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THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY:
ELECTIVE STRESS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Religion and Philosophy Division
Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Dusty Lee Breeding

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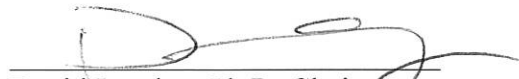
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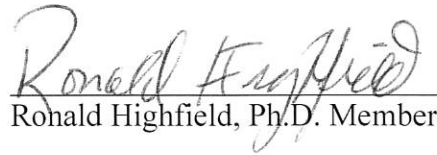
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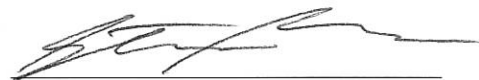
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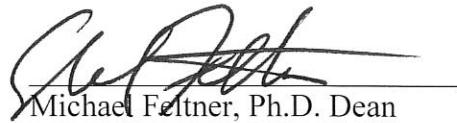
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THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY: ELECTIVE STRESS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

by

Dusty Lee Breeding

February 15, 2017

Dr. Dave Lemley, Chairperson

ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s, research has developed around the concept of posttraumatic growth (PTG). While PTG is not a new phenomenon, it is only within the past thirty years that scholars have intentionally researched the growth that arises out of trauma and analyzed possible ways to foster this growth among trauma survivors. One component of PTG is spiritual growth. Research indicates that one experiencing trauma may also grow in their spiritual development. Is it possible, then, to grow from non-traumatic yet challenging experiences? This thesis suggests it is possible for one to experience spiritual growth by electively participating in events or activities that induce stress. This will be accomplished by integrating psychology and religion to establish elective stress as a spiritual discipline.

CHAPTER 1

The Obstacle Is the Way

“For the mind adapts and converts everything that impedes its activities into something that advances its purpose, and a hindrance to its action becomes an aid, and an obstacle on its path helps it on its way.”¹ These words, penned by Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, suggest that the obstacles encountered on the journey of life may in fact be tools for progress. Life as a journey is a well-known analogy, but troublesome times are rarely portrayed as beneficial for the trip. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way,” yet the journey of following Jesus is filled with hardship, challenges, and discomfort.² Though these are often considered setbacks, is it possible that for Christians seeking to grow more into the image of Christ, the obstacle is the way?

The concept of embracing difficulties is alive and well in the fitness industry. Since 2010, two million people have crawled through mud, under barbed wire fences, and run through electric shock wires; not in a torture camp but as part of a business called the Tough Mudder. Averaging between ten thousand and fifteen thousand participants per event, this military-style obstacle course pushes runners to their physical and mental limits.³ Tough Mudder is not alone. Obstacle-course racing is the “fastest growing sport in history” with millions of competitors taking on races like the Tough Mudder, Spartan

¹ Marcus Aurelius, Robin Hard, and Christopher Gill, *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41-42.

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version*.

³ “Tough Mudder,” accessed September 18, 2016, <https://toughmudder.com/press-room>.

Beast, or Spartan Death Race.⁴ In addition to these races, other companies have sprung up offering physical and mental challenges. SEALFIT and GoRuck are two organizations that offer military-inspired events catered to average civilians. On any given weekend in the United States groups of fifteen to thirty men and women can be found carrying eighty-pound sandbags, ropes, stretchers, stones, and a US flag through major cities as they complete a GoRuck challenge. This challenge begins at 9:00 p.m. and ends the following day around 9:00 a.m., with participants enduring sleep deprivation, hydro burpees in the ocean, and a fifteen- to eighteen-mile march carrying a backpack filled with four bricks, all in the name of fulfilling the company's mission of "building better Americans."⁵ Additionally, tens of thousands of people around the world participate in marathons, half marathons, and boot camp fitness programs. Some even attempt grueling feats of physical stress and endurance, such as climbing Mt. Everest.

Can Christians learn something from these physical fitness trends? Could some of these programs provide insight into a path for increasing spiritual fitness? In the process of pushing one's limit, can one grow more into the image of Christ? Is it possible that for the path to deeper faith, the obstacle is the way? This thesis will explore these questions in the following chapters as it establishes a practical theology for spiritual growth utilizing elective stress as a spiritual discipline to be practiced among the Christian community.

⁴ Rachel Bachman, "Obstacle Racing Finds Itself Stuck in the Mud," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified May 11, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obstacle-racing-findsitself-stuck-in-the-mud-1463007512>.

⁵ "GoRuck," last modified September 18, 2016, www.goruck.com.

Essential Questions

This thesis expands the existing understanding of spiritual disciplines in the Protestant context to incorporate forms of elective stress within the definition of a spiritual discipline. After examining various aspects of the topic, in chapter six, this thesis will draw upon all those discussions to present the scenario of a ministry leader preparing participants for a backpacking trip as an example for how elective stress can be a spiritual discipline. Prior to demonstrating this chapters one through five will establish the necessary foundation for this practice by examining some critical questions:

What is elective stress?

The first question to explore is “what is elective stress?” This thesis uses an original term, *elective stress*, to describe the practice of imposing mild forms of challenge or stress on one’s own life. Elective stress is *the voluntary participation in an event or activity that is generally outside the range one’s self-efficacy*. Self-efficacy is defined as “an individual’s subjective perception of his or her capability to perform in a given setting or to attain desired results.”⁶ Chapter two explores this definition and conveys how psychologists and educators have utilized forms of elective stress as means to psychological growth and learning. After an understanding of elective stress is established, later chapters will explore how elective stress can be implemented as a new spiritual discipline.

⁶ *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “Self-efficacy,” edited by Gary R. VandenBos, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2015, 954.
<http://pepperdine.eblib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=3115092>. April 04, 2017.

Is there precedent for elective stress within Christianity?

Chapter three will explore the question: “is there precedent for elective stress within Christianity?” The Christian community is no stranger to growth in the midst of difficulty. The ascetic and monastic movements throughout Christian history have embraced various forms of pushing the body and mind through fasting, vows of celibacy, and seclusion in monastic communities with the goal of becoming more like Christ. While these examples are more commonly associated with the Catholic and Orthodox churches, stress and challenge are not uncommon to Protestants.

The movements embracing fasting, vows of celibacy, and monastic communities are rooted in ascetical theology, which deals with the practice of virtue and the means of attaining holiness. Asceticism has been a component of the church throughout its history. *Askeo*, a Greek word in the New Testament that provides the root for the English word “asceticism,” means *exercise* or *training* and was used in the context of exercise for athletic events. Over time, this word came to be used by Christians to describe a practice with intentions of forming a connection with God: “Ascetics is that branch of theological study which is concerned with man’s way to perfection, and ultimately to union with God.”⁷ Elective stress has a natural connection to the ascetic use of structured physical challenge for spiritual growth. Chapter three will explore a history of Christian asceticism, which will later inform how this tradition offers models and warnings for elective stress as a spiritual discipline.

⁷ J.A. Ziesler, *Christian Asceticism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1974), 6.

What is spiritual growth and how does it occur?

In order to examine the possibility of elective stress as a tool for spiritual growth, it is necessary to define spiritual growth and understand how growth occurs, leading to the next major questions explored in this thesis: “what is spiritual growth, and how does it occur?” Chapter four offers a description of the process of spiritual formation and of the spiritual disciplines that serve it. The meaning and purpose of spiritual disciplines will be addressed, recognizing the interplay of self, Spirit, and community. Spiritual disciplines lead to spiritual growth, which is taking on the characteristics of Christ. These characteristics will be explored in greater detail in relationship to the fruit of the Spirit.

How is spiritual growth measured?

While it is difficult to measure the extent to which an individual has taken on the characteristics of Christ, there is research to support the existence of various stages of faith which will be examined in chapter five. One resource discussed in that chapter is James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*. Fowler’s work categorizes faith from Stage 1, when a child is powerfully influenced by the visible faith of adults who are in close relationship with the child, all the way to Stage 6, where an individual is “spending and being spent for the transformation of present reality in the direction of a transcendent actuality.”⁸ For elective stress to be useful as a spiritual discipline, it must be relevant to this transforming work and evidence the result of growth.

⁸ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 200.

A Model for Practicing Elective Stress as a Spiritual Discipline

The examination of the critical questions listed above will provide a foundation for the concepts of spiritual discipline, asceticism, and a basic understanding of psychology's important role in the process. Yet synthesis between all of these components is necessary. Chapter six will draw together these concepts and establish a model for practicing elective stress as a spiritual discipline. This final chapter will support the thesis statement, describing how choosing to do something beyond one's self-efficacy could lead to spiritual growth and providing a practical structure for implementing elective stress as a spiritual discipline.

Summary

In summary, this thesis seeks to bridge a gap within current scholarly literature and aims to contribute to general knowledge about stress and spiritual formation by synthesizing concepts in psychology and theology to establish a practical method for utilizing elective stress for spiritual growth.

There is minimal academic work exploring how one can embrace challenge for spiritual growth, and these studies contribute to the discussion. Exercise physiologist Tracey Greenwood and theologian Teresa Delgado, cited in chapter four, provide one voice in this area and suggest that physical fitness with the right intention can be a spiritual discipline. Mike Austen offers one academic work to the conversation, suggesting sports can provide "a context for and be exercises in Christian spiritual

formation.”⁹ Beyond this, little exists to suggest that participating in elective stress, as defined in chapter two, can lead to spiritual growth.

To consider elective stress as a spiritual discipline requires an interdisciplinary approach to the relationship of stress and spiritual growth. Significant psychological research has been conducted in the area of posttraumatic growth, and chapter two will examine the works of preeminent researchers in the field of posttraumatic growth: Richard Tedeschi, Crystal Park, and Lawrence Calhoun. From a theological perspective, the Christian community has an established history of spiritual disciplines and asceticism, with much literature describing how these practices support spiritual growth. James Fowler offers a general introduction to the possibility of spiritual growth as a process. The apostle Paul, Ignatius of Loyola, and Brother Lawrence provide a theological and historical foundation for healthy ascetic practice. Authors on spiritual theology including Joseph Driskill, Dallas Willard, and Gordon Smith provide explanations of Christian spiritual formation and the roll of spiritual disciplines in Christian maturity.

⁹ Mike Austen, “Sports as Exercises in Spiritual Formation,” *Journal for Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3.1 (2010), 66.

CHAPTER 2

Defining Elective Stress and Identifying Its Roots

The term *elective stress* is unique to this thesis and is here defined as *voluntary participation in an event or activity that is generally outside the range one's self-efficacy*. This chapter unpacks that definition by establishing elective stress as a concept rooted in the field of psychology, specifically inspired by research in posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth. It will address a brief history of posttraumatic stress, introduce the concept of posttraumatic growth, address how posttraumatic growth is measured, offer descriptions of therapeutic models to encourage posttraumatic growth, and reveal how the US Army is attempting to facilitate this growth prior to trauma. The chapter will also introduce disfluency and positive reappraisal, which are currently used in psychology research, as being related to elective stress. These elements establish the foundation for elective stress as a means of growth and subsequent chapters will address how elective stress can be practiced as a spiritual discipline.

Posttraumatic stress

To understand elective stress, it is necessary to briefly examine the history and current state of academic research related to posttraumatic stress. Posttraumatic stress disorder has existed for many hundreds of years although it was first defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980.¹⁰ A series of events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as the American Civil War and a growing number of accidents related to the Industrial Revolution, led to an explosion of

¹⁰ Charles R. Figley, *Trauma and Its Wake* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 5.

literature relating to posttraumatic disorders.¹¹ The term “nervous shock” developed in the late 1800s to describe what is now called posttraumatic stress.¹² “Shell shock” and “survivor syndrome” have also been used historically in attempts to describe the syndrome. In 1980, the American Psychology Association officially defined posttraumatic stress as “the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of human experience.”¹³

Posttraumatic growth

As researchers continued to develop their understanding of posttraumatic stress, they developed new areas of study related to a concept that has been around for thousands of years. Throughout history there are many accounts of growth in the midst of trauma. One example is the Egyptian myth of the phoenix, which flies over the Arabian desert, falls to the ground, is consumed by flames, and rises again from its ashes. In Native American culture, the sweat lodge provides a process of ritual cleansing of the mind, body, and spirit through an increase in blood flow, heart rate, and cardiac output.¹⁴ Even the story of Christ and the crucifixion reflect the idea of growth in the face of trauma as Christ’s sacrifice on the cross offers the entire world the hope of forgiveness

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Michael Tlanusta Garrett et al., “Crying for a Vision: The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony as Therapeutic Intervention,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 89.3 (2011), 319.

for sins and eternal life.¹⁵ The concept of positive outcomes in the aftermath of trauma is not new.

Yet only in recent years have growth and trauma been studied from an academic perspective. A new field within posttraumatic stress research, called posttraumatic growth, originated in the 1980s. Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as the “positive psychological changes that may emerge following exposure to traumatic circumstances.”¹⁶ Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Cara Blevins write that traumatic experiences are “events that challenge an individual’s previous assumptive worldviews and conceptions of predictability.”¹⁷ These traumatic experiences come in many forms: physical illness, bereavement, divorce, and dramatic events such as those that occur in natural disasters and war.¹⁸

Since the 1980s, research on PTG has grown in the field of positive psychology, which is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.¹⁹ Psychologists Dr. Richard G. Tedeschi, Dr. Crystal Park, and Dr. Lawrence Calhoun wrote a seminal book in this field in 1998 titled, *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis*. Though posttraumatic growth has always played a role in human development, Tedeschi,

¹⁵ Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park, and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* (Erlbaum: Mahwah, 1998), 4.

¹⁶ Richard G. Tedeschi and Cara L. Blevins, “From Mindfulness to Meaning: Implications for the Theory of Posttraumatic Growth,” *Psychological Inquiry* 26 (2015), 373.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁸ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 99.

¹⁹ Shelly L. Gable and Jonathan Haidt. “What (and why) is positive psychology?” *Review of General Psychology* 9:2 (2005), 103.

Park, and Calhoun introduced it as a concept to the academic world as a term for the benefits that arise from trauma. They suggest posttraumatic growth as a descriptor because it “makes clear that persons experiencing this phenomenon have developed beyond their previous level of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness, that is, they have grown.”²⁰

There are many contemporary examples of posttraumatic growth. Divorce is one example of an often-painful life crisis that often leads to positive life change. One study reflected that more than 40% of women show long-term improvements in psychological functioning ten years after their divorce.²¹ Another study indicated that separated women demonstrate more positive changes than married women, including increased independence, self-confidence, and control over their lives.²²

Traumatic experiences during natural disasters can also result in PTG, according to studies that have found successful adaptations and positive outcomes following a natural disaster. One particular study examined the experiences of school-age children in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Parents reported positive changes in their children’s concern for others and insight into basic needs of food and shelter.²³

Wartime trauma can also increase the opportunities for PTG. In one study conducted among aviators who were shot down, imprisoned, and tortured by the North Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War, 61.7% indicated that they ultimately

²⁰ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 11.

²¹ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 104.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 105.

benefitted psychologically from their ordeal. The research suggested favorable changes in the aviators' personalities, self-confidence, and the ability to appreciate the most important parts of life.²⁴ The research concluded that "a substantial subgroup of POWs perceive their war-imprisonment experience as subjectively beneficial."²⁵ Other research indicates that 70.1% of male Vietnam veterans regarded their experience as mainly positive.²⁶ Researchers discovered that two-thirds of the veterans studied scored at least moderate growth, and more than one-third reported a great or very great degree of posttraumatic growth as a result of their captivity during the Vietnam War.²⁷ Additional research on more recent war veterans demonstrated similar findings regarding posttraumatic growth.²⁸

It is not disputed that psychosocial stressors such as those listed here can have a negative impact on an individual's well-being. Yet these studies reflect that psychologists are only recently beginning to measure evidence of the positive outcomes of undergoing stress and trauma.²⁹ This growth is measured using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory.

Measuring posttraumatic growth

To assess PTG, psychologists assess five different components using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (see Figure 3 and 4 in Appendix) which gauges growth

²⁴ Richard G. Tedeschi and Richard J. McNally, "Can We Facilitate Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans?" *American Psychologist* 66.1 (2011), 20.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 43.

in relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, new possibilities, and appreciation of life.³⁰ Research specifically indicates that PTG can involve growth in existential, spiritual, and religious areas.³¹ While PTG typically involves truly traumatic events, psychologists suggest that, in principle, any life crisis can spark posttraumatic growth.³² Research also indicates that posttraumatic growth takes time, usually occurring two to four months following an event.³³

Cultivating posttraumatic growth in the aftermath of trauma

Psychologists have determined that several variables can increase the possibility of posttraumatic growth. These variables include:

- cognitive processing,
- engagement or rumination,
- disclosure of concerns surrounding traumatic events,
- the reactions of others to self-disclosures,
- the sociocultural context of the trauma and attempts to process the trauma,
- the personal dispositions of survivors and their degree of resilience, and
- the degree to which events permit or suppress these processes.³⁴

Some of these variables can be analyzed through practices adopted in the aftermath of trauma. The following practices have been shown to be effective in facilitating growth

³⁰ Tedeschi and Blevins, 375.

³¹ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 218.

³² Ibid., 101.

³³ Ibid., 230.

³⁴ Tedeschi and McNally, 19.

and these concepts will be integrated into the model for elective stress explained in chapter six.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most extensively researched forms of psychotherapy. According to the American Psychological Association, Cognitive Behavior Modification (another term for CBT) is a “therapeutic approach that combines the cognitive emphasis on the role of thoughts and attitudes influencing motivations and response with the behavioral emphasis on changing performance through modification of reinforcement contingencies.”³⁵ There are five central assumptions to the cognitive-behavioral perspective:

1. Individuals are active processors of information and not passive reactors.
2. Thoughts can elicit and influence mood, affect physiological processes, have social consequences, and serve as an impetus for behavior; conversely, mood, physiology, environmental factors and behavior can influence the nature and content of thought processes.
3. Behavior is reciprocally determined by both the individual and environmental factors.
4. Individuals can learn more adaptive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

³⁵ Richard J. Gerrig and Philip G. Zimbardo, “Glossary of Psychological Terms,” *American Psychological Association*, accessed February 18, 2017, <http://www.apa.org/research/action/glossary.aspx?tab=3>.

5. Individuals should be active collaborative agents in changing their maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.³⁶

CBT serves as a therapeutic technique that identifies and changes negative or dysfunctional self-talk as a way of altering unwanted behaviors and responses. This adaptive process correlates to theological assumptions about transformation through spiritual disciplines of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating to one's environment.

Positive Reappraisal and Mindfulness

Mindfulness and positive reappraisal are two examples of CBT. Positive reappraisal, also called reflective rumination, is the adaptive process by which stressful events are reconstrued as benign, valuable, or beneficial.³⁷ Almost everyone who experiences a traumatic event has an extreme emotional reaction in an effort to control the emotions that follow, pushing the person to disengage from the beliefs that no longer make sense in view of the trauma.³⁸ For growth to occur, it is necessary to fill this gap. Reflective rumination is one tool to process this new reality. It is crucial to the development of meaning in the midst of trauma.³⁹

Another form of positive reappraisal occurs in response to new information. Garland explains the human body's typical response to a stressor or stimulus: "When a given stimulus is initially appraised as being challenging, harmful, or threatening, an

³⁶ Dennis C. Turk and Akiko Okifuji, "A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach to Pain Management," in *Handbook of Pain Management: A Clinical Companion to Wall and Melzack's Textbook of Pain*, eds. Ronald Melzack and Patrick D. Wall (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 2010), 534.

³⁷ Eric Garland, "The Role of Mindfulness in Positive Reappraisal," *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 5.1 (2009), 37.

³⁸ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 228.

³⁹ Tedeschi and Blevins, 373.

activation of physiological systems involved in the stress response co-occurs with a subjective experience of distress.”⁴⁰ On a physiological level, a stimulation of the hypothalamic pituitary-adrenal axis leads to elevated secretion of cortisol, which is the body’s built-in first response to a stressor. The second response, the appraisal, allows an individual to analyze the stressor through personal resources, determining the potential harm based on coping mechanisms.⁴¹

For example, if a person walking through a dark alley at night hears a dog growl, the body’s first response is hypothalamic pituitary-adrenal axis stimulation followed by a release of cortisol. If the person then sees that the growling dog is securely detained behind a fence, he or she reappraises the situation based on previous knowledge and belief that fences restrain dogs and continues to walk down the alley unafraid. Therefore, “a stimulus that was originally appraised as threatening may be reinterpreted as benign.”⁴²

Positive reappraisals are deliberate ruminations rooted in welcomed, intentional thoughts to make sense of an event. These differ from intrusive ruminations, which are unwanted thoughts that appear in one’s mind: “deliberate rumination is an effortful strategy enacted with the intention of conceptualizing highly stressful circumstances in such a way that meaning or growth become potential outcomes.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Garland, 38.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tedeschi and Blevins, 374.

Research indicates that deliberate ruminations impact how an event is processed. While intrusive ruminations are associated with distress and a failure to cope, deliberate ruminations are positively associated with posttraumatic growth.⁴⁴ This mindful attention to the cognitive aftermath of traumatic experience offers the opportunity to step back from the experience, providing space for perspective taking.⁴⁵ It is likely that the process of mindfulness and reappraisal, if practiced frequently, plays a key role in cultivating posttraumatic growth.⁴⁶

Another term for deliberate rumination is mindfulness: “Mindfulness is an innate psychological function characterized by attention to the present experience and shifting cognition to consider alternative appraisals of a situation.”⁴⁷ Research indicates that this is a trainable skill and can potentially enhance positive reappraisal in stress.⁴⁸ It can be utilized in various forms, including paying attention to the sensations throughout the body by conducting body scans, yoga, intentional forward movement, or walking meditation.⁴⁹ These activities are mindfulness-based stress reduction tools that enhance one’s awareness of particular emotional experiences and allow more space for adaptive practices rather than maladaptive responses, such as suppression or intrusive

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Holly A. Gerzina and Erik J. Porfeli, “Mindfulness as a Predictor of Positive Reappraisal and Burnout in Standardized Patients,” *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 24.4 (2012), 310.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth St. Claire, “Bringing Mindfulness and Brother Lawrence Together: Clinical Implications for the Modern Christian” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016), 35.

rumination.⁵⁰

Mindfulness allows individuals to practice direct engagement with their thoughts and feelings while observing the higher order functions of awareness and consciousness from a nonjudgmental and metacognitive perspective. Essentially, by consistently and mindfully attending to the thoughts or feelings induced by traumatic exposure, individuals engage in an iterative process whereby they are able to continually expose themselves to provocative sensations in a way that decreases the reaction intensity with time. Mindful attention to the cognitive, emotional, and interoceptive aftermath of traumatic experience allows one the opportunity, even if just for a moment, to step back and decenter from the experience, thus providing space for perspective taking and potential reappraisal processes.⁵¹

The positive reappraisal cycle, and the role of mindfulness in it, are depicted in Eric Garland's mindful coping model:

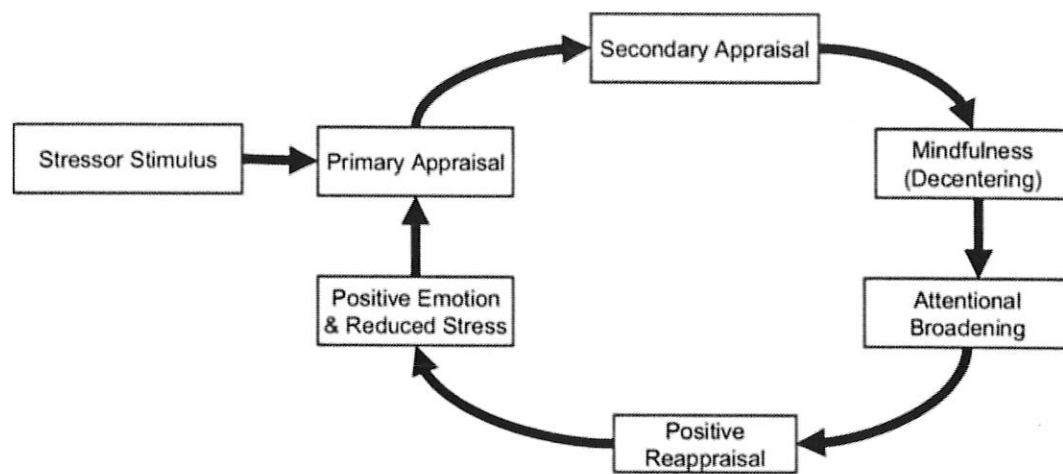


Figure 1. Mindful coping model.⁵²

Garland's model demonstrates how a stressor can result in a positive reappraisal, positive

⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵¹ Tedeschi and Blevins, 374.

⁵² Garland, 41.

emotion, and reduced stress. When an event is seen as an unmanageable stressor, an individual can initiate an adaptive response, focusing on consciousness and awareness rather than the stressor. This practice allows awareness of the situation to broaden, giving space for positive reappraisal.⁵³

An additional benefit to the mindful coping model is that the positive reappraisal of a stressor can also influence subsequent appraisal processes.⁵⁴ This means that the next time an individual experiences the stressor, he or she has already created a neural pathway to experience the stress in a positive light.

Decentering

Decentering, a key process in mindfulness, refers to the shift of cognitive sets that enable alternate appraisals of life events.⁵⁵ This shift offers the ability to see the situation in its wider context. Decentering allows one to transition from the “doing mode,” which sparks patterns in the mind of negative thinking, to the “being mode.”⁵⁶ The being mode describes metacognitive awareness, which refers to the way that negative thoughts and feelings are experienced as they arise, which can allow for decentering.⁵⁷ Specifically, metacognitive awareness relates to “the extent that thoughts are experienced as thoughts rather than as aspects of self or direct reflections of truth.”⁵⁸ Decentering from the

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Garland, 37.

⁵⁶ St. Claire, 24.

⁵⁷ John D. Teasdale et al. “Metacognitive Awareness and Prevention of Relapse in Depression: Empirical Evidence,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 70:2 (2002), 276.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 277.

stressor can separate these negative thoughts from being perceived as truths, allowing space to recognize that they are merely thoughts rather than internal descriptors. The being mode is thus a state which avoids patterns of negative thinking that can lead to depressive symptoms.⁵⁹

A preemptive approach

Posttraumatic Growth and the US Army

The examples listed above are used in therapeutic settings for clients who have experienced trauma. In this way, CBT has existed as a posttraumatic practice for an individual who has experienced trauma and wants to alter future responses to a similar experience or grow through the trauma. While this therapy is helpful to a client who has experienced trauma, the exercises were not established to address the needs of clients, such as soldiers, who expect to face impending traumatic experiences. Thus, in recent years the US Army has identified a need to pursue a preemptive approach to posttraumatic growth.

Since the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan following the September 11 terrorist attacks, waves of troops have returned to the United States with various levels of posttraumatic stress, spurring numerous studies attempting to understand the effects of trauma. Specifically, the US Army has explored the possibility of preemptively preparing a soldier for future posttraumatic growth. The Army's exploration has developed from the reactionary use of therapeutic models for clients who seek CBT for posttraumatic growth following an unexpected trauma such as a car crash or battle with cancer. In a

⁵⁹ St. Claire, 24.

military context, trauma is a likely outcome of a soldier's experience. Recruits who enlist in the US Army are required to memorize the Soldier's Creed, one line of which states, "I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat."⁶⁰ This suggests one is enlisting with an understanding of impending traumatic experiences. Military leaders have thus come to recognize a need to be proactive in developing programs designed to foster PTG before troops actually experience the trauma.

A special issue of the *American Psychologist* in 2011 discussed the development of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program (CSF), a program designed increase the psychological strength and positive performance of the entire US Army.⁶¹ A conceptual model developed by Colonel Patrick J. Sweeney, Ph.D., LTC Sean T Hannah, Ph.D., and Don M. Snider, Ph.D., identified several psychological structures and processes that facilitate human spiritual development.⁶² One component is the individual's spiritual core, defined by the military as an "individual's most central values and beliefs concerning purpose and meaning in life, trust about the world, and vision for realizing one's full potential and purpose."⁶³ The United States Military Academy at West Point recently adopted the spiritual element as one of six development domains in the Cadet Leader Development System, with the belief that individuals with a strong spirit are more

⁶⁰ "Soldier's Creed," accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.army.mil/values/soldiers.html>.

⁶¹ Rhonda Cornum, Michael D. Matthews, and Martin EP Seligman, "Comprehensive Soldier Fitness: Building Resilience in a Challenging Institutional Context," *American Psychologist* 66.1 (2011): 4.

⁶² Kenneth I. Pargament and Patrick J. Sweeney, "Building Spiritual Fitness in the Army: An Innovative Approach to a Vital Aspect of Human Development," *American Psychologist* 66.1 (2011): 58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61.

capable of finding meaning in trauma and growing from adversity.⁶⁴ Reporting on the development of the program, Col. Sweeney and Dr. Kenneth Pargament cite research which corroborates the importance of spiritual growth as a component to psychological health and well-being in addition to its role reinforcing a greater life purpose and encouraging a stronger commitment to goals.⁶⁵

One aspect of the CSF program is a proactive approach to developing resiliency prior to trauma.⁶⁶ This design allows for the development of psychological strength in a preventative manner, thus reducing maladaptive responses.⁶⁷

While the actual program has not been released to the public, psychologists Tedeschi and McNally surmise five parts as being central to the program.⁶⁸ This five-part process is intended to contribute to soldiers' well-being, which consists of four dimensions that contribute to mission preparedness: physical, material, mental, and spiritual.

Part one is understanding trauma response as a precursor to posttraumatic growth. It establishes that a trauma response forms the foundation for the growth that will come later. Understanding that trauma results in shattered beliefs about self, others, and the future, which are normal reactions and do not indicate a defect in one's character or identity, is the goal of part one.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁶ Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman, 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁸ Tedeschi and McNally, 21.

Part two is emotional regulation enhancement, which includes methods of reducing anxiety and intrusive thoughts to allow for later healing and growth. Training at this stage includes tools to manage nervous system responses and intrusive thinking.

Part three is constructive self-disclosure, which develops and encourages various ways of telling the story of the trauma, especially the aftermath. Participants are trained to use metaphors to tell the story while leveraging their social network for support.

Part four begins the process of creating a trauma narrative. In this step, participants reconfigure shattered belief systems and revise life narratives. The trauma story is organized into a coherent narrative, with the trauma serving as a turning point that allows for a new paradox. Trauma stories of others are also used to illustrate the possibility of positive change.

Part five develops life principles that are resilient to challenge. Resilience is enhanced by finding ways to be altruistic, accepting growth without guilt, accepting a changed identity as a trauma survivor, and considering Greek and Roman ideas of heroism that describe an ordinary person who experiences an extraordinary event and returns to express an important life truth.⁶⁹

The development of PTG during and after a traumatic experience is a result of a dynamic interplay of factors including the nature of the crisis, personal and environmental resources, and how individuals perceive and choose to cope with the crisis.⁷⁰ Within this mix of factors, the CSF suggests that there is growing interest in the ability to be intentional in facilitating posttraumatic growth.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21-22.

⁷⁰ Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 107.

Because traumatic experiences are likely for soldiers, the US Army has taken an interest in leading soldiers toward growth early in their career. As noted, one component of the CSF program is spiritual. In the face of this research, a question arises: is trauma necessary for spiritual growth or is it possible to grow from lesser challenges? The work presented in the CSF inspired the possibility of creating a practice which prepares one to grow while experiencing challenges and sets the stage for the concept of elective stress.

Elective stress

This thesis offers an original term, *elective stress*, to describe the choice of imposing mild forms of challenge or stress on one's own life and is defined as *the voluntary participation in an event or activity that is generally outside the range of one's self-efficacy*. Elective stress is rooted in the personal choice of getting outside one's "comfort zone" and pushing the self beyond regular experience.

What qualifies as elective stress is relative to the individual. It could include public speaking for one person or climbing a mountain for another. Regardless of the specific act, elective stress integrates mental and physical stimulus beyond what the individual usually experiences. Participants of elective stress thus push their limits and experience a form of stress that can activate a response characterized by a rupture in one's exterior persona. This process will be detailed in chapter three.

Examples of Elective Stress in Psychology: Disfluency and Desirable Difficulties

Examples of elective stress exist in psychology. Disfluency, the subjective experience of difficulty associated with cognitive operations, is a concept from the field

of psychology that resembles the concept of elective stress.⁷¹ Two disfluency studies carried out on learning retention suggest that, in some cases, making material more difficult to learn can result in an improvement in long-term learning and retention.⁷² In the first study, participants were asked to learn about three different species of aliens that had seven unique features, totaling twenty-one components that needed to be learned. The control group was given the information to learn in sixteen point Arial pure black font, while the disfluent group was given the information in twelve-point Comic Sans MS 60% grayscale font or in twelve point Bodoni MT 60%grayscale font with the intent of making the text more difficult to read. Readers encountered the text similarly to this depiction:

Control Group	Disfluent Group 1	Disfluent Group 2
The quick brown fox	The quick brown fox...	The quick brown fox...

Figure 2. Disfluency example.

Participants received ninety seconds to memorize the material and then were distracted for fifteen minutes with unrelated tasks. The researchers then tested the participants' memory. The results indicated that while the control group achieved a 72.8% success rate, the disfluent groups were successful a total of 86.5% of the time.⁷³

⁷¹ Connor Diemand-Yauman, Daniel M. Oppenheimer, and Erikka B. Vaughan, "Fortune Favors the Bold (and the Italicized): Effects of Disfluency on Educational Outcomes," *Cognition* 118.1 (2011), 111.

⁷² Ibid., 111.

⁷³ Ibid.

A second disfluency study modified the fonts of worksheets and PowerPoint slides for two hundred twenty-eight public high school students in Chesterland, Ohio, across six classes: AP English, Honors English, Honors Physics, Regular Physics, Honors US History, and Honors Chemistry. At the end of the unit, students responded to a questionnaire asking about the difficulty in reading the material, their enjoyment of the class, how frequently they feel lost or confused in class, and how they felt about the material covered in class. The researchers also calculated student test performance in the school subjects and found that the students in the disfluent group scored a statistically significant higher score than in the control group. The study demonstrated that retention of material can significantly improve by making reading material slightly more difficult to read.⁷⁴

These studies reflect what psychologist Robert Bjork calls creating desirable difficulties.⁷⁵ Desirable difficulties lead to more durable and flexible learning and include procedures such as varying the conditions in which learning takes place.⁷⁶ Bjork's research indicates that when instruction happens in constrained and predictable conditions, learning can become contextualized and retrievable in that context alone. However, varying

⁷⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁵ Robert A. Bjork, "Memory and Metamemory Considerations in the Training of Human Beings," *Metacognition: Knowing about knowing*, ed. Janet Metcalfe and Arthur Shimamura (Cambridge, MA: MITS Press, 1994), 193.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Ligon Bjork and Robert A. Bjork, "Making Things Hard on Yourself, but in a Good Way: Creating Desirable Difficulties to Enhance Learning," in *Psychology and the Real World: Essays Illustrating Fundamental Contributions to Society*, eds. M. A. Gernsbacher et al. (New York: Worth, 2011), 58.

conditions can enhance recall later.⁷⁷ Bjork acknowledges that this opposes the more common suggestion to find a quiet place to study.

Summary

The concept of elective stress presented in this thesis is rooted in research on posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth. Current therapeutic techniques, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, are used to foster growth in the aftermath of trauma, and the US Army is attempting to develop a program that cultivates posttraumatic growth before trauma occurs. The concept of growth through trauma as established by PTG research and the possibility of preemptively fostering that growth as suggested by the US Army program inspired the concept of using elective stress to cultivate spiritual growth. Elective stress finds parallels in two educational practices, disfluency and desirable difficulties, which apply stress to increase learning and have been shown to improve learning retention and increase test scores.

This thesis will suggest that elective stress can foster spiritual growth just as CSF can produce growth through trauma or disfluency and desirable difficulties can lead to improved academic performance. The model offered in chapter six for participating in elective stress as a spiritual discipline draws on insights gleaned from CSF and cognitive behavioral therapy research.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Bjork and Bjork, 58.

⁷⁸ Disclaimer: this thesis emphasizes that elective stress is qualitatively different than trauma and does not suggest trauma is good. Trauma and models related to coping with trauma provide a framework for understanding one's response to adverse events, but the impact of trauma is not equivalent to elective stress. This thesis does not seek to minimize the negative aspects of traumatic experiences and does not suggest anyone should put themselves into a situation which may result in trauma.

CHAPTER 3

Precedent for Elective Stress within Christianity:**Historical Models of Asceticism**

The Christian church is no stranger to stress and precedent for its use as a tool for spiritual growth can be found in its history of asceticism. In this chapter scripture will be explored to identify a biblical foundation for ascetic practices in the New Testament. A brief history of the monastic tradition and asceticism in Christianity will be followed by an exploration of asceticism in contemporary times in the form of new monasticism and a discussion of the synergy between asceticism and cognitive behavior therapy discussed in the previous chapter. No examination of asceticism can be complete without a look at its darker side or a consideration of the harmful implementations of stress. Finally, this chapter will integrate wisdom from these ascetic traditions to help develop an understanding of how elective stress as a spiritual discipline could lead to spiritual growth.

Asceticism

In the New Testament

The word asceticism derives from the Greek noun *askesis*, which means exercise, practice, or training.⁷⁹ Historical Christian asceticism was theologically and practically rooted in scripture.⁸⁰ In particular, the root word for asceticism in Greek, *askeo*, can be found in Acts 24:16 (ASV): “Herein I also exercise myself to have a conscience void of

⁷⁹ Greg Peters, “Asceticism,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Glen Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, and James D. Smith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 276.

⁸⁰ Robert H. Von Thaden, “Glorify God in Your Body: The Redemptive Role of the Body in Early Christian Ascetic Literature,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 38.2 (2003), 195.

offence toward God and men always.” This passage and the use of the word *exercise* captures the concept of the training and discipline required to accomplish the task of having a clear conscience.

While the sole use of *askeo* in the New Testament comes in Acts 24:16, the concept of training or discipline as a process for accomplishing a goal is found throughout the New Testament. In Luke 9:23, Jesus describes the ongoing commitment required to follow him when he says, “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” In this text, Jesus says the life of a follower involves the daily task of taking up the cross. The imagery of the cross comes in the context of verse twenty-two, where Jesus predicts his own death. Thus, the rhetoric of taking up one’s cross carries implications and imagery of challenge, pain, and suffering. Most important in this text to the concept of discipline is Jesus’s use of the word “daily.” The process of denying oneself and carrying the burden of the cross is not a momentary event or one that occurs only at the point of conversion. Instead, the daily bearing the burden of the cross is a discipline, practice, or *askesis* required of those who would follow Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, Paul speaks about the process of focusing the mind to be obedient to Christ. He writes, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” In this text, Paul describes the process of battling the powers set against the knowledge of God. This is accomplished by “taking captive every thought,” reflecting the ongoing discipline necessary for obedience

to Christ. The text does not suggest that this process is a one-time occurrence or an event that happens in the moment of conversion, but indicates that it is a continual part of a believer's life.

Paul uses explicitly athletic imagery to describe the spiritual life in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Paul's describes disciplining the body for the purpose of growth, referencing strict training, purposeful running, and intentional preparation, and suggests that such "strict training" of Christian spirituality can bring the body into usefulness to the good news of Jesus, resulting in the Christian's "prize" of union with God. Yet it is not the physical tasks depicted that create the growth. Paul is not suggesting that everyone train like a runner or boxer. Instead, this metaphorical passage captures the concept of *askesis*.

While the word *askeo* is found only once in the New Testament, these passages show that the concept of *askeo* is demonstrated in the practices Christians are encouraged to employ in their consistent and intentional pursuit of becoming more like Christ. For this reason, the Christian church has embraced various forms of *askesis* to accomplish its task of forming practitioners into the image of God.

In the Monastic Tradition

Christians have experienced unwelcome stress in the form of physical persecution and suffering throughout history, but stress has also served as a valuable tool to those

who seek to be formed into the image of Christ. Asceticism conveys the idea that deliberate actions are required to achieve such a result, rather than assuming such formation is achieved in a single act. The monastic movement grew out of some Christians' desires to avoid distractions from within a community in order to work out their salvation without interruption.⁸¹ Monastic Christians saw their actions as a means to an end and not as a good in and of itself.⁸²

Christians engaged in various forms of asceticism as early as the second century.⁸³ Some examples include Justin Martyr noting a group of Christian men and women who lived together in chastity, Roman cleric Eusebius being the first bishop in the West to impose chastity and community life on his clergy, and monasteries growing across Italy.⁸⁴

In the fourth century, Augustine took a vow of chastity following his mystical experience in A.D. 386 and produced a rule for a monastic community around 397.⁸⁵ He intended the community to "have one heart and soul seeking God," reflecting the call of the apostles to the earliest Christians in Acts 2:44 and 4:32 to have everything in common.⁸⁶ While the apostolic community in Acts had an influence on the monastic and

⁸¹ Ibid., 205.

⁸² Ibid., 201.

⁸³ Marilyn Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 59.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 65.

ascetic movements of the third century, Augustine was also deeply influenced by his time living a religious life among a community of his friends.⁸⁷

The *Rule of Saint Benedict* is a well-known example of asceticism. Containing seventy-three chapters, Benedict's *Rule* is characterized by humility and calls for a balance between prayer and manual labor.⁸⁸ Benedict's words suggest that his rule is not a punishment for evil bodies but a way to "return by labor of obedience to the one from whom you drifted through the inertia of disobedience."⁸⁹ By regulating work, worship, and prayer, one would be free from distractions from God.⁹⁰ Benedict suggests that one should "refrain from too much eating or sleeping" and that the legislations for a monastery should include "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome."⁹¹ Moderation, thus, is a characteristic of asceticism within Benedict's Rule.

Carmelite spirituality, another ascetic movement emphasizing solitude and prayer, originated around A.D. 1200 in the Mount Carmel mountain range in the Holy Land.⁹² Here a group of men gathered for reflection, prayer, and fasting, in a setting where they gathered for Mass and lived a life of poverty and solitude.⁹³ Over time, the Carmelite

⁸⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁸ Greg Peters, "The Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia." *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*. 1.1 (2008), 107.

⁸⁹ Von Thaden, 205.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁹¹ Peters, "The Rule of St. Benedict," 107.

⁹² Keith J. Egan, "Carmelite Spirituality," in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 107.

⁹³ John Welch, *The Carmelite Way: An Ancient Path for Today's Pilgrim* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 9.

Order rooted itself in the examples of Elijah and Elisha, finally establishing Elijah as the inspiration and founder of the Carmelite Order.⁹⁴ From this order rose notable members Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux.⁹⁵ For almost 800 years, Carmelite spirituality existed as a way of following Jesus, and the Carmelite community has long served as a model for exploring more contemplative and ascetic approaches to the Christian life.

Another example of monastic tradition comes from Brother Lawrence, who provides an example of the relationship between a structure of personal and corporate ascetic living—a bodily denial of self—and growth through ascetic disciplines for the mind. Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century lay brother at a Carmelite monastery in Paris, is widely known for his portrayal of his relationship with God in his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence, who spent years completing kitchen duties in the monastery, had a life-altering encounter with God while working that resulted in a deep understanding that the sole purpose of life before God is the love of God.⁹⁶ Lawrence asserts that a Christian's only concern should be to live a life that pleases God, which St. Claire suggests is accomplished by practicing awareness of the present moment.⁹⁷ Presence is “the bare awareness of the receptive spaciousness of our mind.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Egan, 99.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 103-105.

⁹⁶ W. David Buschart, “Brother Lawrence (1611-1691),” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, and James D. Smith, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2011), 320.

⁹⁷ St. Claire, 72.

⁹⁸ St. Claire, 73.

This is the focus of Lawrence's approach to spirituality: an invitation to pause throughout the day to consider God and ask him to accept one's work. Lawrence describes his pursuit as "nothing but how to become wholly God's."⁹⁹

This connection with God, through this discipline or any other, also serves as a guardrail against selfishness: "When we are faithful to keep ourselves in His holy presence, and set Him always before us, this hinders our offending Him, and doing anything that may displease Him."¹⁰⁰ Lawrence continues, "I make it my priority to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I maintain a simple attention and a fond regard for God, which I may call an actual presence of God."¹⁰¹ He refers to constant living in the presence of God as being in the "bosom of God."¹⁰² This daily connection with the divine provides great trust in and peace with God: "Once we have established a habit of the practice of the presence of God, we are then with Him who is our end."¹⁰³ Lawrence employed mental focus as a tool for connecting with God: "One way to re-collect the mind easily in the time of prayer, and preserve it more in tranquility, is not to let it wander too far at other times. Keep your mind strictly in the presence of God. Then being accustomed to think of Him often, you will find it easy to keep your mind calm in the time of prayer, or at least to recall it from its wanderings."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Urbana: Project Gutenberg, 2004), 28.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 51.

The ascetic examples in the previous section from the Roman Catholic Church were rooted in connection between physical actions and work of the Spirit and the relationship between human acts and God's acts. Keith Egan writes, "The 'ascetical life' is a life in which 'acquired virtues,' i.e. virtues resulting from a personal effort, are only accompanied by that general grace which God grants to every good will, prevail."¹⁰⁵ The ascetical life differs from the mystical life, in which the work of the Spirit prevails over human efforts, resulting in a soul that has become more passive than active. "Between the ascetic life, that is, the life in which human action predominates, and the mystical life, that is the life in which God's action predominates, there is the same difference as between rowing a boat and sailing it; the oar is the ascetic effort, the sail is the mystical passivity which is unfurled to catch the divine wind."¹⁰⁶

For Orthodox Christians, the directive for asceticism is taken from Matthew 11:12 which says "the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (ESV). This passage, particularly the word *violence*, is interpreted not to mean physical aggression but instead refers to "the intentional and unrelenting work of the person against the impulses and desires of the fallen will, together with the corrupt body."¹⁰⁷ The purpose of this battle with the flesh is to lead one toward purification and reformation.¹⁰⁸ Common forms of ascetical practice within Orthodoxy are prostrations

¹⁰⁵ Egan, 110.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Craig Steenberg, "Askesis," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 55.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

and permanent abstention from certain foods.¹⁰⁹ The actions used to accomplish purification vary, yet the common bond between all is “their value as tools by which the conditioning and training of the heart and body may take place.”¹¹⁰

Asceticism in the Eastern Orthodox tradition also addresses the work of the Spirit and self and is understood as a way of life which prepares one through training and conditioning of both body and soul that entails self-sacrifice, struggle, and battle against the will.¹¹¹ This process suggests the workings of two energies: grace and human will and is explained in the doctrine of *synergy* in the Orthodox Church.¹¹² Asceticism utilizes the human will, which through its effort leads to virtue. The mystical life relies upon grace, in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit take prominence over human work. Synergy is the synthesis of the two, with love as its perfection.¹¹³

Asceticism in Protestant Christianity

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, Protestant churches progressively departed from the ascetic practices which had been in use throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Society at large was experiencing a worldview shift as Protestant traditions sought to understand the connection between faith and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 54-55.

¹¹² Sung Kyu Pak, *Christian Spirituality in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Perspectives from Kenya* (Eugene: Pickwick 2013), 60-61.

¹¹³ Ibid., 61.

scientific and philosophical developments.¹¹⁴ The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and events within, such as the Enlightenment, led Protestants to be skeptical of practices grounded in church tradition and religious authority as they turned to “reason” as the key component in understanding biblical truth.¹¹⁵ Biblical study and an analytical approach thus replaced church tradition and ascetic practices. Influential thinkers of the Reformation, such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), emphasized New Testament scripture over inner experience.¹¹⁶ His focus on the Word moved him away from anything that would detract from scripture’s primacy, reducing public prayer, church music, and decreasing the Eucharist to a quarterly celebration.¹¹⁷ Embodied spirituality expressed through physical practices such as fasting, chastity, and prostrations common among the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches were juxtaposed with a Protestant movement focused on reason and scholarly inquiry. While the Orthodox and Catholic communities continued in their use of ascetic practice, the Reformation marked a time in which some Christians departed from ascetic practices.

Asceticism in Contemporary Christian Practice

A new ascetic movement emerged in the 1970s at the heart of contemporary Catholic monasticism: new monasticism. Jonathan Wilson first coined the phrase in his book, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* to convey the need for practices that will continue to bear witness to the Gospel in the midst of changing times rather than sustain a

¹¹⁴ Joseph Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1999), 5.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁶ Egan, 138.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

tradition of virtues.¹¹⁸ Wilson suggests that new monasticism is needed not to help Christians avoid a bad society but to help them restore faithful living within a renewed view of the church's mission, one that is "necessary in this time and place for the church to serve the world as God calls us to serve."¹¹⁹ New monasticism seeks to accomplish four things: 1) removing the delineation between sacred and secular within oneself; 2) healing fragmentation within Christian culture by removing sacred and secular concepts of vocation; 3) recovering the monastic concept of discipline toward the goal of a faithful life and witness of the church; and 4) displaying a foundation undergirded by deep theological reflection and commitment.¹²⁰ Wilson intentionally stops after laying out the "barest sketch of a vision for a new monasticism" so that the movement would take shape by the gathering of committed followers of Christ.¹²¹

Dr. Stefania Palmisano writes of this movement in an article in *Fieldwork in Religion*.¹²² Palmisano describes new monastics as being those who attempt to rework old rhythms, rules of life, and liturgical resources for a new era.¹²³ Monks from new monastic communities do not live isolated or disconnected from society, but rather attempt to

¹¹⁸ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From 'After Virtue' to a New Monasticism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 58.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 62.

¹²¹ Ibid., 63.

¹²² Stefania Palmisano, "Asceticism in Modern Times: Challenging Monastic Pillars in a New Twenty-First Century Catholic Monastery," *Fieldwork in Religion* 9.2 (2014), 202-223.

¹²³ Mark S. Hurst, "Anabaptism: The Beginning of a New Monasticism," Paper presented at the Christian Mission in the Public Square conference of the Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS) and Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre of Charles Sturt University. Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra, Australia, October 2-5, 2008, 1.

“better integrate core Christian values into their lives as average citizens.”¹²⁴ Through research into an Italian neo-monastic community, St. Basil (pseudonym used by Palmisano to protect the community), Palmisano shares how this one monastic community has continued to bear witness by reinterpreting the grammar of monastic asceticism. Palmisano quotes Max Weber to define asceticism as “a systematically developed method of rational conduct of life with the aim of overcoming *status naturae*, of tearing man away from the power of irrational impulses and slavery to the world.”¹²⁵ Asceticism within this context goes beyond renouncing comforts and instead extends to all aspects of everyday life.

In the St. Basil community, monks are paid, and their earnings can be used for going to movies or eating outside of the community. There is a focus on mentoring the younger generation so that “through asceticism, [they] learn to harmonize their human and spiritual dimensions without allowing either to predominate.”¹²⁶ The community has also rejected certain traditional ascetic practices, such as rising twice in the night for chapel and prayers, due to the exhaustion and inability to concentrate on daily work. Instead, they have modified their schedule to rise at 4:30am each morning, suggesting that early rising is equivalent to night rising because practitioners experience an identical clarity for prayer in the morning as in the night. This transition from typical ascetic practices is grounded in the belief that the traditional results of self-vigilance, mastery, and awareness can be achieved by “training oneself in attention-strengthening exercises”

¹²⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁵ Palmisano, 213.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 215.

and that “asceticism should not consist solely of heroic gestures which are an end in themselves, but aim at opening up the religious to his relationship with God and his neighbour.”¹²⁷ This integration of mind and body is a reoccurring theme within asceticism.

The dark side of asceticism

Throughout church history, ascetic practices have been implemented in a variety of ways, not all of which are healthy. In the New Testament, imagery exists that could be misinterpreted as a foundation for abuse of the body. For example, in Hebrews 9:22, the blood of Christ reconciles people to God and it is participation in Christ’s blood that sets the believer in right relationship to God. Yet while the martyrs faced death with the faithfulness of Christ, the self-inflicted shedding of a believer’s blood does not open significant channels of communication between God and the individual. Modern psychology suggests that repeated self-wounding can be a sign of personality disorder.¹²⁸ Furthermore, these examples represent a theology of the body that requires its elimination, rather than its formation: an oppression of the evil flesh.

Mortification of the flesh has ascetic ties and has been a theme in Christianity resulting in “epidemics of self-mutilation, notably the flagellants of the fourteenth century.”¹²⁹ Christian history also records extremes such as Saint Margaret-Mary Alacoque filling her mouth with the diarrhea of a sick man and cleaning up the vomit of

¹²⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹²⁸ Digby Tantam and Jane Whittaker, “Personality Disorder and Self-Wounding,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 161.4 (1992), 451.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

another with her tongue, or Saint Angela of Fuligno drinking the dirty water after washing the feet of lepers. These examples were done in an effort to overcome the desires or fears of the flesh.¹³⁰ Such extremes should prompt readers to be cautious when encountering examples of abusing the body found even in spiritual classics. While the intent of these disciplines should be retained, the form should be challenged if the body is to serve spiritual formation.

Spiritual Exercises, a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices of St. Ignatius, is an example of a spiritual classic which makes an important contribution, but should be nuanced by a healthy theology of the body, informed by contemporary psychology and physiology. Ignatius' writings offer some great truths, such as the principle of "seeking God in all things" and surrendering oneself entirely to the purposes of Christ as a way to see the divine in the secular.¹³¹ *Spiritual Exercises* is rooted in self-awareness, which leads to a deep personal engagement with Christ that does not stay within, but rather moves one to embrace the call to serve with joy and generosity.¹³² Overall, the theme of Ignatian spirituality is to know, love, and serve Christ.¹³³ Ignatius' examples of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices all reflect healthy approaches of integrating the body into the spiritual formation process that use the body as a tool to move one toward a personal engagement with Christ.

¹³⁰ Anthony Synnott, "Tomb, Temple, Machine and Self: The Social Construction of the Body," *British Journal of Sociology* 43.1 (1992), 91.

¹³¹ Gordon T. Smith, "Ignatian Spirituality," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Glen G. Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, and James D. Smith (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2011), 519.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 520.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Yet, Ignatius moves in an unhealthy direction by telling practitioners to “chastise the body by inflicting actual pain on it. This is done by wearing hair shirts or cords or iron chains, by scourging or beating ourselves and by other kinds of harsh treatments.”¹³⁴ These destructive behaviors reflect Ignatius’ theology of salvation as being achieved through conquest of the body.¹³⁵ It is at this point that Ignatius’ theology become harmful. Ignatius writes that his ascetic practices “have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.”¹³⁶ This concept of the flesh as being something to conquer stands in opposition to an understanding of *askesis* that seeks to synthesize grace and human will with the ultimate outcome being love.

The wisdom of the ascetic tradition for elective stress practices

Elective stress for spiritual growth is grounded in the belief that the flesh can be a tool for deeper communion with Christ: the body is not the enemy of spiritual growth. As shown in this chapter, the church has wrestled with this interplay between the flesh and spirituality. Contemporary theologian Thomas Ryan writes:

In certain eras of Christian History, the body was ignored; in others, denied. In our era, it is glorified. In different periods of history, Christians have been variously exhorted to mortify their bodies and punish themselves, to control their bodily appetites perceived as hindrances to spiritual development, and to transcend their bodies so as to live in a purely spiritual way. The challenge before us in a secular culture that idolizes the body is not to overcompensate for centuries of misguided teachings – Paul said, “Glorify God in your body,” not

¹³⁴ Synnott, 91.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Thomas Peters, “Using the Spiritual Exercises as an Orientation for a Short Term International Service Project,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 2.2 (2013), 14.

“Glorify your body” – but to find a balance between idolatry and denial, between mortification and glorification.¹³⁷

Finding this balance between viewing the body as evil and the opposite extreme of idolization is critical to understanding how to utilize the flesh for spiritual disciplines. Healthy ascetic practice, and elective stress, assume the body has a role in the spiritual disciplines as a means of conforming to Christ, rather than viewing discipline as a way to overcome one’s evil flesh. While the ascetic tradition provides some examples of abuse of the body, there is also a strong tradition grounded in scripture that employs physical challenge outside one’s everyday experience and beyond one’s sense of self-efficacy as a means of spiritual formation. Elective stress aligns with the Christian tradition that seeks to employ the body and physical effort in progress toward the image of Christ and stands in contrast to unhealthy forms of asceticism which suggest that the flesh is an evil that needs to be conquered.

Summary

Precedent for employing elective stress as a tool for cultivating deeper connections with God exists in the historical use of ascetic practices within the Christian church. Also within this history can be found examples of practices that move beyond what this thesis considers to be healthy. These abuses are often grounded in doctrines that view the body as something to be conquered instead of as a tool for spiritual growth. In contemporary Christianity, ascetic practices in the form of new monasticism attempt to bring new life to old rhythms. As shown in this chapter, the Christian church has a

¹³⁷ Thomas Ryan, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 92.

history—and current practice—of utilizing stress and physical challenge for spiritual growth.

CHAPTER 4

Spiritual Growth and How It Occurs

To build a case for elective stress as a tool to foster spiritual growth, it is necessary to define spiritual growth and analyze how spiritual growth occurs. Spiritual growth, also called spiritual formation, is a journey, and according to Dallas Willard is “the process through which disciples or apprentices of Jesus take on the qualities or characteristics of Christ himself, in every essential dimension of human personality.”¹³⁸ From this definition arise two important matters to address. First, “the process” of spiritual growth can be described in terms of progressive steps and means to achieve them. Second, “qualities or characteristics of Christ” describe the specific outcomes of Christian spiritual formation, by which one measures progress in this process. This chapter will begin by defining growth in terms of the characteristics of Christ and then address the process through which this growth occurs.

Characteristics of Christ

Growth is indicated by evidence that one is taking on the characteristics of Christ. While the New Testament offers a number of models for identifying these characteristics, the “fruit of the Spirit” supplies a simple basis for identifying Christian character. According to Paul, these are characteristics evident in the life of a disciple, emphasizing the Spirit as being the giver of Christ-likeness.¹³⁹ Galatians 5:22-25 says

¹³⁸ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation and the Warfare Between the Flesh and the Human Spirit,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6.2 (2013), 152.

¹³⁹ John Painter, “The Fruit of the Spirit Is Love: Galatians 5:22-23, an Exegetical Note,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 5.22-23 (1973), 57.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Therefore, spiritual growth can be seen when believers are coming to look more like Christ, as demonstrated by the presence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

The faith reflected in the fruit of the Spirit is active, shown by the call to walk in Galatians 5:16, to lead in Galatians 5:18, and to keep in step with the Spirit in Galatians 5:25.¹⁴⁰ Spiritual formation is not merely about a transcendent relationship with Jesus, but about actions that reflect the life of Christ to the community. Galatians 5:13-14 suggest that walking with the Spirit is fulfilled when one loves and serves one's neighbors.

Walking in the Spirit also requires moving away from the acts of the flesh: The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:19-20)

When Christians are growing in faith, they are moving away from actions of the flesh and toward the image of Christ. As spiritual growth occurs, an individual's own character begins to look more like the character of Christ.¹⁴¹ Willard writes, "Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will or 'spirit' of the human being takes on the character of Christ's will."¹⁴² Therefore, the embodied nature of the will taking on the character of Christ must lead to transformation of bodily activity.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Austen, 71.

¹⁴² Willard, "Spiritual Formation and the Warfare," 157.

Willard goes on to write that “this inward faith has now spread throughout my social, embodied self.”¹⁴³ That which is on the inside comes out in the body. This process of transformation from the inside out carries with it the ability to change the world.

This display of the fruit of the Spirit is a tangible acknowledgment of the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of spiritual formation. Moving away from the acts of the flesh and toward fruit boldly proclaims the work of one who is capable of works not possible simply through human effort. The changes that occur as one moves toward the fruit of the Spirit reflect the synergy between the ascetical, or disciplines and work of humanity, and the mystical, or work of the Spirit. Beyond doctrines and religious practices, Christian spiritual growth implies a transformation of the inner self and the exercise of faith in action. Willard writes that the “reality of the kingdom life is an inner one.”¹⁴⁴ Christian spiritual formation cannot be accomplished merely through the keeping of religious structures. Paul’s words in Romans 14:17-18 reflect this: “for the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy sustained by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17-18). An individual’s actions indicate that person’s inner life. Willard writes that the “most exalted outcome of submersion in the risen Christ is the transformation of the inner self to be like him.”¹⁴⁵ This inner transformation and the outward signs that demonstrate a transformed life are the focus of this thesis. Spiritual growth is displayed in a Christian’s embodiment of the characteristics of Christ.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (Harper: San Francisco, 1998), 279.

¹⁴⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 280.

The process

Jim Wilhoit suggests “Christian spirituality is not simply a state; we do better to think of it as a process.”¹⁴⁶ Paul’s writings in the New Testament affirm this concept of faith being a process. In Galatians 4:19, Paul describes the challenge of growing in Christ-likeness when he writes, “I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”¹⁴⁷ The phrase “until Christ is formed in you,” suggests that this formation is a process, not something that occurs at the moment of conversion. The church in Galatia was on a formational journey. Paul is experiencing pain here as he sees this community struggle with turning back to their previous ways, indicating that their formation into the image of Christ was not a momentary event but was instead a process.

Numerous biblical passages indicate that spiritual formation and growth is a journey, not a destination. Isaiah 64:8 draws on the image of clay in the hands of a potter, being formed over time: “Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” 1 Peter 2:2-3 offers this analogy: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” These scriptural references remind followers of Christ that growth is integral to the Christian experience. Christians do not stay static; nor are they encouraged to do so. Scripture advocates a process of

¹⁴⁶ Jim Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

maturation so that Christians may “grow into salvation.” These passages suggest that spiritual growth occurs through a process.

Spiritual growth, indicated by taking on the characteristics of Christ, is a transformation of a life that is interconnected with the development of *the self*. The idea of the *self* is a complex description of human experience that integrates all aspects of a person. Dr. Joseph Driskill, in his book, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises*, describes three levels of self: inner, middle, and exterior. Driskill writes that the presence of God resides at the inner level, which is the most profound level, suggesting that when one moves beneath the outer levels one frees the deeply embedded spiritual core to more fully inform the outer actions.¹⁴⁸ This inner self is “who we are in God.”¹⁴⁹ Spiritual growth is initiated at this level, the center of one’s being, which desires to break out but is often restrained by the middle level of self. In this middle level of personality one wrestles with insecurities and challenges such as anxiety, greed, and arrogance. A person’s exterior level contains what psychologists describe as the “persona.”¹⁵⁰ On this level are the traits an individual wants others to see, traits the culture suggests are good, such as care for others, wisdom, and intelligence. When the inner level—“who we are in God”—is nurtured so that it takes precedence over the other levels, an individual is freed to live in a way that emanates the love and grace that comes from being created in the image of Christ. The inner transformation that results in outer transformation is what this thesis seeks to address.

¹⁴⁸ Driskill, 38.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

To get to this inner level, Driskill describes the need for a rupture in the outer levels. This rupture often comes through crisis, such as divorce or serious illness, when “the normal coping systems are taxed, and it becomes impossible to maintain the façade that heretofore has given definition to much of a person’s life. When the persona is broken open, the hidden aspects of life begin to pour forth: hurt, anger, pain, vulnerability.”¹⁵¹ During these times of crisis, a spiritual discipline can offer a structured practice for entering into the presence of God.

Spiritual disciplines

J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler provide a definition of a spiritual discipline and its outcome: “Christian spiritual discipline is a repeated bodily practice, done in dependence on the Holy Spirit and under the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers in His way, to enable us to get good at certain things in life that we cannot learn to do by direct effort.”¹⁵²

Moreland and Issler’s definition of a spiritual discipline suggest four key components: bodily practice, dependence on the Holy Spirit, the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers, and growth through the Spirit beyond direct effort. When a spiritual discipline includes these four components, formation into the likeness of Christ will be maximized. A simple summary of these components reveals four foundational concepts within them:

1. Self: bodily practice

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁵² J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *The Lost Virtue of Happiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 46.

2. The Holy Spirit: dependence on God
3. Community: the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers
4. Growth: evidence of transformation

These components and concepts guide the efforts in this thesis to develop the idea of employing elective stress as a spiritual discipline.

Self

The first component essential to a spiritual discipline is the *self*, an interconnected and layered framework of one's existence. Karl Barth's belief in the inseparable union between soul and body and the concept of *imago Dei* from the Genesis creation accounts contribute to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of soul and body. According to Barth, the soul encompasses a human's subjective and mindful life, while the body implements the decisions of the soul. Moving the body, therefore, is interconnected with the soul.¹⁵³

With this in mind, one can choose to use the body in a way that brings growth to the soul. Exercise physiologist Tracey Greenwood and theologian Teresa Delgado suggest that physical fitness done with the right intention can be a form of spiritual discipline.¹⁵⁴ The authors assert that being made in the image of God results in a composite of body and spirit as inseparable entities, saying, "when human beings yearn toward God, we do so with body and spirit."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Tracey C. Greenwood and Teresa Delgado, "A Journey toward Wholeness, a Journey to God: Physical Fitness as Embodied Spirituality," *Journal of Religion and Health* 52.3 (2013), 947.

¹⁵⁴ Greenwood and Delgado, 942.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 943.

Greenwood and Delgado's research indicates that this spirit-body connection can become a spiritual discipline through a process of (1) setting an intention at the beginning of the exercise, (2) praying over the impending movement, and (3) mindfully stretching, reflecting, praying, and reading scripture.¹⁵⁶ This research implies that the intentional connection between God and the body can result in spiritual growth.

The role of the self in spiritual growth is theologically complex, and more discussion can be found in chapter three regarding the varying attitudes toward the body held by mystics and ascetics. Mooreland and Issler's components reflect the orthodox theology of synergy, acknowledging that both self and Spirit play integral roles in the process, recognizing that "Christian life is one of complete dependence on the grace of God," while at the same time affirming that a Christian "can and must take responsibility for his or her actions."¹⁵⁷ To be fully transformative, a spiritual discipline should be performed with appropriate expectations regarding both the effect of individual effort and God's transforming agency.

In relation to practicing elective stress for spiritual growth, self is critical to the process simply because one must choose to participate in a spiritual discipline for it to actually occur. While the theological aspects of synergy between self and the Spirit are at play, the process requires a very basic personal decision to participate in a practice. This act of will and personal decision to be engaged is the starting point. While the self is merely a tool to open ourselves up to God and his transformative power and of itself does

¹⁵⁶ Greenwood and Delgado, 942.

¹⁵⁷ Gordon T. Smith, "Grace and Spiritual Disciplines," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed Glen G. Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, and James D. Smith, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2011), 222.

not carry the power to transform, the self *is* critical to the process.¹⁵⁸ The process cannot occur without personal engagement.

Holy Spirit

The second component of a spiritual discipline, dependence on the Holy Spirit, reminds practitioners that spiritual formation is “by the Spirit of God in Christ.”¹⁵⁹ The work of the Spirit is integral as individual effort alone cannot produce the growth.

As an agent of God, one’s practices allow God to do what only God can do.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, practices and the role of self are merely the starting point into the grace of God. While these actions provide structure for transformation, the human effort depends on the divine work on the inner person to produce spiritual formation.

In the implementation of elective stress or any practice as a spiritual discipline, the Holy Spirit is “the means by which the grace of God in Christ becomes known.”¹⁶¹ Christians do not act to earn God’s favor, but rather to open their hearts to God’s transformative power.¹⁶² Thus, disciplines must be performed “in dependence upon the Holy Spirit under the direction of Christ.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Austen, 75.

¹⁵⁹ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What It Is and How It Might Be Done,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 28.4 (2000), 256.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 223.

¹⁶² Austen, 75.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

It is “through the power of the Holy Spirit” that one is conformed to Christ.¹⁶⁴ It requires humility to recognize the power of the Spirit at work, knowing that the individual effort does not bring the reward. It is this giving over of self to the divine, trusting and allowing the Spirit to be at work in one’s life which brings about transformation. A Christian who does not acknowledge the Spirit’s ultimate power risks falling into moral formation, a belief that individual power independent of the Spirit should be credited for the growth.¹⁶⁵ For this reason, the second component of a spiritual discipline, dependence on the Holy Spirit, is the most essential part. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, fasting is merely a diet, communion is merely eating bread and drinking wine, and elective stress is merely another activity.

Community

The third component of a spiritual discipline—the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers—can be summarized in the concept of *community*. The Christian community is unique in purpose and nature as its purpose is to grow all members in their relationships with God. Individual spiritual growth is not merely for one’s own benefit but is instead for “fulfillment of their God given mission,”¹⁶⁶ as members of the body of Christ. No single member fulfills the community’s mission alone, and every member has a part in the growth of the other. The church acts as a family, existing for others in the

¹⁶⁴ Ruth Haley Barton et al., “Spiritual Formation in the Church,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7.2 (2014), 295.

¹⁶⁵ Austen, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Barton et al., 292.

midst of one's weakness.¹⁶⁷ A family then builds each member up toward the ultimate goal of spiritual formation in Christ, which is "the ultimate goal of a local church."¹⁶⁸

For Fowler, a community of believers amplifies the spiritual development process:

As children mature, good religious nurture invites and stimulates the growing person to claim a shared sense of identity in relation to the Source of Life's being and meaning. This happens by participation in the community's shared symbols, practices, and teachings. They come to know and trust God's love and cherishing for themselves, as it is expressed in sacramental action, in teaching and proclamation, and in the warm and faithful sponsorship and affirmation of their presence and worth, by a community of faith.¹⁶⁹

When an individual is journeying through a spiritual discipline, the support of a Christian community and its shared symbols, practices, and teachings is critical to that individual's connection to God. The call to be more like Christ is community-wide, and while Christ-likeness requires individual intention and action, the individual's growth should also support the development of the community.

The church also bears a unique nature, carrying out a story that binds it to scripture and tradition. To become Christian is to take on a new identity and worldview, and spiritual formation involves maturing into a particular vision of oneself in relationship to others. It is a community that expands beyond the local body to incorporate the history of the church, its traditions, leaders, and important texts. Scripture is the authoritative voice in establishing the community's effectiveness in mission and

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 293

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ James W. Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium," *Religious Education* 99.4 (2004), 414.

measuring the growth of each disciple within the community. The church is called together by the mission of Christ and the Spirit, gathered around the word, and joined to a “cloud of witnesses” represented in the witness and writings of saints, theologians, spiritual directors, and mentors who guided the tradition. Thus, the process of individual spiritual growth is guided by this collection of people, past and present, called by Christ, transformed by the Holy Spirit, living out the Father’s will in their distinct time and place.

The nature and purpose of Christian community—the church—is to direct and support an individual’s effort, empowered by the Holy Spirit, toward formation in the image of Christ. As it affirms, models, and supports each individual’s journey, the broader body of Christ is also shaped more into the image of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests, “the church is the church only when it exists for others.”¹⁷⁰ The church community serves as the primary space for individuals to grow up in the faith: “In Pauline writings, instructions about spiritual formation and transformation are never given to private individuals but are always addressed to individuals in communities of faith.”¹⁷¹ Thus, while spiritual disciplines such as fasting are inherently personal, they are at the same time a corporate response to the message of Christ. Collectively, the body of Christ is being shaped more into the image of Christ.

Growth: Discerning Formation in Christ

Finally, practitioners of a spiritual discipline must exhibit growth if the discipline is to be considered effective. As previously stated, spiritual formation takes place “by the

¹⁷⁰ Barton et al., 293.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Spirit of God in Christ” and is not something one does without God.¹⁷² The work of formation is a partnership between the physical and the divine. Growth is a living acknowledgement of formation beyond oneself, and the evidence of growth is the fruit of a life conformed to Christ. Growth is measured in its congruence with the kind of life produced by intentional effort toward formation in Christ, empowered by the church in the Holy Spirit. A spiritual discipline should lead to a life in the Spirit, which results in a practical expression of faith.

In Galatians, Paul urges the church to “keep in step with the Spirit” (6:16, 22-25), which manifests as avoiding carnal living (5:17, 19-21) and caring for fellow believers (6:10).¹⁷³ Because spiritual disciplines are intended to foster spiritual growth, “Biblical spirituality, then, is inherently practical.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, spiritual disciplines are not only informed by the community, but they also carry a practical goal of forming the community. This larger community is formed as individuals within the community experience formation in themselves. A community is only loving when it is composed of people who love. A community only exhibits care when the individuals who make up the collective exhibit care.

Summary

This chapter has defined spiritual growth as taking on the characteristics of Christ, including the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22-25: love, joy,

¹⁷² Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ,” 256.

¹⁷³ Leslie T. Hardin, “The Quest for the Spiritual Jesus: Jesus and the Spiritual Disciplines,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 15.2 (2012), 220.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Individual ability cannot ensure growth in these areas; such growth requires the practice of a spiritual discipline which engages self, the Holy Spirit, and community. The next question to be explored is “how does one measure this growth?” Is it possible to measure faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? James Fowler’s research on the stages of faith offers one way to gauge growth toward the image of Christ and will be examined in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

Measuring Spiritual Growth

James Fowler is widely known for his seminal work in the area of faith development, *Stages of Faith*. Fowler describes various stages and common traits at each stage that exist in the process of spiritual formation from a developmental psychology perspective. Although progress in the realm of spiritual growth is difficult to define, delineate, and measure, Fowler's *Stages of Faith* offers one tool for assessing one's place in the process of faith development.

Fowler focuses on the human side of faith, which he describes as "persons engaged and involved in shaping their lives in community and in relation to shared visions of transcendent value and power."¹⁷⁵ Community and relationships, therefore, interact with the transcendent power to help one make sense of life through various stages of life. Infancy, early childhood, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood have corresponding stages of faith development.

Fowler proposes six stages of faith that may be experienced: (1) intuitive-projective faith, (2) mythic-literal faith, (3) synthetic-conventional faith, (4) individuative-reflective faith, (5) conjunctive faith, and (6) universalizing faith.

Stage 1, intuitive-projective faith, begins around the second year of life and continues until a person is about six or seven. It is characterized by children combining fragments of stories from their culture into significant associations relating to God and faith.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 123 and 128.

Stage 2, mythic-literal faith, is when “the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community.”¹⁷⁷

Stage 3, synthetic-conventional faith, occurs when faith provides synthesis between values and information engaged within new spheres of influence such as school, peers, and media.¹⁷⁸ While this stage often occurs during adolescence, it becomes a “permanent place of equilibrium” for many adults.¹⁷⁹ It is characterized by an acute awareness of the expectations and judgments of others without a solid understanding of one’s own identity. Authority often lies within the consensus of the group with which one identifies.¹⁸⁰ Identity is often determined by a perception of relationship to social or institutional expectations, with individuals measuring their faith according to those expectations. Fowler describes this stage as “assumptive faith.”

A person transitions from Stage 3 to Stage 4 when there is an interruption of reliance on of authority in defining one’s identity.¹⁸¹ For many, this transition occurs when they move to a university or experience another life transition that allows them to interact with people who hold different belief systems and values, challenging their preconceived notions of truth. This transition moves one from the assumptive belief structures that exist in Stage 3 to a deepening of one’s self-awareness.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 172.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 178.

Stage 4 is described as individuated-reflective faith and often occurs during young adulthood, although some never construct it while others reach it in their mid-thirties or forties.¹⁸² Stage 4 occurs as one's notion of identity or self is no longer dominated by a group of significant friends or a specific community. Instead, the self "composes a meaning frame conscious of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a 'world view.'"¹⁸³ *Self* as used by Fowler differs slightly from the way the term is used by Driskill, who adopts a strictly Christian perspective of the inner self being related to one's identity in God and where the presence of God exists. Fowler approaches self from a psychological perspective, seeing self as identity formed by the conscious mind and critical thought.¹⁸⁴ Fowler's Stage 4 is not the rejection of community, but it is no longer characterized by the blind dependence on community seen in Stage 3.

Individuals at Stage 4 analyze the beliefs they held implicitly or without critical scrutiny at Stage 3. Fowler suggests that the two essential elements of a transition to Stage 4 are movement away from the assumptive value system of Stage 3, which is "marked by a dependence on external authority and derivative group identity," and the growth of an "executive ego," described as an "internal panel of experts."¹⁸⁵ This journey includes shifts in identification with community and in personal choice, as the new self begins to craft a new reality and lifestyle.

¹⁸² Ibid., 182.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 179.

Further, Stage 4 prepares a person for more meaningful engagement in spiritual disciplines as directed by an individual's commitment to a community and tradition. Prior to Stage 4, personal identity is defined by a variety of groups in which an individual experiences face-to-face interactions, such as the family or a church community. Fowler acknowledges that these authorities do not cease to play a role but that their role is diminished for people who move into Stage 4. "While others and their judgments will remain important to the individuating-reflective person, their expectations, advice and counsel will be submitted to an internal panel of experts who reserve the right to choose and who are prepared to take responsibility for their choices."¹⁸⁶

A person in Stage 4 begins to ask deep questions about the standards and norms of those communities. In this process, distance from these communities provides an opportunity to think critically and consider alternate possibilities. In this transition, one becomes mindful of the self. Previously, beliefs and attitudes may have been accepted based solely on the person's connection with a specific community, but spiritual growth begins to guide a person inward, allowing the acknowledgement of self as playing a role in the cultivation of and adherence to an ideology or faith practice. Fowler summarizes and offers a warning about Stage 4:

Stage 4's ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity and outlook. Its dangers inhere in its strengths: an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self over assimilates "reality" and the perspectives of others into its world view.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 182-183.

While a person in Stage 4 does not disconnect entirely from the community that played a significant role in Stage 3, wisdom, values, and concepts touted by the community are now processed through a filter of individual consciousness. A person in Stage 4 can be selective and intentional in choosing, integrating, and applying the wisdom of his or her community, an essential skill for engaging a spiritual discipline.

Some individuals progress to Stage 5, conjunctive faith, which represents the rejoining of unconscious and conscious that were previously separated between Stages 3 and 4.¹⁸⁸ Now, one is aware that the “conscious ego is not a master in its own house.”¹⁸⁹ People in Stage 5 are able to discern and describe their experiences of interior transformation, aiding their ability to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and share their growth in relationship to mentors and their community.

Stage 5 faith also embraces the possibility of faith as a way of *knowing*.¹⁹⁰ In Stage 5, the logical and the ethereal come into communion. Fowler attempts to describe this nuanced stage by comparing it to light, which is both a wave phenomenon and particles of energy.¹⁹¹ This stage represents the beginning of understanding interconnectedness: “Conjunctive faith suspects that things are organically related to each other; it attends to the pattern of interrelatedness in things, trying to avoid force-fitting to

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 185.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

its own prior mind set.”¹⁹² This removes the either/or dichotomy found in the logic of Stage 4.¹⁹³

The detachment experienced in Stage 5 is especially important: “What the mystics call ‘detachment’ characterizes Stage 5’s willingness to let reality speak its word, regardless of the impact of that word on the security or self-esteem of the knower.”¹⁹⁴ Fowler contends that this detachment celebrates the wisdom that comes from recognizing things as they are prior to imposing control or categories.¹⁹⁵

Stage 5’s detachment, then, is the ability to disconnect from stimuli responses predetermined by an outside authority, which held priority in Stage 3, and instead rely on an internal reality to speak for the self. This ability allows the removal of oneself from the constructs crafted through a specific community or authority and filters the moment through the internal ego, allowing an executive ego to stand. This truth may indeed align with the constructs of the group, just as it would in Stage 3, but the alignment has now been vetted by the executive ego. A person in Stage 4 might reject an idea based entirely upon its relation to the group, but the detachment characteristic of Stage 5 precludes any predetermined response.

Shifting into Stage 5 represents a move toward a post cynical phase, which Fowler suggests allows for a paradoxical understanding of faith: “The new strength of this stage comes in...a capacity to see and be in one’s or one’s group’s most powerful

¹⁹² Ibid., 185.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial, and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality.”¹⁹⁶ Essentially, Stage 5 is the time in a faith journey when one finds deep meaning in the collective ideals reflected within communities of faith and proven to be true through the inner self while simultaneously acknowledging that distortions may be present in one’s thoughts. A person at Stage 5 is thus able to experience a challenge to worldview as an opportunity for growth, without creating a crisis of faith or a break in community relationship.

Thus, Stage 5 moves an individual to a capacity of greater room for others without being subject to the judgment of others. For Fowler, the “interconnectedness” of Stage 5 is a quality of maturity beyond the “individuation” of Stage 4. One embraces that truth is more multidimensional than previously believed: “Conjunctive faith, therefore, is ready for significant encounters with other traditions than its own, expecting that truth has disclosed and will disclose itself in those traditions in ways that may complement or correct its own.”¹⁹⁷ At first, this may seem feeble or indecisive, but Fowler disagrees: “This position implies no lack of commitment to one’s own truth tradition...Conjunctive faith’s radical openness to the truth of the other stems precisely from its confidence in the reality mediated by its own tradition and in the awareness that that reality overfills its mediation.”¹⁹⁸ This openness to the other represents an ability to take the perspective of others and prepares one for mutual dialogue with different traditions.¹⁹⁹ At this stage, one

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 186.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 187.

¹⁹⁹ Daniel. James Srinivasan, “Mentoring for Faith Development” (PhD diss., Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 1996), 130.

is ready not only to assess and critically evaluate the truth claims of other traditions, but is also capable of embracing similar assessments made of one's own faith.

Stage 6 faith, universalizing faith, is rare.²⁰⁰ Fowler describes this stage as achieved by persons who have become “incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community.”²⁰¹ Practitioners who arrive at Stage 6 are said to have experienced a shift away from self as the center of their experience and have come to see God as central. They are free from political or ideological chains to which others are tied and thus are often subversive to corporate and religious structures.²⁰² Yet Fowler clarifies that those at Stage 6 also are also inclusive of community, have a radical commitment to justice and love, and exhibit a selfless passion for a transformed world.²⁰³ This commitment to transformation is reflective of the reality of God, who does the same for structures of life and faith.²⁰⁴ While Fowler acknowledges those in Stage 6 are not perfect, he does suggest that God plays a role in their maturity, suggesting that “it is as though they are selected by the great Blacksmith of history.”²⁰⁵

The stages of faith proposed by Fowler offer individuals an opportunity to examine current stages while looking to what could be ahead. Yet, the stages of faith themselves are merely indicators not components of a Christ-like faith. As Willard's

²⁰⁰ Fowler, “Stages of Faith,” 200.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 200.

²⁰² Ibid., 201.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 204.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 201.

definition of spiritual formation suggests, the stages of faith reflect the process: “Spiritual formation in Christ is the process through which disciples or apprentices of Jesus take on the qualities or characteristics of Christ himself, in every essential dimension of human personality.”²⁰⁶ The taken-on qualities and characteristics of Christ lead to an understanding of spiritual growth.

Summary

Measuring spiritual growth is a difficult task. There is no formal test or scale to analyze how much grace one has, or a meter to quantify love. Yet Fowler’s work in *Stages of Faith* suggests that there will be a transition through various recognizable stages as one grows more into the image of Christ. Within Fowler’s descriptions of the various stages exist underlying components of spiritual growth that aid in one’s progress through each stage. Fowler’s description of Stage 6 faith reveals that although individuals in this stage are not perfect, they are subversive to all structures in the same way that the reality of God transforms and redeems structures of faith and life. Based on this example, it can be surmised that Stage 6 faith best mirrors the person of Christ, which is the purpose of spiritual growth. On a practical level, this embodiment of Christ and subversiveness to structures is seen in the fruit of the Spirit. Growth occurs as one moves away from acts of the flesh and toward the love, joy, peace, and more that Paul suggests in Galatians 5:22-25.

As seen in this chapter, Fowler’s work contributes to the idea of implementing elective stress for spiritual growth by helping identify stages common to spiritual growth. Thus, if elective stress is to be useful for spiritual growth, it must show that it can help a

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 152.

practitioner progress through those stages of faith. While the discipline of elective stress could be beneficial to a practitioner in most any stage of faith, it would be most useful to individuals in Stages 3, 4, and 5. Individuals in Stages 1 and 2 would likely be too young to safely participate, and, as noted later in this chapter, Stage 6 is a rare achievement, with Fowler listing only a few examples of individuals known to have captured the essence of this stage. Presumably, individuals would have the physical and emotional capacity to meaningfully participate in the physical challenges suggested by the concept of elective stress by about the time they enter puberty, which often corresponds with Stage 3. Chapter six will explore further how elective stress as a spiritual discipline has the potential to support participants in movement through the stages of faith.

CHAPTER 6

A Model for Practicing Elective Stress as a Spiritual Discipline

In the previous five chapters, a foundation has been laid for synthesizing the concept of posttraumatic growth, aspects of Christian history, and the use of spiritual disciplines in fostering spiritual growth that will be evident at various stages of faith. Chapter six combines information on all these topics to offer a model for practicing elective stress as a spiritual discipline. To introduce this new discipline, it is necessary to establish a step-by-step model for practicing elective stress as a spiritual discipline. This model will be presented throughout the rest of this chapter.

Becoming a practitioner of elective stress requires the engagement of self, Spirit, and community in conjunction with undertaking a physical practice designed to challenge an individual beyond typical self-efficacy. Elective stress as a discipline, thus, is a modern form of *askesis*, as it serves as a training regimen for spiritual growth. This chapter introduces a new practice while recognizing that structures alone do not create spiritual growth. Fowler warns that a person “can exhibit...structuring in relation to quite other theological or faith contents and orientations”²⁰⁷ as a reminder that the acts do not inherently nor necessarily create spiritual growth toward the image of Christ.

Post-traumatic growth and Christian spiritual practice

The model presented in this chapter seeks to offer a practice to be utilized by a church leader who would use the model to guide a group of practitioners through an elective stress practice. The model lays out the steps a leader would take to guide participants through the discipline and addresses how to measure the growth that occurs

²⁰⁷ Fowler, “Stages of Faith,” 249.

throughout the experience.

Elective stress as a spiritual discipline is executed through participation in five steps: (1) listening, (2) mindful meditation, (3) contemplation, (4) communal response, and (5) formation. This process reflects influences from psychology and theology and uses a structure similar to Calhoun's comprehensive model of PTG, which has likely influenced the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. The CSF structure provides a useful model for elective stress because it was developed to prepare soldiers who have chosen to participate in a stress-inducing environment prior to their experience of any traumatic events, whereas most posttraumatic stress programs currently are used with subjects after they have experienced trauma. Additionally, the CSF represents a collection of people sharing a common identity (soldiers) who are journeying through an experience communally, which is similar to the community aspect of an effective spiritual discipline. Thus, the preventative aspect and communal element of the CSF align with the purpose of elective stress, although its components have been analyzed through a lens of spiritual formation, which shifts language and actions from a psychological tool to a process that engages Christian spirituality.

Psychology in Christian spiritual practice

As this chapter integrates psychology and Christian spiritual practice, it is important to note that this integration is not a new concept. In recent years, the concept of integrating the mind into Christian practice has found synergy with cognitive behavior therapy. In 2011, Siang-Yang Tan examined mindfulness and its application in a Christian context. Tan acknowledges the Buddhist background of mindfulness but points out Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic examples that also emphasize awareness of

the present moment and maintains that the benefits of mindfulness align with God's intentions for how creation is to act.²⁰⁸ He contextualizes this in the contemplative traditions, describing the act of "surrendering to God" and God's will and "being mindful of the sacrament or sacredness of the present moment."²⁰⁹ From Tan's perspective, this act of letting go is active and allows one's thoughts to be held captive by God rather than blowing away like "leaves going down a stream."²¹⁰ He writes that the gentle aspect of mindfulness is consistent with the biblical primacy of Christ-like love, specifically noting that this love is of the Holy Spirit and not the result of self-effort.²¹¹

This ability to embrace one's thoughts and take control of their place in one's mind is central to positive reappraisal, and this ability to decenter and examine a situation with fresh eyes allows one to choose a response. This disconnection allows a person to perceive a situation in a way more congruent with the individual.²¹² In the context of faith, this positive reappraisal allows an understanding of how one can become formed into the image of Christ, resulting in a congruence between the self and the divine which is beyond the individual ability to accomplish alone. Thus,

Mindful decentering allows for the possibility of positive reappraisal. For one to reconstrue his or her appraisal of a given event as positive, one must disengage and withdraw from the initial appraisal into a momentary state of metacognitive awareness that attenuates semantic evaluations associated with the event...Once

²⁰⁸ Siang-Yang Tan, "Mindfulness and Acceptance-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapies: Empirical Evidence and Clinical Applications from a Christian Perspective," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 30.3 (2011), 243.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 246.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Garland, 39.

this state of mindfulness consciousness is established, one may redefine or reframe his or her circumstances as meaningful in a way that engenders hope and resilience.²¹³

Metacognitive awareness describes a way of thinking where “negative thoughts and feelings are seen as passing events in the mind rather than as inherent aspects of self or as necessarily valid reflections of reality.”²¹⁴ This concept is seen in scripture, as in 2 Corinthians 10:5, which instructs followers of Christ to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Practicing elective stress for growth is rooted in this ability to reframe difficult experiences as meaningful in the journey to becoming further transformed into the image of Christ.

Garland writes that mindfulness is more like a mode than a trait, thus suggesting it to be an innate psychological function that can be fostered by training.²¹⁵ This is key to the discussion of elective stress: for elective stress to truly be a successful discipline, it must be a trainable practice centered on God.

In considering elective stress as a spiritual discipline, practitioners must recognize that difficulties alone do not shape them into the image of Christ, just as skipping meals for a few days is not the same as the spiritual discipline of fasting. The same is true for the practices utilized in therapeutic models with the aim of fostering posttraumatic growth. For example, decentering and reflective rumination as utilized in therapeutic models seek to bring awareness to the practitioner. Yet in a spiritual discipline, such as the model being established for elective stress, awareness for the purpose of positive

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Teasdale et al., 285.

²¹⁵ Garland, 38.

reappraisal is not the end goal. “While awareness of the present moment is important, it only serves a function to the ultimate purpose of increasing awareness of God.”²¹⁶ It is mindfulness and deliberate rumination on how the discipline forms us into the divine that results in spiritual growth. The function is merely a tool to accomplish a greater purpose.

Guiding the process, means, and outcomes, of elective stress

The model developed here offers church leaders a structure for leading a group through the practice of elective stress. This model is ideally suited for a leader in a congregational context such as a minister or lay leader. As with other spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, it is possible to engage in the process alone, yet doing so significantly minimizes the impact because the community element plays a significant role. The engagement of one’s community serves as a foundation for almost every component throughout this research: therapeutic models for fostering posttraumatic growth, historical ascetic practices, and contemporary spiritual disciplines. Thus, this model is rooted in communal engagement which is why it presupposes the congregational context.

Once the leader has been identified, development of the discipline can begin. At the very beginning of the process, it is critical that the leader understands the physical limitations of the group. Care should be taken to ensure the safety, health, and well-being of all practitioners. If a participant has any questions about their ability to participate, the group leader should suggest that the participant seek advice from a doctor. A release of liability protecting the church and leader are also an important step in the process.

Listening

²¹⁶ St. Claire, 74.

The first step in the practice of elective stress is guided listening. This first step of listening is itself critical to the process of growth through the stages of faith. As noted previously, Fowler suggests that faith at Stage 4 is a balance between total authority lying in the hands of the community and authority lying in the hands of self. A move to Stage 5 reflects the interconnectedness of community and self. Thus, being open to the voice of the community reflects the detachment indicated by movement into Stage 5 faith. Being in the presence of God through the text of scripture and the voice of the Christian community allows the Spirit to bring inner transformation. Participants must discern together a number of factors before the discipline can begin.

First, participants must develop an understanding of how the practice can contribute to their process of growth. As the intended outcome is growth in faith, the group leader and participants must begin by listening to the community and Spirit to gain an understanding of a starting point. This can allow later assessment to determine whether growth has occurred. The process of listening is best accomplished through a combination of group conversation and individual reflection. Referencing the outline of Fowler's *Stages of Faith* from chapter five of this thesis will allow a leader to help practitioners recognize key characteristics of the six stages of faith. Input from the church community and others engaged in the discipline can support a participant in identifying their current stage. The group leader should also discuss the indicators of subsequent stages of faith to prepare the practitioner for impending growth. Based on Fowler's research and the age in which most people experience specific stages of faith, participants likely fall within Stages 3-5, recapped here with key indicators of each stage:

- Stage 3: synthetic-conventional faith

- Stage in which faith provides synthesis between values and information engaged within new spheres of influence such as school, peers, and media.²¹⁷
- Characterized by an acute awareness of the expectations and judgments of others while not yet having a solid understanding of one's own identity.
- Authority often lies within the consensus of the group with which one identifies.²¹⁸
- Stage 4: individuative-reflective faith
 - One's notion of identity or self is no longer dominated by a group of significant friends or a specific community. Instead, the inner self begins to take a prominent role.²¹⁹
- Stage 5: conjunctive faith
 - Rejoining of unconscious and conscious, which were previously separated between Stages 3 and 4.²²⁰
 - Ability to discern and communicate about the experience of an interior transformation.
 - Ability to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and describe growth in relationship to mentors and community.

²¹⁷ Fowler, "Stages of Faith," 172.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 173.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., 185.

- The possibility of faith as a way of *knowing*, the removal of the either-or dichotomizing logic of Stage 4.²²¹

Whether or not Fowler's stages are explicitly referenced, the group leader should guide participants in engaging the Spirit to give discernment on where they are in relationship to the outcome of spiritual formation, taking on the character of Christ.

This discernment is accomplished through prayer, the text of scripture, and conversations regarding the intended outcome for the discipline. The church plays a key role in providing wisdom, direction, and accountability for any spiritual discipline. Most importantly, the church offers other faithful followers of Christ who can provide critical feedback, allowing one to see where growth needs to take place. The church and Spirit guide participants to an understanding of areas of growth within their lives, and to scriptures that will be beneficial during the journey.

This next step of listening contains three components which may occur throughout the listening process. These three components should be included in the discussions between the group leader, practitioners, and supporting community: 1) selecting an elective stress activity, 2) selecting a biblical text on which to meditate throughout, and 3) implementing the practice of visualization.

Selection of stress

A key component to the process of elective stress is found in the word "elective." Individuals actively chooses to participate in an event or activity that is generally outside their range of regular personal experience. As previously noted, *self* is one of four components to spiritual growth, and it provides intention in electing for growth to occur.

²²¹ Ibid., 184.

The simple choice of a stress experience is in fact the first step on a bigger journey of spiritual growth, and suggests that the participant is either transitioning beyond Stage 3 or has already passed this point.

The selection of the elective stress practice should be based on two components:

1) a practice that provides an experience beyond one's self-efficacy, and 2) a group of willing participants. The ideal size for the discipline is subjective based on the leader, group, and activity, but the group size should allow for communal conversations and regular gatherings. A group of four to twelve people should allow for regular gatherings in which all participants can share and discuss openly in a reasonable amount of time. For a larger group, elective stress could be executed within a small-group format, where various groups of four to twelve participants are being guided collectively.

While elective stress could be implemented in a variety of contexts, this thesis uses a multiday trekking expedition as a model because such an activity provides an opportunity for a wide variety of people to participate. Trekking, also called hiking, allows for variations in distance, backpack weight, comfort levels, and intensity. For example, a trek could be three days long, cover a distance of twenty miles, and require participants to carry a light backpack, which would provide an experience outside the range of one's self-efficacy for many people. Based on the participants, the difficulty of this same trek could be increased significantly by the addition of team weights for each person to carry or by pushing the group to finish a set number of miles in a specific time frame. Additionally, a trek offers the opportunity to engage participants in conversations before, during, and after the experience. Thus, a trek serves as an easily modifiable elective stress practice.

Selection of Text

The process of listening to the Spirit and community, guided by the group leader, informs the selection of a text from scripture which will serve as a mindfulness tool. The text should be relevant to the growth the leader wishes to cultivate in the participants, and short enough to be memorized. The leader will guide participants as a group to select a text which will support the desired growth. Intentional thought should be given to selecting a text which will guide the participants to the intended outcome of growing in the qualities of Christ.

It is important for the leader to consider those who are in Stage 3 and Stage 4 during the selection of a text, and participants should be drawn into an understanding of why the specific text was selected. If this is not done, those in Stage 3 could miss an opportunity to look within themselves for synthesis between the text and intended outcome, and they might accept the text as being important simply because the group leader group says so. Participants in Stage 4 might reject the text simply because the group leader chose it. Thus, it is important for the leader to involve the participants in the process, informing them and seeking their input in the selection of the text.

Visualization and Prayer

Visualization helps prepare the mind for the challenge to come and to anticipate the body's response to the experience. The leader should guide practitioners in understanding that they will experience physiological responses to the elective stress activity and that these responses are normal. One way mentally to prepare for these responses is through the process of visualization in which the participant mentally walks through the entire elective stress activity from beginning to end. The leader should

encourage participants to consider moments in the activity that will bring stress, anxiety, or discomfort. At this point in the process of visualization, the participant should consider the body's natural response to a stressor, such as elevated heart rate, anxiety, and fear, and accept them as normal—yet challenging—reactions to the experience.

As noted earlier, exterior crises can affect the way one sees oneself, rupturing the outer persona. The “normal coping systems are taxed, and it becomes impossible to maintain the façade that heretofore has given definition to much of a person's life.”²²² As the practitioner visualizes the moments of stress, one's attention should be drawn to God to reflect on how one can grow in this point of challenge. These moments of stress can challenge the façade, or exterior, forcing one to engage with the interior self and further rely on and commune with God. Additionally, the leader should guide participants in repeating the selected text out loud during the visualization process. This serves as a reminder that this process is not completed alone, but that a community of people are all pursuing growth through challenge together.

The leader closes the pre-discipline preparation with a prayer for the Spirit of God to use these moments to draw the practitioners into a deeper connection with the peace and comfort of God. This sets the intention for the self to be actively engaged in the process, standing ready for the synergy between self and Spirit to occur. This prayer is not a prayer for escape, but one for endurance and communion with the divine in the midst of adversity.

These components of listening can and should occur regularly prior to engaging in the discipline. In the example of this trek, the leader should schedule a minimum of three

²²² Driskill, 37.

gatherings for the entire group, walking them through the selection of the elective stress practice, selection of a text, and the visualization process. After these meetings have taken place and the steps above have been accomplished, the group is prepared to begin.

Mindful Meditation

At this point, the elective stress practice begins. From the onset, mindful mediation serves as the tool in which one invokes the work of the Spirit. This can occur throughout the duration of the activity, but should particularly be utilized during moments of challenge. Without this component of connection with the Divine, the practice is merely another activity in the day. The invocation itself does not bring the Spirit to one's presence, as the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:20 remind us that "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Instead, meditation serves as an opportunity for the self to convey to the Spirit that one is ready and willing to engage in the synergy, as mindfulness puts one in a position for decentering to take place.

Mindful meditation takes place during the elective stress activity when the practitioner implements Garland's mindful coping method. Using mindfulness, the participant reappraises the stimulus in a positive light to facilitate a positive emotion and reduce stress in the moment, resulting in an adaptive response to the stressor. In the midst of the activity, the participant repeats their mindfulness mantra (i.e., the passage of Scripture) during difficult moments in order to rely on the Spirit. This process allows for decentering, disconnecting from "doing" and moving toward "being" in the presence of God. In the example of a trek, as the practitioner faces a particularly challenging portion of the trail, it can be easy to focus on the physical discomfort or the feeling of being out of breath. Decentering is the process of mental assessing the present moment, analyzing

that an elevated heart rate, increased breathing, and moderate discomfort in the legs is the body's natural response to walking up hill. It is in this moment of awareness that one can shift from focusing on the challenge to a deeper awareness of the presence of God. The movement from "doing mode" to "being mode" represents a move from the outer to interior aspects of self. Trekking in the being mode allows the practitioner to go to God in prayer or concentrate on the biblical text. This positive reappraisal cycle can facilitate a change in the interior person that results in a change to the exterior.

In the example of a trek as an elective stress practice, it is not expected that the participants exist in a state of mindful meditation throughout the duration of the activity. This process should flow naturally. The group leader should remind practitioners before and during the discipline that mindful meditation is a tool in moments of challenge, but that the experience is communal. Participants should feel free to engage in conversation, laughs, and enjoyment of the activity, yet know that the mindful meditation practice can be implemented at any time.

Contemplation

At the conclusion of the practice, the leader of the group should guide practitioners into a time of contemplation. Examining one's experience in the aftermath of the practice with the Spirit draws one into a period of thoughtful reflection, or contemplation, on the experience. This contemplation immediately following the activity should include a mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention activity. This process includes a body scan (paying attention to sensations throughout the body) and mindfulness meditation, both of which can enhance one's awareness of particular

emotional experiences.²²³ A body scan can be conducted by sitting calmly and drawing your attention to the feelings throughout the body, starting at the feet and working all the way up and throughout the body. Becoming aware of the pulse, the feeling of sweat on the skin, or soreness following an activity can allow the space for adaptive or appropriate responses, instead of maladaptive responses such as intrusive rumination.²²⁴ For example, at the end of long day of trekking it would be simple to arrive at a campsite and begin setting up for dinner, building the tent, or rolling out a sleeping bag. Doing this without first pausing to reflect on how one was formed is a missed opportunity to move one's mind from the difficulty of a hard trek to the spiritual formation that occurred.

During this contemplation, it is necessary to examine two components of self: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Following the body scan, the practitioners should continue to remain still and ask themselves the following question: how has God led and transformed my life through this practice? This intrapersonal question reminds the practitioner of the role of the self in the spiritual discipline process, acknowledging that this was an intentional practice engaged in to connect with God, and also that God played an integral role. The second component, the interpersonal, moves the participant to consider how the practice affects one's community. During this time of contemplation, the practitioner should ask: how has my experience affected my understanding of my role within the community of faith?

At the conclusion of this time of contemplation, the leader should release the

²²³ St. Claire, 35.

²²⁴ Ibid., 9.

group to continue with their activities. In a trek, mindful meditation and contemplation can occur on a daily basis throughout the experience. At the culmination of the experience, the leader should inform the group that there will be a follow up gathering within one week of completion of the discipline. This week-long time frame allows space to recover from the experience and for the experience to seep into the mind. After a week, the practitioners should reconvene to participate in the last two steps.

Communal Response

Upon reconvening, the group leader will guide the practitioners through a time of communal response. As previously noted, elective stress as a spiritual discipline must impact the Christian community for it to be effective in transforming self and others. This communal response is accomplished through self-confrontation, cognitive reconstruction, and composing a new narrative. These three steps help a practitioner become a contributor to the community through sharing a personal story.

A key component to all of Fowler's *Stages of Faith* is the concept of community. As one transitions through various stages, the relationship with community also changes. In Stage 3, the community plays a strong role in the development of one's beliefs and actions. Stage 4 begins to challenge this community attachment, questioning whether the communal voice aligns with the internal self. Stage 5 finds synergy between the two, and Stage 6 represents a sense of selflessness for the good of the community, so much so that persons best described by Stage 6 "frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate."²²⁵ Thus, like the self and the Spirit, the community and the individual are also in a dynamic relationship, with the ultimate goal of synergy, rather than dominance. The

²²⁵ Fowler, "Stages of Faith," 200.

importance of this synergy is reflected in Mooreland and Issler's definition of a spiritual discipline.

In Luke 8, Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac who had been living in the tombs away from society. After the healing, he begs to go and be with Jesus. Yet Jesus' response is clear, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39). Just as it was with the demoniac, an experience with Jesus should be woven into one's narrative, with participants proclaiming throughout the town how much Jesus has done for them. Thus, this time of sharing is not simply about telling of the experience. Rather, it "becomes an opportunity to hear our stories and the stories of others with an eye to the work of the Spirit in our daily lives."²²⁶ The narrative of the journey through elective stress is not about the accomplishment of the practitioner, but instead is the narrative of the Spirit at work in the midst of one's effort.

This step in the process has implications for a shift from Stage 3 faith to Stage 4. As Fowler suggests in *Stages of Faith*, this transition between these particular stages occurs when a reliance on external sources of authority is interrupted. This reliance is often found in Stage 3 by an individual whose identity is defined by his or her collective group. For many, the church serves as this collective. Elective stress carries implications for this transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 as it draws a practitioner outside of the church building and into direct relationship with individual church members, offering human engagement, conversation, and the potential for a variety of perspectives that may have been previously unknown through church attendance alone. The elective stress practice creates a space and the potential to break down walls, allowing participants to see

²²⁶ Driskill, 74.

individual identities of other church members within the collective church as a whole.

This communal response and discernment time carries with it the possibility for the inner self to grow in its formation. Practitioners have the opportunity to analyze beliefs, which is an indicator that one has moved from Stage 3 to Stage 4. Fowler describes this as the development of an “executive ego” or “internal panel of experts.”²²⁷ Engaging the community, therefore, is an important component of elective stress as a spiritual discipline.

Within one week of the elective stress activity, the leader should lead participants through the following steps, which have been influenced by cognitive behavioral therapy.

*Self-confrontation*²²⁸

The leader will lead participants in self-confrontation, requiring them to write in journals for fifteen minutes to identify the most challenging aspect of the elective stress. Writing in first person, the participant describes in detail the experience based on all five senses. Being as detailed as possible, the participant describes any fears experienced before or during the activity.

*Cognitive Reconstruction*²²⁹

Cognitive reconstruction begins by reimagining the experience in a positive light, forming a new perspective on the stress experience. An important element to this process is considering how the scripture played a role in the process and acknowledging new insights or perspectives gained by meditation on the passage. The cognitive

²²⁷ Fowler, “Stages of Faith,” 179.

²²⁸ Christine Knaevelsrud, Alexandra Liedl, and Andreas Maercker, “Post-Traumatic Growth, Optimism, and Openness as Outcomes of a Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Post-Traumatic Stress Reactions,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 15.7 (2010), 1034.

²²⁹ Ibid.

reconstruction should lead a participant to identify the moments of challenge identified in the self-confrontation step and then challenge the practitioner to begin to consider growth that has occurred in the process. The leader should encourage participants to think back to the moments where they experienced challenge and to reflect on how the difficulty of the practice led them to a deeper connection with God through the mindful meditation step.

In this step, practitioners should come to a lived understanding of how elective stress can lead to spiritual growth. For example, a practitioner may recognize that the mindful meditation in the midst of the challenge led them to a greater sense of peace in a God who is present in the midst of challenge. Another practitioner may note that the scripture took on new meaning in the midst of the stress. This process of positive reappraisal or reflective rumination can allow the participant to see the event as valuable or beneficial even though the experience was challenging.

*Composing a New Narrative*²³⁰

The next step of communal response is to compose a new narrative. In this step, the participant writes a supportive letter to a friend preparing to go through the same experience. In the letter, the participant should reflect behavioral patterns and push back against dysfunctional intrusive rumination. For example, the letter would encourage a friend not to fear the physical challenge that would come from a multiday trekking trip. This instant response is an intrusive rumination, causing fear about an event that has not yet occurred in the person receiving the letter. The practitioner, having just completed the experience, has the wisdom to write that stress is actually a tool for growth. The letter

²³⁰ Ibid.

should include potential benefits of the elective stress for the person's life, sharing the lessons learned from it and how scripture played a key role in drawing the practitioner into communion with God through mindful meditation. The group leader should inform the participants that it is not necessary for this letter to be actually sent in order to achieve personal growth, as the growth can come simply from putting words to paper. However, *it is* important that a spiritual discipline support the formation of the Christian community; therefore, these letters play a role in drawing an entire church into the formation process. This communal response and sharing not only informs others of the experience, but also serves as a model for those looking for similar growth. Therefore, the letters should be sent to complete this step of the process.

Formation

The ultimate measure of a spiritual discipline is how it forms an individual more into the image of Christ. As Willard writes, "Spiritual formation in Christ is the process through which disciples or apprentices of Jesus take on the qualities or characteristics of Christ himself, in every essential dimension of human personality."²³¹ Thus, elective stress and all spiritual disciplines must lead to disciples who take on the characteristics of Christ. As noted in chapter five, James Fowler differentiates between the *content* of faith—what a person believes—and the *structure* of faith—how a believer's life conforms to their faith.²³² For elective stress as a spiritual discipline, the practice is merely the structure. If one participates in the structure of any spiritual discipline, such as skipping meals while fasting, yet has not grown in the content, the formation has not been

²³¹ Willard, "Spiritual Formation and the Warfare," 152.

²³² Ibid., 249.

accomplished. Fowler warns that structure alone does not lead to faith in Christ, noting that many exhibit faith structures but see the world no differently than atheists or agnostics.²³³ Formation is reflected by transformation which takes on a living acknowledgement of the work of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual formation process. The content of faith—including notions of God, understanding of the church, and views on sin and salvation—is critically important. Thus, while it provides tools for the journey, the structure must be supported by the Spirit for growth to occur.

A spiritual discipline that does not result in one looking more like Christ is simply a discipline without the spiritual part.

In Galatians 5, Paul lays out a list of things that result from being connected to the vine of the Spirit, all of which should be more evident in the aftermath of a spiritual discipline. Paul gives emphasis to the Spirit as being the giver of Christ-likeness as it is from the Spirit not the structure that growth comes.²³⁴ Galatians 5:22-25 says,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

This final step in the process comes full circle to the communal aspect of the practice. The practitioner must maintain a connection with one's spiritual director or community throughout the process, even following its completion. This community provides the mentorship and accountability to support the assessment of the growth toward the fruit of the Spirit. The ongoing communication between practitioner and

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Painter, 57.

community allows for honest appraisal of any growth which has occurred. The reward for growth in Christ, while providing some benefits to self, actually offers its greatest gift to the broader community in which one exists. The love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which are indicators of the fruit of the Spirit, are cultivated on the inside yet carry outward facing results.

Elective stress and progress in faith

Ultimately, the goal of any spiritual discipline is to foster spiritual growth.

Elective stress offers this as a possibility. The five steps listed above create a space for the four components of spiritual growth (self, the Holy Spirit, community, and growth in the Spirit). The stress provides an opportunity to rupture the outer level of one's persona, and the disciplines of listening, mindful meditation, contemplation, and communal response allow for a deep connection with the Spirit, which can result in formation. As noted previously, spiritual disciplines can play a role in cultivating the growth needed to move to the next stage of faith. For example, a person in Stage 3 may reject mindfulness as a tool simply because it is not a component of her or his group identity. At Stage 4, one may begin to recognize mindfulness as a tool to come into deeper alignment between self and God. Faith at Stage 5 recognizes that all truth is God's truth, and if mindfulness has the power to create a deeper connection with God, it should be employed to do so within a Christian framework. A person at this stage is prepared to suspend one's own view to enter into the experience of another. The previously held beliefs and perceptions are not forgotten, but are now qualified by multiple perspectives, increased self-awareness, and disciplined subjectivity.²³⁵

²³⁵ Srinivasa, 133.

While some practices suggested by St. Ignatius in *Spiritual Exercises* cross into unhealthy territory, some truths remain. Ignatius suggests that self-awareness for Christ does not lead simply to inner spirituality, but moves one to become what Ignatius refers to as a “contemplative in action.”²³⁶ As with all spiritual disciplines, the role of the self within these steps is impossible to separate from the process. Yet elective stress as a spiritual discipline is inherently communal. The spiritual growth is supported by and has implications for the broader Christian church. This practice, like all spiritual disciplines, has great implications for the community of Christ and the world, which can be transformed by the fruit of the Spirit as suggested in the fifth component of the model listed below. As a practitioner seeks to be formed more into the image of Christ, the ultimate measure of the success of a spiritual discipline success is how that practitioner is moved to be more of a contemplative in action, which occurs when the synergy between self and spirit leads to actions that support the work of God.²³⁷ Therefore, the practice of elective stress seeks to transform the outside world from within an individual.

The self-awareness and communion with the divine that comes in the midst of practicing elective stress is not primary or secondary to service. The Christian is called to both. It is in this interplay between action and connection with God where Christian life is found. Elective stress has the potential to capture the theme of Ignatian spirituality: to know, love, and serve Christ.²³⁸

²³⁶ Smith, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 520.

²³⁷ Smith, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 520.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion: The Importance of Elective Stress as a Spiritual Discipline

As many spiritual disciplines already exist, one may ask if there is a need for new spiritual practices? Common forms of spiritual discipline, such as tithing and fasting, already provide opportunities for growth that the church has recognized for thousands of years. Yet there is value in reworking old rhythms, rules of life, and liturgical resources in a new era. Driskill reminds us that spiritual disciplines are not tools to manipulate God into a relationship with humans:

Those who encounter the holy while using a spiritual practice sometimes believe that if they engage in the practice again God will be there in exactly the same way. People more experienced with spiritual practices understand that being in a relationship with God is not unlike being in a relationship with another person. Sometimes the person is present to us as we anticipate and sometimes not.²³⁹

As one's relationship with God grows and changes, so does the need to continue exploring various ways to connect with the divine. Elective stress attempts to offer a new approach. When practiced with intentionality, elective stress can bring synergy. Physical practice, theology, and psychological tools such as mindfulness and positive reappraisal can be integrated to assist in this process of spiritual formation.

Early Christian monasticism viewed the human body as an important component of the ascetic's spiritual journey toward purity of heart.²⁴⁰ This importance has not changed, but the idea has been lost over time. Although these tools have been at use within Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities for hundreds of years, they have fallen out of favor among the Protestant community. New monasticism and the rising popularity of physically demanding pastimes among Americans sets the stage for a

²³⁹ Driskill, 42.

²⁴⁰ Von Thaden, 209.

unique spiritual discipline. Elective stress, a modern form of healthy asceticism, offers a new approach to being intentional with the body to accomplish the goal of being more formed into the image of Christ. With intentionality, Christians can explore the use of stress as a tool that can help form practitioners into the image of Christ.

In the contemporary American context, as physical challenges draw increasing numbers of participants, a lack of structure for using the body results in a missed opportunity for spiritual growth. The components necessary for such an activity are in place: Christians regularly engage in physical challenges and also desire to grow spiritually. In recent years, participation in obstacle course racing, CrossFit, and other physically challenging practices has swept the nation. While the stage is set, the connection between the popular activities and Christians' desire for spiritual growth has yet to be made. Instruction is necessary to unlock this practice.

Theologian Simon Chan suggests that modern evangelicalism generally struggles with a lack of coherence: "People are told they should pray but are seldom shown how to pray in any systematic fashion."²⁴¹ Elective stress, thus, serves as a systematic discipline by which to enter into communion with the divine using elective stress for growth. Practitioners are not only told they should grow in faith, but are also given a new tool to do so. Elective stress operates as any healthy ascetic practice, not for abusing the body, but instead as a means to "filter out all that distracts from true contemplation of the divine."²⁴² The end goal of elective stress "should not consist solely of heroic gestures

²⁴¹ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 24.

²⁴² Von Thaden, 201.

which are an end in themselves, but aim at opening up the religious to his relationship with God and his neighbor.”²⁴³ As new disciplines are explored, intentionality is necessary to capture the Ignatian principle of “seeking God in all things.”²⁴⁴ Thus, elective stress offers a timely integration of Christian spirituality and recent research in posttraumatic growth in a culture that seeks challenges. As research indicates, spiritual growth can occur in the midst of challenges. Thus, utilizing elective stress to foster spiritual growth serves as a culturally relevant opportunity to engage the self, the Holy Spirit, and the community, which results in growth by the grace of Holy Spirit.

²⁴³ Palmisano, 218.

²⁴⁴ Smith, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 519.

APPENDICES

Figure 1²⁴⁵**Post Traumatic Growth Inventory**

Client Name: _____ Today's Date: _____

Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of the crisis/disaster, using the following scale.

0 = I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis.

1 = I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis.

2 = I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis.

3 = I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis.

4 = I experienced this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis.

5 = I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis.

Possible Areas of Growth and Change	0	1	2	3	4	5
1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life.						
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.						
3. I developed new interests.						
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.						
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.						
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble.						
7. I established a new path for my life.						
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others.						
9. I am more willing to express my emotions.						
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties.						
11. I am able to do better things with my life.						
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out.						
13. I can better appreciate each day.						
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise.						
15. I have more compassion for others.						
16. I put more effort into my relationships.						
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing.						
18. I have a stronger religious faith.						
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was.						
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are.						
21. I better accept needing others.						

²⁴⁵ "Post Traumatic Growth Inventory," accessed February 20, 2017.

http://www.emdrhap.org/content/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/VIII-B_Post-Traumatic-Growth-Inventory.pdf.

Figure 2²⁴⁶**Post Traumatic Growth Inventory Scoring**

The Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) is scored by adding all the responses. Individual factors are scored by adding responses to items on each factor. Factors are indicated by the Roman numerals after each item below. Items to which factors belong are not listed on the form administered to clients.

PTGI Factors

Factor I: Relating to Others

Factor II: New Possibilities

Factor III: Personal Strength

Factor IV: Spiritual Change

Factor V: Appreciation of Life

1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. (V)
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. (V)
3. I developed new interests. (II)
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. (III)
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. (IV)
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. (I)
7. I established a new path for my life. (II)
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. (I)
9. I am more willing to express my emotions. (I)
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. (III)
11. I am able to do better things with my life. (II)
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. (III)
13. I can better appreciate each day. (V)
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise. (II)
15. I have more compassion for others. (I)
16. I put more effort into my relationships. (I)
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing. (II)
18. I have a stronger religious faith. (N)
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. (III)
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. (I)
21. I better accept needing others. (I)

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

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