered and tired. So beware of the pithy welcome parties that treat this place like an escape. The oasis within Pepperdine University is a mirage—this is headquarters. Do not allow geography to fool us into disengaging the world.<sup>4</sup>

4. Nate Barton, “Ready, Set,” *Graphic* (September 16, 2014), <http://pepperdine-graphic.com/ready-set/>.

Nate's warning to Pepperdine students is appropriate as we consider spiritual formation, relationship with God, and the reality of our broken world. It's not just privileged college students who have a tendency to escape the dangerous, bloodied, blistered, tired, and broken world. It's the way of our congregations. So, I want to talk about this strange connection between cultivation of our spiritual lives and engagement with a broken world.

But first, we need to acknowledge that all around us and in our churches, our fellow Christians are talking more about spiritual matters. Spiritual formation is of interest in youth groups, golden-year groups, and in children's education. Spirituality is emphasized in our seminaries and graduate schools where we send our ministers for training. As part of accreditation requirements, our schools offer structured, institutional spiritual formation opportunities. For example, as Rochester College students in the MRE program we have a spiritual director and develop a communal rule of life. We are meditating more, fasting and cleansing more, appreciating the saints more, collecting crosses more, exploring spirituality and the arts more, making spiritual pilgrimages more. And, by all indications, North American Christians are deeply interested in spirituality. And I believe it's a sincere interest.

But how much has this helped? Richard Foster opens his book *Celebration of Discipline* with these lines: "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people."<sup>5</sup> Have we heeded Richard Foster's warning? Are we less superficial? Are we deeper people than we were in 1978? We yell at our computers if they are slow. A recent study at UMass Amherst examined 6.7 million Internet users to see how long they were willing to wait for a video to load. It's two seconds. After five seconds, the abandonment rate is 25 percent. When you get to 10 seconds, half are gone. Amazon now offers same-day delivery because overnight delivery is just too long. No, I don't think we've heeded Richard Foster's warning about self-gratification. And it is connected to our spirituality.

A 2013 *New York Times* editorial acknowledges that spirituality has been utterly co-opted by a corporate mentality that is using spirituality, or rather its practices, for the sake of making people effective and efficient, less stressed-out, and better at concentration under pressure.<sup>6</sup> The book *Selling Spirituality* argues that capitalism has coopted spirituality more than the church has, turning it into an instrument to address our consumerist anxiety and commercial pressures, helping us more effectively live in and of this world.<sup>7</sup> James Wellman, chair of the Comparative Religions Department at University of Washington writes, "In my work on American megachurches, it has become ever more obvious that a part of the reason megachurches are expanding so rapidly is that their chief product is so clear and precise—if you trust Christ you will have eternal life, otherwise you're going to hell. . . . Just say you're sorry and then accept Jesus and you're home free."<sup>8</sup>

So, we have to wonder, is there a market for the spirituality of Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did *not* do for one of the least of these, you did *not* do for me. . . . Go away to eternal punishment" (vv. 45–46, italics added). Are people waiting in a long lines to buy the spirituality of Mary's song—"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1.52–53). Who is paying extra for same-day Amazon delivery of the Sermon on the Mount?

Who really wants to talk about cultivating a cross-shaped heart for a broken world? Jesus speaks plainly in Mark, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It's much easier to collect crosses and wear them bejeweled around our necks than to climb up on one. It's easier to talk about spiritual formation than it is to give heart, soul, mind, and strength over to the surgery of the Holy Spirit.

5. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 2002), 1.

6. Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster, "The Gospel According to 'Me,'" *New York Times* (June 29, 2013), <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/29/the-gospel-according-to-me/>.

7. Jeremy R. Carrette, *Selling Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2004).

8. James Wellman, "Selfish Spirituality, Selfish Religion," *Patheos* (July 3, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jameswellman/2013/07/selfish-spirituality-selfish-religion/>.

So, what are we going to do? I would like to emphasize six areas of cruciform spirituality gleaned from Michael Gorman that make a connection *between cultivation of our spiritual lives and engagement with a broken world*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cruciform spirituality gives up power.**

Sometimes we act as if we can choose to accept Jesus only because we need him as a personal Savior but postpone our obedience to him as Lord. Is this not a form of heresy? Cruciform spirituality pries our fingers free of scarcity and fear of death so that we fully embrace God's kind of power. We are not merely transformed by the blood of Jesus so we can be angelic in afterlife; no, rather the blood of Jesus transforms us so that we can live now.

Jesus demonstrated for us what it means for power to be conformed to the cross. On the cross, in the face of death, Jesus defiantly initiated a powerful act of love. And we are called to initiate powerful acts of love. Cruciform spirituality tells the story of the cross again and again in each of our lives when we give up power.

### **Cruciform spirituality is unpredictable.**

We often prefer to compartmentalize and routinize our lives separating our "spiritual" or "religious" beliefs and practices from our behavior: spirituality is for family life, not our jobs; our personal behavior, but not our politics. We relegate our spiritual lives to a morning devotional rather than the other 23 hours in a day. Once we compartmentalize our spirituality, we don't tend to reshape and constantly rethink our spiritual commitments. We lack imagination. Cruciform spirituality does not permit this. It requires a constant and creative imagination to discern what it means for the cross to be embodied in every dimension of our existence and in ever-new situations.

### **Cruciform spirituality has predictability.**

Cruciform spirituality does have some predictability—predictability is not all bad. You can predict some *always* and *nevers*: cruciform spirituality *never* includes revenge or hate or self-centeredness; it *always* demands loving sacrifice and ever-deepening spirituality.

These questions I asked myself about spiritual formation in the past—how often am I fasting? How consistent is my prayer life? Am I keeping a prayer journal? Those are good practices *if* they include cruciform imagination. They are not good practices if done for self-fulfillment and if they are so routinely predictable that the Spirit cannot cultivate imagination.

### **Cruciform spirituality is prophetic.**

And here's the truth of cruciform spirituality: People like your spirituality, praise your spirituality, if it's routine. Read your Bible through in a year. People will notice. Spend weekends on silent retreats. Have a spiritual director. People will like it. Those are good things, but they are not God's spirituality if they do not result in prophetic behavior like the Old Testament prophets. If your spirituality is cruciform, it should challenge the norm. We should be worried if our spirituality is always welcome and always receives the praise of people.

Cruciform spirituality creates a world of strange reversals in which wisdom is foolishness, in which the least become the greatest, in which strength is found in weakness, in which we are filled with emptiness. For example, in our divided world, we need imagination about how we may be people of peace in a pluralistic society. We need prophets who stand up to the fear-mongering and worship of security that is all too common. We need to befriend people of other religions. We need prophets who eat with unlikely dinner partners. We need prophets who recognize the Good Samaritans of our day.

9. Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 375–397.

### **Cruciform spirituality costs.**

Unimaginative spirituality doesn't cost anything, but imaginative, prophetic spirituality does. Only God can know precisely what form cruciform spirituality should take in our lives. Yet the story each believing community and each person tells is clear—it is a story that bears a credible similarity to the story of Jesus, and that inevitably costs. Try it this way: act toward your barista, the next time you order a coffee, in a way that bears resemblance to the story of Jesus. Or only use the amount of energy in your home and in your transportation that you believe bears resemblance to the story of Jesus. Or only live in a house the size that you think bears credible similarity to the story of Jesus. Your spirituality should tell a story in the way you act and live. And that is costly.

### **Cruciform spirituality is within the gravitational pull of the cross.**

In whatever way we can, let's make sure our conversations about spirituality is cruciform in nature; that is, it is ordered within the tremendous gravitational pull of the cross. As Neil Elliot notes, Paul's mission in life was to "order the lives of Christian congregations by pulling everything into the tremendous gravitational field of the cross."<sup>10</sup>

Sermons may be such conversations. Coffee shop talk may involve such conversations or even private moments of prayer and contemplation may involve such conversation. Just imagine what might happen if the hunger for spirituality in our world is fed by the *real* cross. Paul is a rich resource for how we might cultivate hunger for the cross. He hungered for it, lived it, wrote about it, and pastored others in it.

M. Gorman believes the purpose of Paul's letters is pastoral or spiritual in nature before it is theological. Accordingly, today we might speak of Paul's goal as spiritual formation; indeed Paul himself uses the metaphor of fetal development to describe his ongoing ministry with the Galatians.<sup>11</sup> Today, that kind of goal is known as spiritual formation. If so, spiritual formation is always on the tip of Paul's pen. In fact, he uses the metaphor of fetal development to describe his ongoing work to help the Galatians imagine cruciform spirituality: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (4.19).

In Philippians 2, when Paul addresses people who are facing trials, persecutions, and interpersonal conflicts, he gives them deeply practical, cruciform, spiritual advice. Listen to how Paul seeks to mold behavior, to affirm the cross, to alter patterns of living and experience. Listen to how everything is pulled into the gravitational field of the cross. This is cruciform spirituality. Listen to the words of Philippians 2.5–11 TNIV:

In your relationships with one another,  
have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a human being,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on the cross!  
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the father.

10. Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1994), 93.

11. Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 4.

Do you sense the gravitational pull of the cross? It is all there—all of history, all of the triune life of God, all of our communal experiences of relationship. The cross is at the center, but the life of the triune God is not marginalized.

The passage does not allow for a myopic experience. While it includes the individual, the passage does not allow for individualistic spirituality. It engages individuals (“In your relationships with one another”); every individual, every knee shall bow; and every individual and personal tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord.

The passage does not read the cross myopically—it is not about me and about my sins as the end-all of life with God. Dallas Willard described that myopic view of the cross as heresy and coined the term “vampire Christianity” to describe it. He writes, “One in effect says to Jesus, ‘I’d like a little of your blood, please. But I don’t care to be your student or have your character.’”<sup>12</sup> The point is that our lives must remain in the gravitational pull of the cross. Gorman writes, “The passage suggests that kenosis and crucifixion are intimately expressive of the *Missio Dei* in the world, because divine being and act are inseparable.”<sup>13</sup>

You could hire the best PR firm in the world, the ones who get the Super Bowl campaigns, and they cannot develop some corporate branding campaign for cruciform spirituality. It is simply very difficult to market because it is so demanding. The only way I’ve found the courage to try is through a personal relationship with Jesus. And that takes me back to Depeche Mode.

## Conclusion

When Johnny Cash was asked why he recorded Depeche Mode’s song in 2002, he said, “I heard that as a gospel song. And if you think of it as a gospel song, it works really well. . . . I just heard that a couple of people had recorded it, the writer wanted me to try it, and I did, and I loved it.”

When I listen to Johnny Cash’s voice I can hear the brokenness of his life and of my life and of all our lives. It’s a world where addiction often seems to be winning. It’s a world where innocent people are beheaded. It’s a world where children are neglected. It’s a world where the Ebola virus creates new categories of *us* and *them*. It’s a world where death-penalty laws apply to our gay brothers and sisters.

It’s a world where we long so much for a relationship with God that we will settle for making another human being a god for us. It’s a dangerous, bloodied, blistered, tired, and broken world where, personally, I long for a relationship with God.

Often we feel unknown and alone. And we hold onto this as truth: “Christ is determined by God himself as the place where God can be known” (2 Cor 4.6). We long for someone who cares, someone who’s there, and we remember that there is one who is “for us.” “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Rom 8.31–32).

Yes, we are sinful, and we need a forgiver, and we need a confessor. And God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom 5.8). We have been freed from sin and the freedom of the Spirit is the freedom to love, to become servants of one another.

I close with Paul’s thought in Galatians, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5.13–14).

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12. Willard, Dallas, *The Great Omission* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006). 14.

13. Gorman, Michael, “‘Although/Because He Was in the Form of God’: the Theological Significance of Paul’s Master Story (Phil 2:6–11),” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no 2 (Fall 2007), 147–169.