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SPIRITUAL FORMATION
EXPLORED

Robert M Solomon



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Published by Genesis Books
An imprint of Armour Publishing
Block 1003 Bukit Merah Central #02-07 Singapore 159836
Email : sales@armourpublishing.com
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Website: www.armourpublishing.com

Dedication

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Printed in Singapore

ISBN 978-981-48-0796-8

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PREFACE

There are two kinds of Christians who fail to grow in Christ. The first group has a limited understanding of the purposes of God and limit their salvation experience to the initial conversion. They are right in seeing the necessity of spiritual birth, but wrong at stopping there, in not going on to spiritual growth. Therefore, they remain stunted in their growth and fail to live up to God's glorious purposes for them.

The second group knows the importance of spiritual development and growth, but they give up trying when they encounter difficulties and see the whole process as rather impossible when it comes to them. Missionary Amy Carmichael, who served in India, wrote about such people.

Sometimes when we read the words of those who have been more than conquerors, we feel almost despondent. I feel that I shall never be like that. But they won through step by step, by little bits of wills, little denials of self, little inward victories by faithfulness in very little things. They became what they are. No one sees these little hidden steps. They only see the accomplishment, but even so, those small steps were taken. There is no sudden triumph, no spiritual maturity. That is the work of the moment.¹

Satan's strategy is this. He can make us fail to understand that God is bringing us to the Promised Land and, like the ancient Israelites, fail to understand that the journey involves difficult terrain and time.

We can cross the Red Sea, and not make any more progress. But even as we go through the journey and traverse the desert, we may fail to have the faith to possess the Promised Land, the way the 10 spies who were sent by Moses to survey the land did. They saw the land as pleasant, but saw the giants in the land that had to be conquered, and saw themselves as nothing more than grasshoppers (Numbers 13:33).

Failure to grasp that to be born again is to go on to grow into spiritual maturity in Christ, or failure to appreciate that such growth is a lifelong process of faith, obedience and spiritual discipline is the reason for the lack of spiritual growth among so many Christians.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia, conveying his disappointment at their lack of proper growth in Christ, but also sharing his painful burden and travail “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). I remember my childhood wonder when doing experiments with simple pinhole cameras that I had made. It was marvellous to see the image of a scenery formed on the screen in the camera. The sun that was rising beautifully in the horizon was reproduced on the screen.

What Paul wished for is something similar as far as Christ was concerned. The Lord wants to dwell in us and rule over us, as His glorious character is reproduced in us. Our starting point is often a blurry and distorted image of God (*Imago Dei*), for due to sin, the image of God in us has been marred. But as we turn to Christ, in whose face we behold the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:6), we are then transformed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ, who is the very image of God (2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:4). Diane J Chandler summarises this process by stating that “the origin of Christian spiritual formation derives from God’s making humans in the *Imago Dei*, followed by Christ’s redeeming work on the cross as the ultimate expression of love for fallen humanity and the Holy Spirit’s ongoing empowerment to live a godly life.”²

This is God’s purpose for each of us, as Scripture reminds us, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:29). What the Bible teaches about Christ being formed in us and how God purposes us to be conformed to the likeness of Christ is the basis of what we call spiritual formation.

This book is an exploration of the subject, spelling out what spiritual formation is, and what issues we ought to be aware of, and how spiritual formation takes place in our lives as we practise faith in Christ and exercise discipline as the Holy Spirit guides us according to the Father’s purposes.

Section 1 defines what spiritual formation is, based on the will and actions of the triune God. It discusses how salvation is to be viewed as a process that ends with Christlikeness, and what is important in this process, such as faith, love and relationship, spiritual power, and victory over sin.

Spiritual formation does not take place in a vacuum and always has a specific context. Section 2 explores this by looking at temperament and personality, personal habits, family history, culture and society—how these affect the process of spiritual formation.

Section 3 then goes on to explore key aspects of spiritual formation. Transformation takes place in community and in a holistic way, producing wholeheartedness in us as we are led to grow in multiple dimensions: worldview, moral formation, mission, and the development of virtues. As this happens, we will also have to encounter temptations, self-deception, suffering, and spiritual dryness.

The final section deals with the practice of spiritual formation through regular spiritual disciplines. Emphasis is given to how the Word shapes us and prayer helps us to grow and deepen our lives, and other disciplines such as fasting, attending corporate worship

and being shaped by the liturgy, as well as active service in the church and the world.

It is hoped that this book will help readers understand what is involved in spiritual formation and spur them to get on with co-operating with what God is doing in their lives. We, often underestimate what God is up to in our lives as C S Lewis reminds us in this analogy.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.³

God is not in the business of reforming us. Rather He intends to transform us beyond our expectations or imagination. We need to have some understanding of this transforming grace of God and what it does to us. We also need to submit ourselves to God's will and actions through obedience and the faithful and disciplined practice of spiritual disciplines, giving attention to all aspects of our lives, as God's grace works in, among and through us.⁴

Robert M Solomon

Section One

DEFINING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

The Christian life is a call to follow Jesus Christ by the grace of God. It is based on the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross to save us from our sins, and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit to make us more like Christ. Different words and phrases are used to describe this Christian journey.

The most common word is a biblical word—“discipleship”. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The Lord called 12 men and many others to be His disciples, who He taught and trained as they followed Him everywhere and every day. Except for one (Judas), all of them went on to live the life of a disciple of Christ, many of them dying as martyrs for their Lord.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave specific instructions to the disciples. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and *make disciples* 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, emphasis added).

The main verb in the second sentence in the biblical passage above is “make” as noted in the original Greek construction. The other verbs

(*go, baptise, teach*) are secondary and informed by the main verb. In other words, the acts of going, baptising and teaching are for the clear purpose of making disciples. As has been rightly pointed out by Dallas Willard, we are called not just to make converts. Far more than that we are to make disciples, a truth that is often forgotten—what Willard calls the “Great Omission from the Great Commission.”⁵

The word “discipleship” helps us to keep God’s purpose in mind and helps us to understand what is involved in living the Christian life. It keeps reminding us that we are disciples of Christ. Christian discipleship is the result of an ongoing relationship with Christ.

Another term has come to be more commonly used these days—“spiritual formation”. James Houston and Brian Hindmarsh trace the origins of the term among Protestants in the 20th Century to the post-Vatican II period when Roman Catholic theological educators found new ways to emphasise spiritual formation.⁶ The concept was adopted by the Protestant Association of Theological Schools, and subsequently was embraced as a general concept applying to all Christians.

The term, while rapidly embraced by many, also found critics who saw in its use the diluting of biblical notions of discipleship and the seeping in of mystical religious practices into mainstream Protestant doctrines and practices. While there is some reason to share these concerns because of the way the term “spiritual formation” has been used (or rather misused) in some circles, there are advantages in the way many Protestant spiritual writers have employed the term.

First, the term suggests that the Christian life is a *process*. While the term “discipleship” refers to a life-long “journey *with* Christ” as Kenneth Boa has emphasised⁷, many have forgotten this and think of discipleship in terms of a conversion experience, important as that is. This can be seen in personal testimonies heard in church. “I was like that, but now I am like this” is the basic theme of such testimonies, and

we all rejoice at the person’s story of redemption. However, that story is not complete, for while it focuses on the doctrine of justification by faith (a central Protestant doctrine), it does not go on to grasp the doctrine of sanctification by faith (another important Protestant, as well as biblical doctrine).

The term “spiritual formation” offers a clearer focus on the truth that the Christian life is a life-long process by which we are spiritually formed. There is something that happens between conversion and our entry into heaven—and that process is understood as spiritual formation.

Second, the word “spiritual” points us to a *holistic* view of the entire process. We must avoid artificial dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, between the spiritual and the physical, and between the present and eternity. These polarities are intimately connected by the word “spiritual” which involves all the areas and aspects of our lives—from how we pray to how we use our money, from attending church to how we relate to the poor.

Diane Chandler locates spiritual formation in seven key dimensions of life: spirit, emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, physical health and resource stewardship.⁸ We can add other aspects such as moral formation, community, and so on. The point for us to note here is that spiritual formation helps us to see the big picture and its various parts. If pursued in the right way, it will lead us to a more holistic approach to Christian discipleship and to the lordship of Christ in all areas of our lives. We are meant to live as integrated beings.⁹

Third, the term “spiritual formation” also points us to the place of *spiritual disciplines* in helping us to grow as Christ’s disciples as we respond to God’s grace made available to us in Him and through the work of the Holy Spirit. No one grows into Christian maturity without making regular use of the means of grace (the spiritual disciplines).

We are to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” even as we believe that it is God who “works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13).

Divine grace and the faithful practice of spiritual disciplines are meant to work hand in hand for our spiritual growth.

The concern that the term “spiritual formation” can dilute and distort the biblical message of Christian discipleship can be allayed by defining them properly so that we are guided in our reflections by what is actually based on the Bible’s teachings. We shall proceed to do just that in the next chapter.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term “discipleship”? What are the advantages of using this term? What are common misunderstandings of this term?
2. Consider the three advantages of using the term “spiritual formation”? Which of these appeals to you most? How would you assess your own spiritual growth? Are there any areas in your life that need more attention? How do you think you can do this?

THE TRINITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Any notion of spiritual formation that is not rooted in the triune God is bound to fall short of what we read about the subject in the Bible. We will try to define spiritual formation in this chapter.

Some definitions of spiritual formation are too general and lack proper rooting in God. For example, psychiatrist and writer Gerald May defines spiritual formation as “a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instruction, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavours as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction.”¹⁰ While this definition may spell out some aspects of the process, it does not state the key foundations of spiritual formation.

Realising that such a general definition can be applied in non-Christian contexts, spiritual writer Dallas Willard offers a more specifically Christian and Trinitarian definition. According to him, “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹¹

In a similar vein, American academic Diane Chandler defines Christian spiritual formation as “an interactive process by which God the Father fashions believers into the image of his Son, Jesus, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit by fostering development in seven primary dimensions” (those mentioned in the previous chapter).¹² This is most useful for it clearly defines spiritual formation in Trinitarian terms and refers to how the three Persons in the Trinity are involved in the process of spiritual formation.

For the purpose of this book, we shall define spiritual formation *as the Process by which God the Father calls us with the purpose of conforming us into the likeness of His Son Jesus who is the Pattern for that process, through the Power of the Holy Spirit whose sanctifying work makes available God’s grace and the means of grace to transform us to the glory of God.*

In our definition, we root spiritual formation in the purposes and power of the triune God who is actively involved in the holy process. It is the Father’s purpose that directs the entire process and sustains it with His divine will. God the Son is the divine Pattern for our transformation. God has chosen us to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). God the Holy Spirit does His work of sanctification in our lives to fulfil the Father’s purpose and to help us to be formed into the likeness of Jesus. As James Bryan Smith rightly points out, “Every soul-training exercise we engage in would be of no value if it were not for the work of the Holy Spirit.”¹³

Spiritual formation is thus the result of the combined work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This truth is of utmost importance if the process is to be solidly grounded in the life and will of the triune God. The Source of spiritual formation is God the Father, the Standard is the Son, and the Strength to experience and achieve it is the Holy Spirit.

Our definition also reminds us that it is a process. It is not something that stops at some point in our present existence, as if God’s work in us can be completed in this life. It is an ongoing work as God works within us as we live our lives in our particular contexts and circumstances. It is God’s good work in us that will find final and perfect completion on the day of the Lord. This is what the apostle Paul wrote about to the Philippian Christians. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6, ESV).

We are also reminded that it is God’s grace that makes the entire process possible; without grace, it cannot begin or be carried on to completion. What is begun by grace will be carried on by it till the end. As John Newton’s famous hymn goes, this “grace will lead me home”. To receive God’s grace does not mean we are merely passive automatons. God’s grace activates us, renewing us and helping us to align our wills to His will, and to take steps to cooperate with His will. Theologian Simon Chan helpfully discusses grace as both God’s favour and enabling power.¹⁴ We can say that God operates while we are expected to co-operate with God’s grace through faith and obedience. Or as theologian Les L Steele writes, our spiritual formation is “a result of God’s initiative and our responsibility.”¹⁵

Our response to God’s will will result in His grace making available to us His means of grace—what we traditionally call the spiritual disciplines. These disciplines include such practices as prayer, Bible-reading, worship, participating in Christian community and so on. As we participate in such Christian disciplines, God works in us over our lifetimes to help us grow in Christian maturity and into the image of Christ.¹⁶ Spiritual formation is thus something that happens, not independently of, but in conjunction with our regular practice of the spiritual disciplines as taught in Scripture.

The result of the whole process is the glorification of God, who is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), whose ancient purposes to redeem us will bring glory and praise to Him. Paul's prayer for the Christian community in Philippi is recorded thus: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:9-11).

In tracing out a process of spiritual formation involving growth in knowledge, love, discernment and godliness, Paul attributes the purpose of the whole process to God's glory and praise. That must surely be the grand outcome of all that we are talking about. Spiritual formation is not something in which we glory in ourselves or something that results in spiritual superstars. The glory is entirely God's.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Review the definitions referred to in this chapter. What do you find useful in the working definition of "spiritual formation" for this book? What do you appreciate about it? Can it be improved?
2. Reflect on how the three Persons of the Trinity are involved in your own spiritual formation. Take time to worship the triune God and thank Him. How do you see the place of God's grace and how are you expected to make sure of the means of grace?

SALVATION AS A PROCESS

Like me, many Christians may remember the exact moment or day when they repented of their sins and entered the kingdom of God by accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Evangelicals have emphasised this by telling their stories of conversion and issuing altar calls at their gospel meetings. We even have an acronym to identify those who respond to the Gospel call at such gatherings—PRCs (prayed to receive Christ).

Historian David Bebbington's classic description of evangelicalism with a fourfold characterisation (called the Bebbington quadrilateral) has been very influential.¹⁷ Biblicism (the authority of the Bible), crucicentrism (focus on the cross of Christ), conversionism (the need to repent and express personal faith in Christ) and activism (an active living out of the Christian life and involvement in ministry and mission) are the four marks of evangelicalism; the focus on conversion is one of them. This is a good emphasis and not to be abandoned by Christians. There is, however, one danger we must clearly avoid. It is to reduce our salvation experience to a single event and to forget that it is a life-long process. A new-born baby is reason for much rejoicing and celebration. However, if the baby remains a baby and does not

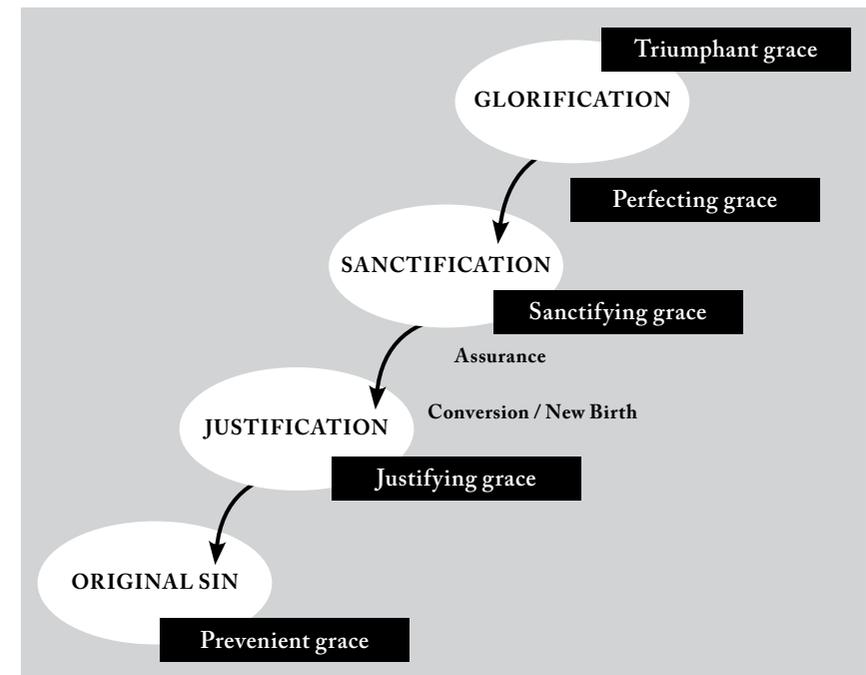
grow into a mature human being, we would know something was awfully wrong.

Parents look at their children and celebrate the key developmental milestones (crawling, sitting, walking, speaking, reading, and so on) with photos and shared news with friends and relatives. There is also quiet assurance that their child is making good progress.

The same principle applies in our spiritual lives. After conversion, we need to grow into mature Christianity. What if there is a lack of such growth? Paul wrote a number of times urging his Christian readers to grow up (1 Corinthians 3:1-5). The writer of Hebrews had the same concerns when he wrote, “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:12-14). Just as a growing child needs to change its diet to suit its growth stages, likewise the growing Christian has to change his spiritual diet, going on to more substantial and “meaty” spiritual food.

How can we understand this process? Theologically, this general pattern of growth has been described as a spiritual movement involving justification, sanctification, and glorification. At each stage, God’s grace works to redeem and shape us into the likeness of Christ, as the diagram on the next page shows.

As John Wesley noted,¹⁸ God frees us from the *penalty* of sin when He justifies us through the completed work of Christ on the cross. Then, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, He frees us from the *power* of sin. This is a long process by which we gain mastery over our sinful tendencies and habits. Eventually God will save us from the very *presence* of sin when He brings us home to heaven.



This truth arises from how the Bible describes the way God saves us. All three tenses are used in Scripture. *We have been* saved (Ephesians 2:8), *are being* saved (1 Corinthians 1:18), and *will be* saved (Romans 5:9). Salvation is a process, a truth that is illustrated in this story from the 19th Century.

Some years ago the Bishop of Durham, England, was Dr Wescott. He was a real saint of God, one of the greatest scholars of his day, a real believer with a great sense of humor. One day he had to make a train journey, and, as English trains then had carriages containing separate compartments for six people only, he sought and found an empty compartment and settled down to read quietly.

Just as the train was moving away from the station, the carriage door was opened, and a young girl in Salvation

Army uniform jumped in. After she had settled herself in her corner she realised that the only other person with her was, as indicated by his distinctive garb, a real live bishop. She hadn't long been converted, and was keen to win others for Christ. Therefore, when she saw a real live bishop, and realised that he would be her companion for at least another hour, she planned how she could lead him to Christ. She assumed that because he was a bishop, in her opinion, he couldn't be a real believer!

Presently she leaned across to the bishop, who was reading, and said very abruptly, "Excuse me, are you saved?"

This short, but unexpected question caught Dr Wescott by surprise, and he said in his kindly way, "Pardon me, but what did you say?"

She immediately thought, "There, he doesn't even know what I'm talking about!" and so explained, "I simply asked if you were saved."

The bishop's face disappeared behind his book and his eyes twinkled merrily for a moment; then, leaning toward her he asked her, "Excuse me, my dear, but do you mean *sotheis* or *sezosmenos* or *sozomenos*?" The girl's face went blank, then puzzled, then startled. Finally she blurted out, "I don't know what you are talking about. I simply asked you—were you saved."

"Yes, my dear," replied Dr Westcott, "I realised that, and I asked you which 'saved' you mean. Did you mean 'I was saved' or 'I will be saved' or 'I am being saved'?"

And the story goes on that for the rest of the journey this great man of God explained to the simple believer the wonder and immensity of God's salvation—past, future and present.¹⁹

The challenge often is in unwrapping the process of sanctification. Evangelicals are clear about conversion and our eternal home, but not so conversant with what lies in between. A road map is often missing, and converts are somewhat expected to make it to the final destiny of their Christian journey without a spiritual map. It is not that we do not have such maps, in Scripture as well as in Christian literature. It is locating such maps that spiritual formation is concerned about.

One Bible passage we can think about in this regard is 2 Peter 1:5-8. "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Notice that Peter gives eight spiritual characteristics that mark the journey from faith to love. We are also reminded of how Paul wrote that, "The only thing that counts is *faith* expressing itself through *love*" (Galatians 5:6, emphasis added). Peter's list seems to offer some milestones for us to think about the Christian's faith journey as he grows in God's love.

A helpful contemporary book on this is Canadian Baptist pastor, Mark Buchanan's *Hidden in Plain Sight*.²⁰ He points out that the virtues listed in 2 Peter 1:5-8 show a picture of the amazing Christian life. If we don't grow in these, we will be ineffective (no impact) and unproductive (no fruit). He shows that these virtues offer goals for spiritual disciplines and exercises. He points out that all the books he has read on spiritual discipline assumed that we wanted more

of God when in fact we have a Jonah heart that wants to run away from God, not wanting Him to intrude into our lives unnecessarily, supervising and breathing down our neck.²¹ The virtues are not some simplistic series; hence we must beware formulaic approaches.

John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a 17th Century work that has been in circulation till today. It is an allegory of the Christian life and is a great Protestant rendering of spiritual formation, spelling out a spiritual geography through which one must travel, facing temptations, trials and attacks as well as receiving help and encouragement along the way.

It is vital that we rediscover such biblical notions of how God saves us both in a moment as well as over a lifetime.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on your own journey as a Christian. How would you describe it in terms of special moments and a lifelong journey?
2. Read 2 Peter 1:5-8. Reflect on the eight virtues that are like milestones or boxes to tick. How would you view your life in terms of these virtues? Is there any of these that need particular attention at the moment?

CHRISTLIKENESS IS THE GOAL

What is the central purpose of God for His people? That was the question that the late British scholar and evangelical leader John Stott tried to answer for many years. He tried various answers, but finally found one that brought deep satisfaction to him. He writes about it in his last book, *The Radical Disciple*. “God wants his people to become like Christ, for Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God” (emphasis added).²²

Stott placed his view squarely on Scripture which tells us that God has predestined His people to be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29). The apostle Paul also put this truth in a slightly different way when he wrote to the Galatians sharing his travails in longing to see *Christ formed in them* (Galatians 4:19, emphasis added).

This biblical truth that the whole purpose of the Christian journey is to see us transformed into the very character of Christ is an ancient one, not only discovered by modern theologians but also held clearly by ancient church fathers. Athanasius was a bishop in Alexandria in Egypt. Before he became bishop, he played a crucial role in the first Ecumenical Council of the Church in Nicaea in 325 AD. He argued against the heretical teachings of Arius, insisting that Jesus was fully