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## Sunday School Isn't Enough: Biblical Foundations for Adult Spiritual Formation

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# Sunday School Isn't Enough!

## Biblical Foundations for Adult Education



*By PAUL LEARNED*

I grew up in the shadow of Standard Oil's refinery on the island of Aruba, thirteen miles off the northern coast of Venezuela. That oil refinery was so huge! The immense size of the plant was related to its tremendous task. Daily it took the black-green crude oil off the shallow-draft lake tankers from the wells in Lake Maracaibo, Venezuela, and turned it into useful products—asphalt for roads, oil for lubricants, and gasoline for fuel. These products were then loaded onto oceangoing tankers bound for markets around the world. Everywhere I looked there were storage tanks, fractionating towers, condensers, catalytic cracking towers, smoke stacks, stills, separators, and piers. Connecting all these were pipes—miles and miles of pipes! This massive plant was necessary to make the transformation of oil from crude to product.

### **A Gargantuan Task**

Spiritual formation requires similar transformation. “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15–16).<sup>1</sup> A massive change is required to transform people into God's holiness!

Several passages vividly portray the vast gap between what people are and what they are meant to be:

From unclean, unholy, and unjust to washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Cor 6:9–11)

From conformity to transformation (Rom 12:2)

From the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of light (Col 1:12–13)

From death to life (Eph 2:1, 5)

From hostility to peace (Eph 2:15–16)

From foreigners and aliens to fellow citizens and members of God's household (Eph 2:19)

From slaves of sin to slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:13)

From under law to under grace (Rom 6:15)

From lost to found (Luke 15:32)

From foolishness, disobedience, deception, and enslavement to rebirth, renewal, justification, and hope (Titus 3:3, 5, 7)

From not a people to a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Pet 2:9, 10)

From a lowly slave to someone who makes the teaching of God appear attractive (Titus 2:10)

Spiritual formation must be a radical metamorphosis so that people can be remade in the holy character of their Creator. So drastic is the change that the apostle Paul calls it a change of self: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . . since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col 3:5, 9, 10).



The goal of spiritual formation of adults is transformation to holiness. At issue is whether our “refinery” is up to this challenging task! I worked with churches for twenty-five years trying to accomplish spiritual formation with excellent preaching services twice a week, Sunday school classes that cycled through the whole Bible, sacrificial giving, church gatherings that consumed up to six hours a week, bigger and better buildings, larger and better educated staffs, and more and more innovative programs. After all these efforts, I was frustrated that so many members of the churches with which I worked were uninvolved in Christian service, unengaged in a dynamic church life, unrelated to fellow Christians, underdeveloped spiritually, unchallenged with kingdom purposes, unexcited about being Christians, unsupported by their fellow Christians, unaccountable to their fellow Christians, and inexpressive of their Christian faith. As George Barnas’ studies have shown, most who claim to be Christians are not becoming holy as their God is holy.<sup>2</sup> All of my efforts had produced more exhaustion than spirituality!

### The Work of God

My conclusion is that our “refinery” will never be adequate for the task of spiritual formation of adults if we use only human resources. The key ingredient to spiritual formation is not using Jesus’ teaching methods, urging parents to teach their children (Deuteronomy 6), making biblical exhortations to holy living, learning large amounts of Bible content, regularly observing the Lord’s Supper, making Bible teaching relevant, using praise songs in worship, preaching without a pulpit, or projecting songs instead of using hymnbooks—as important as those may be.

Most searches for the biblical foundations of spiritual formation find great educational principles such as instruction in deliberate ways, teaching for personal response, engaging the student, starting with the familiar and building to the unknown, and addressing all learning styles. All good principles, these can be found in any book on education. But they are mere human efforts. And my Restoration/pioneer heritage causes me to emphasize these human efforts in spiritual formation. With John Locke’s view of the mind as a blank slate to be filled and the human will as supreme, I have too long attempted spiritual formation as mostly a matter of the mind, accomplished by the determination of the human will. This approach allowed me to see spirituality largely as keeping biblical

rules; I wrongly minimized the power of God, my human weaknesses (Rom 8:3), and the opposing power of Satan (1 John 4:4). Christian spiritual formation is not accomplished primarily through human endeavor. It is the work of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is a miracle! God transforms me; I don’t (John 1:12, 13; Eph 2:8–9; Titus 2:11–15; 3:3–7).

If I am to be serious about Christian spiritual formation, I must become serious about God’s present activity in the world, in the church, and in the born-again person. I need to focus less on the amount of water in the baptism and more on the fullness of the Spirit in conversion. I need to be less concerned about the amount of biblical content in the Sunday school and more concerned with the presence of the Holy Spirit in my person. I need to be less concerned about whether a person’s name is written in the church directory and more concerned with whether the Spirit is writing God’s law on his heart. I need to be less concerned about attending church services and more intent on living in a Spirit-filled, God-empowered community of faith. I need to be less concerned about what the Bible teaches about the first sin and more concerned with having the second incarnation. I need to be just as concerned with the supportive context of my teaching and learning as I am with correct doctrinal content. I need to be less concerned about being empty of intoxicants and more concerned with being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18).

God’s way of transforming people spiritually is twofold. At the point of conversion, God washes their sins away, transferring their state from lost to saved. This is justification, an immediate act, through the atoning death of Jesus Christ to remove sins (Rom 8:3; Heb 2:14–17). God now counts them righteous. At the point of conversion, God also gives Christians the indwelling Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32; 1 Cor 6:19) to empower them to grow in righteousness and become more and more like the righteousness of God already assigned to them through justification (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16–18, 24–26). Unlike the immediate justification through Christ (Rom 5:1; 8:1), this sanctification by the Spirit is a lifelong process (2 Cor 4:16).

### The Role of the Holy Spirit

God’s Spirit was present first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. When the people sinned, God removed his presence from the temple, as depicted in Ezek 8:1–11:25. But God promised to put his Spirit directly in the



people one day (Ezek 37:14). Made possible by the incarnation of Christ, this incarnation of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled when the Spirit indwells people as the church, God's new and better temple (1 Cor 3:16). God promised to put his Spirit into people to transform them, to "move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezek 36:27). In Rom 8:4 we find the fulfillment: "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."

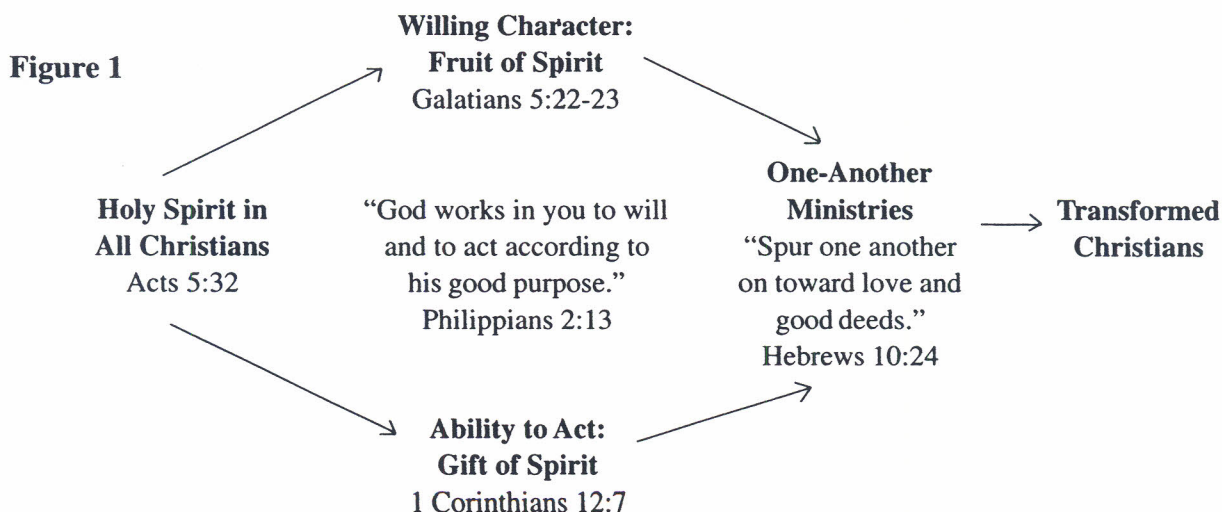
Now God works through his indwelling Spirit in two ways to transform people to be like him: "for it is God who works in you to *will* and to *act* according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13). God uses his Spirit to change two different aspects of people. First, he changes their *character* by empowering them to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). With renewed character, they desire to do the good things of God (Eph 2:10; Titus 2:14). Second, he changes their *ability* to do good by giving them the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:27-28). With transformed character and transformed ability, Christians can work to further transform each other by serving each other through the one-another ministries of the New Testament, to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24). The diagram below shows how God uses the Holy Spirit in two steps to transform Christians. First, God's Spirit changes Christians' wills and abilities. Second, these empowered Christians use their new wills and abilities to mutually transform each other through the one-another ministries in their life together in the church. (Figure 1).

These are some of the one-another ministries by which Christians use the Spirit's power to transform each other:

- Loving one another (Rom 13:8; 1 John 3:11; 4:7, 11; John 13:34)
- Edifying one another (Rom 14:19, KJV)
- Accepting one another (Rom 15:1)
- Instructing one another (Rom 15:14)
- Greeting one another (Rom 16:16)
- Being devoted to one another (Rom 12:10)
- Carrying each other's burdens (Gal 6:2)
- Serving one another (Gal 5:13)
- Bearing with one another (Eph 4:2)
- Being kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
- Being compassionate to one another (Eph 4:32)
- Forgiving each other (Eph 4:32)
- Submitting to one another (Eph 5:21; Col 3:13)
- Teaching one another (Col 3:16)
- Admonishing one another (Col 3:16)
- Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19)
- Encouraging each other (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:25)
- Confessing sins to each other (Jas 5:16)
- Praying for each other (Jas 5:16)
- Clothing themselves with humility toward one another (1 Pet 5:5)

### The Church as Intimate Community

It is no accident that God created the church as an intimate community of faith for spiritual transformation.





The doctrine of the Trinity shows that God is ultimately not individual but communal: “Let us make man in our image . . .” (Gen 1:26). Because community is integral to the Godhead, the divine concern for people is “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). And so when God spiritually transforms people, he does so by placing them together in the church (Acts 2:47). For the apostle Paul, church as community of faith is really the gospel in corporate form. Church as intimate community where the Spirit miraculously transforms people has the characteristics described below.

*Basis of Intimacy: Reconciliation.* The Spirit baptizes all kinds of people into one Body, the diverse many becoming one (1 Cor 12:13). This reconciliation into one community happens when Christ breaks down dividing walls of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, and men and women (Eph 2:14, 19). So close is this intimate, reconciled community that Paul names more contemporary Christians (as in Romans 16) than Old Testament worthies in his letters. In fact, the closeness of the faith community in which the Spirit transforms people required the New Testament writers to develop a whole vocabulary of Greek words beginning with *sun* ‘together with’. These words are unique to the New Testament and are not found in classical Greek:

Prisoner with (Col 4:10)  
 Reclining at table with (Luke 14:10)  
 Bearing with (Rom 8:26)  
 Fit together (Eph 4:16)  
 Reigning together (2 Tim 2:12)  
 Fellow traveler (2 Cor 8:19)  
 Chosen together with (1 Pet 5:13)  
 Made alive with (Eph 2:5)  
 Bear evil treatment along with (Heb 11:25)  
 Endure adversity with (2 Tim 2:3)  
 Agree with (2 Cor 6:16)  
 Co-inheritor (Rom 8:17)  
 Fellow imitator of Christ (Phil 3:17)  
 Be of one mind with (Phil 2:2)

*Bond of Intimacy: Love.* Jesus’ followers were closer to him than servants; they were his beloved friends (John 15:12–17). This self-giving love that binds diverse Christians into intimate community is the first and second commandment (Matt 22:37–39); the distinctive mark of a disciple (John 13:35); the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23); the fruit that gives validity to all use of spiritual gifts (1

Cor 13:1); the way to tell if a person loves God (1 John 4:20); what God has poured out into Christians’ hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Rom 5:5); the over-clothing that binds each Christian’s virtuous clothes together in perfect unity (Col 3:12–14). This love has all kinds of practical consequences in the Christian community.

It is this [love] that should propel people to welcome one another despite their differences (Rom 14:1–15:4), to believe and hope the best for others even when we are included to the contrary (1 Cor 13:7), to carry each other’s burdens even as Christ carried ours (Gal 6:2), to give generously to those who are in need (2 Cor 8:2–3), to feed and clothe those who lack proper sustenance (James 2:8–17), to visit those who are in serious need (James 1:27), and to reconcile those who are at odds with one another (Phil 4:2–3).<sup>3</sup>

*Model of Intimacy: Family.* Nowhere in the Old Testament is Israel called God’s family. But Jesus says that those who do his Father’s will are his family (Matt 12:50). Paul’s main metaphor for the church is family. When Paul describes his ministry among the Thessalonians, his words are saturated with family: motherly gentleness and care, sharing of lives, becoming dear to each other, brotherly relations, fatherly encouragement, comfort, and urging (1 Thess 2:7–12). Within the closeness of family, examples are accessible and powerful. What better way to develop the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) than to see it in those close to us in Christian community (John 13:1–17; 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Thess 3:7–9).

*Place of Intimacy: Homes.* The church is most often described in the New Testament as family; this intimate nature of the fellowship was encouraged by meeting in homes. The basic unit of early church life was “the church in the house” (Acts 2:46; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2), meeting weekly. Ninety percent of the population at that time lived in the cramped quarters of high-rise apartments, limiting each group to less than fifteen, including children. Less frequently, the “whole church” gathered in one place when several house churches in a locale came together (Rom 16:23), probably in the center atrium of the Roman-style villas, homes of the wealthy 10 percent of the population. Because of the size of these houses, the group was limited to forty or less.<sup>4</sup> In these small meetings, the Christians had a ready-made intimacy



## The New Testament foundation for adult spiritual formation is life together within the Holy Spirit-empowered community of faith.



laboratory in which they could hone and develop the relational skills that were the fruit of the Holy Spirit in them (Gal 5:22–23). They could practice the reality of their reconciliation with other people.

*Experience of Intimacy: The Lord's Supper.* The coming messianic kingdom was associated with a feast (Luke 13:29; Isa 25:6; Matt 8:11; 25:1–10; Rev 19:9), and at the Last Supper, Jesus promised to feast with his people again in his Father's kingdom (Matt 26:29; Luke 22:29–30). When the kingdom came, how fitting that each church would gather weekly to share a full meal, the "Lord's Supper" (1 Cor 11:20), celebrating by an experience of fellowship the reconciliation made possible by Christ's death and resurrection. In such an intimate "love feast" (Jude 12; 2 Pet 2:13), these reconciled Christians would demonstrate their acceptance of each other and their unity with each other by eating together. Here they recognized each other as Christ's body (1 Cor 11:29) and participated with each other in the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor 10:16). With such close fellowship in a joint meal among slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, no wonder the early struggles of the church involved food (Acts 11:3; 15:20, 29; Rom 14:2, 6, 15, 17, 20–21; 1 Cor 8:1–13; 10:14–22; Gal 2:11–14).<sup>5</sup>

*Purpose of Intimacy: Edification.* The primary reason for all that happened in these intimate gatherings was mutual edification, not preaching, missions, evangelism, or Bible study. Thus Paul told the Corinthians that in these meetings they were to "try to excel in gifts that build up the church" (1 Cor 14:12). "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be

done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Cor 14:26). In a beautiful way, serving other Christians in whom the Lord lives is serving and worshipping the Lord (Matt 25:40; Heb 13:15–16).

*Expression of Intimacy: Participation.* In these small, bonded groups, there was to be ample opportunity for participation by all. No matter his gift, every Christian was to use it for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). "[E]veryone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. . . . For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged" (1 Cor 14:26, 31). Everyone was allowed to participate because everyone was empowered to help the community of faith with his or her Holy Spirit gift (1 Cor 12:21–26).

### The Task of the Church Today: Build Community!

In the beginning, the church was a fellowship of men and women centered on the living Christ. When the church moved to Greece, it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved to the rest of Europe, where it became a culture. And finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

The New Testament foundation for adult spiritual formation is life together within the Holy Spirit-empowered community of faith. The contemporary church must intentionally build community as the context for God's miracle of spiritual transformation. Here are some possible ways:

1. Expand the means of spiritual formation beyond the teaching/preaching of God's word to supportive relationships in which there is exemplary living, mutual acceptance, mutual service, joint ministry, prayer for each other, and confession/forgiving of each other's sins.
2. De-emphasize large meetings and gather more in small groups.
3. Use the homes of members for these small groups, to build a warm and personal atmosphere.
4. Stress relationship building in the gatherings, not worship or Bible study. Catholicism has followed the Old Testament and Hellenistic religions, centering community on a rite. Protestantism has followed Jewish Pharisaism of the synagogue, centering community on a code, a book—the Bible. Early Christians centered community on a blood-bought, Spirit-indwelled fellowship, a supportive network



of reconciled relationships. The focal point of reference was neither a book nor a rite, but a set of relationships. God communicated himself to them not primarily through the written word and tradition, or mystical experience and cultic activity, but through one another.<sup>7</sup>

5. Stress participation in the gatherings, whether large or small. Avoid the performers/spectators syndrome. In large meetings, have testimonials, interviews, and sharing. Share in twos and threes.
6. Allow time and interaction in every gathering for Christians to serve each other with the one-another ministries. Do this with storytelling, affirmations, confessions, and the like.
7. Expect each member to be bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Provide opportunity for each member's gifts of the Spirit to be used in the gatherings.
8. Use adult curricula that are intersectional and relational. An abundance of this type of adult material is now available.
9. Minimize the time required in gatherings for the presentation of content by using visuals and handouts. This allows more interaction time for Christians to use their gifts to help each other respond with their lives to the word from the Lord.
10. Celebrate the Lord's Supper as a meal. Don't let this experience of community be minimized! The Lord's Supper can be done in the fellowship area or, better, in individual homes.
11. Be intergenerational with some of the gatherings so that children will see adult models of Christian maturity in addition to their parents. Parents, too, will benefit by seeing the parenting skills of other adults as they interact with their children.
12. Minimize closed-door leadership meetings by allowing each small group to have representation in the decision-making body. This can be accomplished through the elders' discipling of the small-group leaders.
13. Build a church lifestyle that enables informal as well as formal learning, ensuring that there is room in the schedule for the Holy Spirit to work fully to transform.

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bers of Community Church of Christ in Cordoba, Tennessee, an innovative fellowship exploring ways to do spiritual formation through divinely empowered community.

### Ten Helpful Resources

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1990), 112–16.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," *Christian Education Journal* 13, no. 3 (19 ): 26.

<sup>4</sup> John McRay, "House Churches and the Lord's Supper," *Leaven* 3, no. 3 (1995): 14.

<sup>5</sup> David Lertis Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil," *Leaven* 3, no. 3 (1995): 8–12.

<sup>6</sup> E. Glenn Wagner, *The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1995), 56, quoting Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the United States Senate.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 111.