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## Spiritual Formation in the Twenty-First Century

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## **Spiritual Formation in the Twenty-First Century**

**Maria Ovando-Gibson**

Thank-you for inviting me to this gathering where, we have come together as pastors, teachers, professors and leaders seeking mutual support and encouragement. We are moving together into a new century, while we wait for the glorious event of all centuries, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In former years we spoke of Christian education in our churches and seminaries today, the words spiritual formation, Christian formation, faith development, spiritual maturity, the Spiritual life and disciplines are terms used to describe the developmental, processing, growing, and intentional maturing of the Christian faith in our personal life, journey or pilgrimage. Having characterized the above, the question I am still asked the most is, "but what does this really mean and how would you define spiritual formation?" After years of study and reflection in this field, I would describe spiritual formation as that awesome work of the Holy Spirit upon the human character that transforms it and conforms it into becoming like Jesus. My favorite text that speaks of this process is 2 Corinthians 3:18 "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (NRSV)

But, what does it mean to be transformed and conformed into becoming like Jesus? Let us look at the life of Jesus for our answers. First, we notice His relationship with the Father. It is such a close one that He states, ..."Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father do-

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ing for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise." "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." John 5:19, 14:10 (NRSV) Yes, Jesus and His Father had an intimate and close relationship, so close that they are part of one another and do not work apart from one another.

Secondly, there is the element of task or service to the Father. Jesus, had the task of coming to manifest and demonstrate to the world the Father's character. "What did he demonstrate in His every word and action?" It was if through Him the Father was saying. . . to each one that Jesus encountered and to each of us, "you are my child, I love you so much, I could not bear to live eternal life without you." Love was the essence of everything that Jesus did, was, and manifested about the Father.

Thirdly, there was a commission involved. Jesus was commissioned to become as in Jacob's dream, the ladder that linked heaven and earth. It was only through His death and resurrection that the hope of eternal life could become a reality. Praise be to God, He fulfilled His commission and the restoration process was secured. It is only through Jesus (our ladder) that we come to God, as He is today our High Priest. This is a glimpse of what Jesus is and was like.

From Genesis to Revelation we also observe the personal lives of men and women, the miracles and work they accomplished as they became more transformed and conformed into the likeness and character of Jesus. They possessed spiritual power yet, they gave the glory to God, boldness yet, they manifested humility, and courage yet, they were completely dependent upon God's faithfulness while living and ministering under the most oppressing, worldly, dark and sinful contexts.

My research indicates that all of our biblical heroes and heroines displayed one or more of the following five spiritual habits that made it conducive for them to be formed and become like Jesus, instruments and communicators of God's love, character and power. I invite you to look, and reflect upon what implications this might have for us as the individuals who make up the church going into the twenty-first century.

#### *1. An Intimate Knowledge and Integration of the Word of God*

Notice that I use the word integration, this is very intentional. These individuals live and hear the Scriptures as the

Word of God to them and to others without a question. They have become part of not only their lives, but integrated into their very vocabulary. The gospels depict Jesus as One who answers with the words "It is written..." in His confrontation with the adversary in the wilderness.

This integrated experience with God's Word acquaints the individual with the Speaker of the words and in this relationship of personal and intimate listening there grows a deep knowledge of God's ways and His character is known and experienced.

### 2. *Time Alone with God*

Immediately after the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew 14:23 tells us, "And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone." Peter Foster comments in his book *Celebration of Discipline*,

In the midst of an exceedingly busy ministry Jesus made a habit of withdrawing to "a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13). He did this not just to be away from people, but so he could be with God. What did Jesus do time after time in those deserted hills? He sought out his heavenly Father; he listened to him, he communed with him. And he beckons us to do the same (pp. 16,17).

Consider the ministry of Jesus, where did His power, stamina, focus and knowledge of the will of the Father come from? I believe it was centered in His time alone with God.

The third point is the balance to our time alone with God.

### 3. *Fellowship and Community with Fellow Believers*

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal that everyday life and ministry takes place in the midst of shared living. Learning, teaching and growing is done in the context of corporate life. This corporate lifestyle continues on in eternal life, Isaiah 66:22-23 tells us,

For as the heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD; so shall you descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.

There are many applications that come from this principle, but let us go on to the final two and we will come back to this one.

#### *4. Prayer*

The story of the call of Abraham in the book of Genesis begins and unfolds before us insight and example into the life experiences of prayer with God as talking with a friend. This is seen throughout Scripture in the lives of those individuals who were close to God and empowered with His Spirit. Intimate relationship with God through prayer is central and intentional in practice both, in the individual life and in ministry.

#### *5. Gratitude, Faith and Praise*

The Psalms have been the prayer book of many throughout the centuries and reveal the importance of a thankful heart for God's goodness that surrounds us. Praise to God is on the lips of those who experience His presence and joy through the times of blessing as well as through the obstacles, challenges and difficulties. It seems that these two attitudes are partners to faith as well to possessing utmost confidence in God's ability, love and individual concern and attention.

At this moment you may begin to think, "is that all there is? I knew that already." Yes, you do "know" all of the above, the challenge I present to you is to "become" and in the process continue to be transformed and conformed in the likeness of Jesus, developing an extraordinary intimacy and relationship with God, that empowers your ministry and call.

Friends, we too are living as the heroes and heroines of Bible time in a context of sin, darkness and evil. Too often we hear of the demise of our colleagues. Those in ministry see first hand the pain, sorrow and tragedy of every kind of sin that affects the soul, the homes and lives of those in our very congregations. We too, are tempted, tried and know the struggle of sin and the pain of secret failures. The surrounding culture has affected us and we are in danger of thinking that all we need are new methods and techniques to give power and life to our ministries and work.

I entreat you to study the lives of those who have gone before us as depicted in the Word of God, consider again, what would it mean to you if you integrated the five suggestions for spiritual power and success that we have just looked at together?

What would you become? What would your ministry, teaching and preaching look like?

Let us review and look for examples of application to these in our life today. For those of us who are scholars the obstacle and danger is that we have exegeted, studied and diagrammed Biblical passages so much, that we might approach Scripture having lost the devotional ability to experience and taste God's word again. I invite you to put aside your scholarly knowledge and listen to God's voice speak into your soul.

By contrast, there are some who approach the Bible only devotionally, to these I say, enrich your experience by once again refreshing your research skills. Discover more treasures and add depth to your teaching and preaching. In both instances, experience, listen and become intimate with God through the hearing of His voice speaking to you through its pages.

Sharing and living in community is something that is difficult to hear more about, especially for those of us who live in big cities and are constantly surrounded by people. Yet, the primary factor of importance that I would like to emphasize is the value of accountability. The spiritual journey as that of life, cannot be lived without mutual love, support and encouragement. We must share our struggles, temptations, and challenges as well as our joys and victories.

Time alone with God, is perhaps the most challenging to our modern day existence. I invite you to think of more than just the once a year retreat. Perhaps you can schedule one or two hours once a week to be alone with God in nature. A small park, a country walk is a beginning. Work yourself up to spending a day with God perhaps once a month, and then to a week-end or week once a quarter. What a privilege, what a delight, but most of all how necessary in order to hear God's voice, gather focus, strength, insight, courage and boldness. Spending time alone with God as you share your life with His, is the beginning of an intimate friendship and relationship.

A powerful, meaningful prayer life is an outcome of time spent alone with God. Prayer is an instant retreat into God's presence and the familiarity of His company. Your individual as well as public prayers will be spoken and lived out of your experience and intimate friendship with God.

This will naturally lead to living a life of unceasing praise, heartfelt gratitude and strong faith in a God with whom you are intimately acquainted.

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Behold the spiritual power that can be yours, the rich blessings, the peace, the rest, the focus in both life and ministry, but most of all I invite you draw near to Jesus, be strengthened, encouraged and empowered as you become more like Him. We too, can develop a relationship with Jesus as he had with the Father, one of intimacy and closeness. We also have the task that He has given to us, to manifest and demonstrate His character of love to the world. We also have been commissioned to "Go therefore and make disciple of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:19,10 NRSV).

Let us meet the challenges and obstacles that lie before us in this new century with success, gathering in our numbers and not losing them. Fulfilling our part in the glorious work of redemption as we await the consummation of eternal life. May we all be part of the great heavenly banquet and celebration. I close with the following words, from the apostle Paul,

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...

because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence...

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4: 7-9, 14,16-18. NRSV).

#### Writer

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