

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION

**Introduction:** To understand spiritual formation we start with a study of two passages that will provide a framework for the four exercises that follow.

## *Isaiah 6*

“<sup>1</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” <sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

The first step in Isaiah’s spiritual formation and ours is **insight into one’s own soul**. This insight was shaped by his encounter with a revelation of God’s nature. While we start with an audit of our own lives, we realize that as we come to see God’s nature more clearly, we will then have a clearer view of our own sense of need. I cannot audit my own soul unless I know what I am called to be as one who bears God’s image.

**Questions for discussion:** When was God more than a word for you? When and how have you most dramatically sensed God’s glory and grace?

<sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

The second step for Isaiah and us is a **deep sense of God’s grace** in Christ. Like Isaiah, we must be “touched” by an angel. The third step will be **heart felt repentance** followed by an **assurance of God’s love**.

**Questions for discussion:** How has God shown you that you are forgiven? How do you handle feelings of guilt? What keeps you from sensing God’s grace?

<sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

The end of the process of spiritual formation will be **faithful service**. But this will also involve participation in community.

**Questions for discussion:** Have you ever sensed the call of God on your life? If “yes”, how did you respond? If “no”, what would you expect such a call to be like?

<sup>9</sup> He said, “Go and tell this people: “ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ <sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people callused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

<sup>11</sup> Then I said, “For how long, O Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, <sup>12</sup> until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. <sup>13</sup> And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again

be laid waste. But as the terebinth (a small spreading tree native to Palestine) and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

The harsh reality of ministry is that it will be hard and not always encouraging. We must be prepared of this reality.

**Questions for discussion:** What has been most disappointing to you since starting to follow Christ? How have you managed the disappointments?

### *Matthew 22:37-40*

“<sup>37</sup> You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, <sup>38</sup> this is the great and foremost commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

There are four observations that we must make from this text. These observations can be summarized with four words.

**Spirituality** is the first word. The order of the two commandments is intentional and important. The “great and foremost commandment” is prior to and the foundation for the second. We are called first to relate to God as our Creator, Redeemer, Lord. It is this “vertical” spiritual relationship that provides the context and meaning for the “second” commandment, which is the “horizontal” social relationship. Jesus came for the purpose of dying. As the “Lamb of God”, He was an atoning sacrifice that would reconcile us first to God. Jesus was not primarily an ethical teacher, a social revolutionary, or a community developer, but a redeemer and propitiation for our sins. The good news is not centered in social political reform but in spiritual reconciliation. It is our relationship with God that is of first importance. Spirituality is the foundation of Social connection.

**Devotion** is the second word. We are called to “love”. This is not soft sentimentalism, nor is it a subjective feeling. It is “agape” devotion. It is a commitment to care for, identify with, and prefer others before self. It is a response that is not superficial, legalistic, or intramural. It flows from the depths of our being.

**Socialization** is the third word. Spiritual reconciliation spills over into a social reconciliation as well. The “second” commandment is “like” the first in that it is preeminent. It is not optional. The way we relate to our human “neighbor” will reflect the kind of relationship we have with our Lord and Savior. Spiritual formation is not complete apart from social reconciliation.

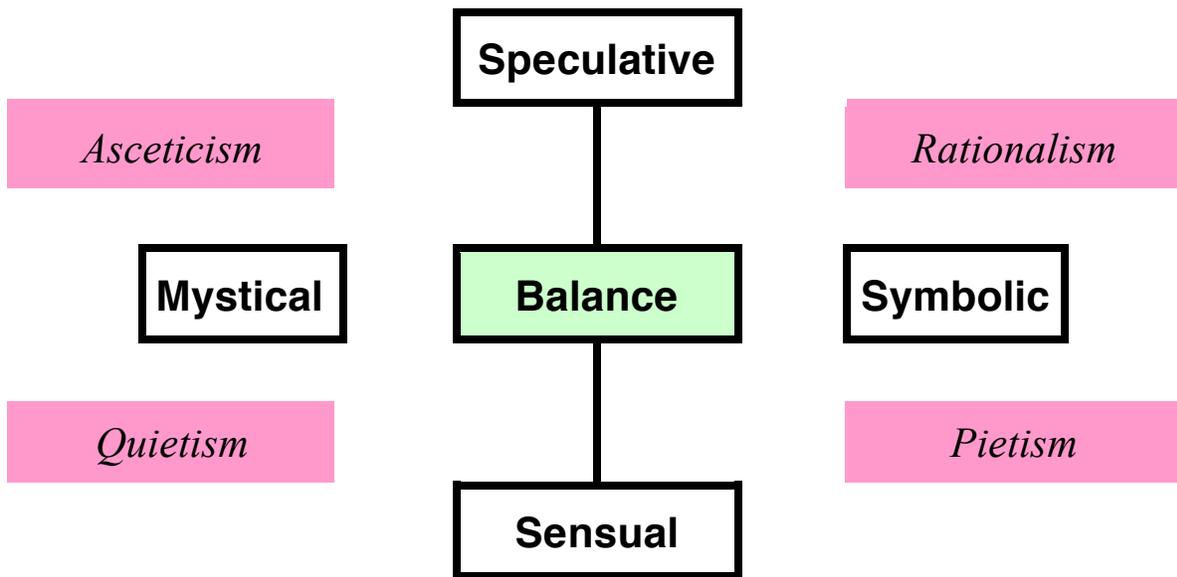
**Integration** is the fourth word. We are called to a holistic response starting with our “heart”. This is not a legalistic duty so much as a passionate impulse that directed by the head, energized by the heart, and expressed through the hands. Spiritual maturity is measured by the degree to which our faith and Christ’s Spirit are integrated fully into every area of our lives.

Each of these words has a counterpart that works to frustrate spiritual formation and development. When we center our spiritual life on the “**our**” and not on the Lord Jesus, we have little more than a “Christian New Age” experience. By the same token, when we define

love as a shallow, fleeting **sentimentalism** (“You make me feel good.”) and not as devotion, we use people as a part of our love choir. Socialization is too often replaced with a selfish **consumerism**. This means that we use people rather than connect with them in a mutually beneficial relationship. Integration is often neglected and replaced with a **compartmentalized** spirituality. We can turn on the spiritual side when it serves us well with little attention as to how the rest of our lives are coordinated with it.

**Questions for discussion:** Which of the four words mentioned above is the area of greatest strength in your spiritual life? What is the weakest? Do you think that your closest friend would identify the same words if they were asked to describe you?

**A. Ways of Experiencing God:** From Urban Holmes’, *A History of Christian Spirituality*



1. The pink areas express the dangers of imbalance when some aspects of the spiritual life are neglected.
2. It should be noted that individual personalities might find themselves more at home in one quadrant than another.
3. This is not a problem unless other quadrants are marginalized, discredited, or excluded as invalid.

**Questions for discussion:** Which of the four quadrants is most common among evangelicals? Why is this so? In which quadrant do you and your friends feel most comfortable or uncomfortable? How could a deeper respect for other quadrants be encouraged?