

Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done

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A few scripture passages point us to the place in human personality that is the focus of spiritual formation:

Proverbs 4:20-24 reminds us to keep the words of God's wisdom "in the midst of your heart," and that from there "they are life to those who find them, and health to all their body." (vv. 21-22 NASB) Then comes the exhortation, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." (v. 23)

In Mark 7:15, 20-23, Jesus teaches about the true source of evil in human life: "The things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.... For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, acts of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness."

In Luke 6, he points out that "there is no good tree which produces bad fruit.... Men do not gather figs from thornbushes...." (vv. 43-44) It is the inner nature of the tree that determines its outward product. Likewise, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." (v. 45)

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Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.

The progression of spiritual formation is outlined in various passages of the New Testament. It is most fully spelled out in II Peter 1: "Now since you have become partakers of the divine nature," the writer says, "applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love." (vv. 4-7)

These New Testament progressions always conclude with agape. Agape is the center, the linchpin, of it all. Colossians 3 has a wonderful progression that concludes, "And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." (v. 14) Romans 5 concludes its progression with the words, "because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (v. 5)

If you examine these and related passages you will see that they include a passive element and an active element. And making the distinction between passive and active, and seeing

how they come together, poses--especially for the evangelical understanding--the greatest difficulty in the area of spiritual formation.

We know, as Jesus says, "Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) And I think everyone here will agree with that. It is the initiative of God and the presence of God without which all of our efforts are in vain--whether it is in justification or sanctification or in the realm of the exercise of power, all our efforts will be in vain if God does not act. But we had better believe that the back side of that verse reads: "If you do nothing it will be without me." And this is the part we have the hardest time hearing.

So I have read the above passages to you. "Keep your heart." Well, that's something for me to do. I have the keeping of my heart. I am responsible for it. Do I do it alone? No. If I do it alone, I'll just make bad matters worse. But I have to do it nonetheless. I am the one who has to "give all diligence to add to my faith moral excellence and add to my moral excellence knowledge"--I'm the one. Again: Do I do it alone? No. But if I do nothing, it will not be done.

We have a problem today in Evangelical circles. We're not only saved by grace, we're paralyzed by it. I'm Southern Baptist, and we often preach to you for an hour, telling you you can do nothing to be saved, and then sing to you for forty-five minutes trying to get you to do something to be saved. That's confusing! And, as we look at these verses (many similar ones could be chosen), I hope we can see within them the union of passivity and activity because spiritual formation is something that requires us to take wise steps in accomplishing it. The "old man" will not be put off, and the "new man" put on, unless I do something--and, indeed, unless I do the right things. And so the need as we approach the topic of spiritual formation, is to understand as well as we can what is our part and what is God's part, and take care of our part that God may be able to work with us in bringing us to be the kinds of people that we need to be and he wants us to be. (If the idea that we must do something to "enable" God to do something bothers you, you have just hit a major barrier on the pathway of spiritual formation.)

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Now, spiritual formation talk has emerged within evangelical circles because of a pervasive felt need--felt on the part of many people within the laity as well as within the clergy--for "something more" than the group and individual activities that have been recognized and encouraged in conservative religious circles in recent decades. Especially, as Fundamentalism fell away and our contemporary (post-WW II) version of Evangelicalism emerged, we had a period of great success, and still enjoy that in many, many quarters; but because of the particular dynamics of that period, we came to think that, in the language of some Protestants, "the Word of God is the only sacrament." And what that meant practically was that the sole means of spiritual growth was being taught and "preached at"--that we're saved and transformed by hearing the truths of the scriptures; we're redeemed by the truths which the conservative and evangelical segments of the church rightly stood for. We're saved by believing them, we're sanctified by believing them, and all issues of spiritual growth are dealt with simply by taking the word in through reading it, through hearing it, through exhortation and ministry from the scriptures. Or so we thought. But I think that what we found, beginning some years ago, was that this "method" really does not do everything that is needed or that we thought it would do. And during the period since WW II, especially, we came to accept the marginalization of discipleship to Jesus. We came to see it as something of an option that we might choose to exercise should we wish. But if we would just like to believe the truth

and receive the ministry of the word, and get on with our life without discipleship, that's okay too. And as a result we have now come to the place where we can be a Christian forever without becoming a disciple.

So discipleship was marginalized to something that was a special function. In my circles it always had to do with soul-winning. In the more liberal wing of the church (you know, Sojourners and The Other Side, if you are acquainted with those magazines and the segments of the church they appeal to), discipleship came to mean some type of "social action."

Discipleship in the sense spelled out clearly, through word and deed, in the New Testament was moved out of the center of the Christian life. The subsequent rise of talk about spiritual formation occurred because of the felt (though often unarticulated) need to find something deeper: something that actually lead to the transformation of life, that actually moved people in the direction of "the good tree", that looked into the tangled depths of the heart and said, "There must be a way of doing something about that."

In the path of serious spiritual formation there is indeed (as there always has been) a real possibility of meeting this need for transformation. There is a real possibility of looking at I Corinthians 13, for example, and being able to see that the love that is portrayed there can actually come to occupy the human heart. People can really be like that--"Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." People can be like that, not because they do such things, but because agape love has occupied them effectively as a result of their having learned how to receive it into the deepest part of their being.

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Now I think we are at a crucial point in time, and that the very great promise which currently steps forward in the "buzz" about spiritual formation has three possible outcomes, two of them disappointing ones.

One is that spiritual formation will be lost in the sea of humanistic or "new age" spirituality--in what I am tempted sometimes to call the "Oprahcization" of Western culture. I think that Oprah means well, and there is much good in what she does--certainly much more than with many others in her type of public position. But she is severely misguided on some fundamental points. She now has on her television program a segment called "attending to your spirit," and we should pay attention to what shows up in that segment, asking ourselves how we could deal with the real needs she addresses. The hunger of the human heart that is unfed by what is authentic will go for what is inauthentic. If human beings need something vital badly enough, they may even destroy themselves trying to get it.

I was raised in southern Missouri where the land is mineral poor. Cows and sheep there will find piles of junk or refuse out in the fields or woods and eat old dry-cell batteries and rusty wire and nails to get the minerals that they need, and they die of it. The hunger for spiritual depth that we see manifested across our culture becomes a threat to a meaningful and practically effective understanding of spiritual formation as it should be presented by followers of Christ. And this threat has several forms.

Most are familiar with the Vedic or New Age form, but now secularism itself has a 'spirituality'. Even a mere "culture" has a spirituality to it now. There is a book titled Spirituality and the Secular Quest, edited by Peter Van Ness, in the very well known "World Spirituality" series. And what you have there is simply the claim that secular people have a

'spirituality' too. Spirituality is taken to be simply one dimension of the human being. That's the great divide, because, from the scriptural teachings and the teachings of our traditions in the Christian communities, we know that that is supposed to be right--human beings are, as such, supposed to have a spirituality. And in a sense they do. They remain spiritual beings, with all that implies. But on their own they're dead spiritually. They're cut off from the source of spiritual life. Yet what we are seeing and what we will continue to see is an attempt to take the merely human, dead in trespasses and sins, and make that into 'spirituality', framing it culturally, artistically, and in other ways. Usually 'spirituality' as a purely human dimension has to do with commitment, creativity and meaning.

And so we have not only the Old Age, viz. the Vedic, which is now called the New Age, but we also have secularism as a direction in which the drive to "spirituality" may develop. We could almost speak of "culturalism," because culture is now generally assigned to the area of the spiritual. And I think that in many of our Christian congregations there already exists in the minds of many people a hopeless mish-mash of these two tendencies, the Vedic and the secular. It has already almost totally captured some mainline churches--and some not so mainline, as you find when you begin to talk with people about what they actually think about spirituality and spiritual formation.

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Now all of the spiritualities address, of course, the deep human needs of identity, righteousness and power. They must do so to have any appeal, and recent failure to show how the Christian way deals with those needs is largely responsible for their widespread appeal today.

Who am I? And the culturalisms etc. that pose as vital spirituality, as well as other forms of group identity, step up and say: This is who you are. But in these responses you don't get the sense that what we are meant to be is children of the heavenly Father, with a life that transcends everything that can be found in human culture or actual human nature.

Am I okay? Am I a good person? You will see that all the spiritualities address that issue. Am I strong? And you will see again, the longing for power ("empowerment" is the usual term now) is what is back of all these forms of spirituality, what gives them their appeal.

Well, that's one thing I think we are in danger of seeing happen with the current interest in spirituality and spiritual formation: It may be taken over by these kinds of Vedic or secularist tendencies.

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Another possibility is perhaps more dangerous for those of us here today. It is that spiritual formation will simply become a new label for old activities--for what we are already doing: worship, hearing the word, community, quiet time, plus a new twist or two such as spiritual direction and so on. Now all of these things are very important. But if spiritual formation merely becomes a new label for things we are already doing, it will leave us right where we are. And the issues of deep inner transformation will remain untouched. And I say with trepidation that there is a real danger of spirituality becoming a field of mere "expertise," of academic competence, focused upon "religious activities."

I myself am sometimes introduced as an expert in the field of spirituality. I want to fade into the wall at that point. Spirituality and spiritual formation isn't that kind of thing. And I think that one of the greatest dangers for the cause of Christ today is that we Evangelicals will not understand our need for genuine repentance: repentance, not about what we aren't, but about what we are. Our problem is not caused merely by the fact that we don't do certain things, like love our neighbor as ourselves and so on. It's the very things that we teach and practice about the spiritual life that leave us in the position of not doing the things we should.

Haven't we been told that judgment begins at the house of God? That means, first of all, it begins where I am. I am a man of unclean lips who lives in the midst of a people of unclean lips. I have to own this. We have to own it. And sometimes the uncleanness of our lips simply comes from the fact that we use the language of our culture, and sometimes our religious culture, which may in fact be full of unperceived godlessness. We need to recognize that fact. What are we as Evangelicals, as religious Conservatives, or as Christians generally doing to bring about the kind of deepening called for by the turn to "spirituality" in our times? And is it really true that we just need to do what we are already doing, but more or better? Or do we need to do something different?...We need to do something different.

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Now the third possibility is that "spiritual formation" could become a term for those processes through which people are inwardly transformed in such a way that the personality and deeds of Jesus Christ naturally flow out from them when and wherever they are. In other words, it can be understood as the process by which true Christlikeness is established in the very depths of our being. Thus multitudes of men and women could be brought forth from generation to generation to be, unapologetically, Christ's redemptive community: the true "city set on a hill," of which Jesus spoke, established in the midst of the earth now, as it shall be for eternity in the midst of the cosmos. (Eph. 3:10; Rev. 22:5) We could become a true "society of Jesus." We could be the life-transforming salt and light in a darkened world which God has always intended his covenant people to be.

Spiritual formation could and should be the process by which those who are Jesus' apprentices or disciples come easily to "do all things whatsoever I have commanded you." What I call "the great omission from the great commission" is the fact that Christians generally don't have a plan for teaching people to do everything that he commanded. We don't as a rule even have a plan for learning this ourselves, and perhaps assume it is simply impossible. And that explains the yawning abyss today between being Christian and being a disciple. We have a form of religion that has accepted non-obedience to Christ, and the hunger for spirituality and spiritual formation in our day is a direct consequence of that.

Sometimes Christian trinkets can be very instructive. There is a map that is sold in Christian bookstores. One of these hangs in the foyer of a large church in the San Fernando Valley. It's one of those old-fashioned maps that has monsters drawn around the edges and everything is out of proportion to what we now know to be true of world geography. Under the drawing of the continents it has the words, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations." This is a Charismatic church, so it continues, "baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And then what comes next? An ellipsis, "..."! Then, "And lo, I am with you always."

You have to ask yourself what kind of a thought context that Christian trinket came out of. The people in that church--and it is a good church--walk by this map every week. No one has ever noticed the problem.

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When we talk about spiritual formation we are talking about framing a progression of life in which people come to actually do all things that Jesus taught. So we are obviously going for the heart. We are aiming for change of the inner person, where what we do originates. I have already indicated my view that, biblically and systematically, it is appropriate to identify the heart and the spirit of the human being and the will as roughly the same thing. The spirit is that part of the human being that has the capacity of moving without being moved. It is the depth of the human being where freedom really exists. It is that part of us that is self-determined. That's the heart. That's why evil and good come out of the heart, it's because that's the part of us that is really us. It's really ours. And spirit is of that intensely personal nature.

God is spirit. God is wholly self-determined. We are self-determined only in a very small way. And this part of the human being--the spirit, the will, the heart--is the place where the work of spiritual formation has to be done. You remember the words of Samuel: "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart." And functionally the will is the executive center of the self. When it comes to life in God through the new birth, its task is then the re-formation of the whole self in co-operation with God. Will is not exactly character, but is formed into character as it becomes habitual and automatic.

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Now I must discuss will a bit further. You find human will in three dimensions or conditions. First of all there is what I call vital or impulsive will. This is a willing that is outwardly directed and moved by and toward things that are simply attractive. You see this in a baby. A little baby very quickly begins to be attracted to things, to reach for them, and move in relationship to them. And that's all there really is to will in the baby. If the will does not develop beyond this stage, it threatens to be identified with the person, and in our culture modern thought encourages identification of the person with the will rather than subordination of the will to the whole person living in God's world. Thus, "I want to" and "It pleases me" are now widely regarded as overriding reasons for doing something in our culture, when in fact it should never function alone as a reason for action. The meaning of the cross of Christ in human experience is that it stops any mere "I want to" from functioning as an adequate reason for action. The cross is therefore central to the moral life of humanity.

But there is also reflective will. The reflective will is oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not merely to what is desired. And so we have the conflict that we all know too well, as human beings, between the good and the bad, and the good and the not so good, and the good and the better. This conflict goes on constantly in our lives, and it trips up people at all levels of life in our Christian circles. That happens in cases where, for whatever precise reason, the reflective will has not effectively guided life.

Now when you bring the reflective will to life in Christ and add the instruction of the law and the person of Christ, along with the fellowship of his body, you then have the wherewithal to live in such a way that God is glorified in every thing that you do. The anticipation of this is

reflected in such great passages as Colossians 3:17: "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him." That becomes a real possibility. Inward transformation toward inner likeness to Christ makes it increasingly actual. Reflective will is the will oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not toward the merely desired.

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So I'm hoping that you now have these two ideas: vital or impulsive will, where you simply choose what you desire, and reflective will, where instead of just doing what you want, you choose for what is good--and especially, as Christians, what is good under God, in the kingdom of God. Now I have to add the idea of embodied will. Embodied will is where one of the other two has sunk down into your body to such an extent that you automatically do what they dictate. And this is the standard situation for most human beings on earth. Their body is running their life from choices that have formed their will and positioned it in their body.

Take the case of Peter's denial as an illustration. That was an exercise of his embodied will. Peter did not reflect on the situation and then decide what to do. When he was faced with the accusation of association with Jesus he blurted out the denial. That is embodied will for evil. Peter reflected after the fact and discovered what he was really like inside.

To take another example, when people are reviled, what do they normally do? They revile in return. When they are hurt, they hurt back. That's embodied will as it exists in a fallen world. When you are driving on the freeway and you don't do what someone thinks you should, they may honk their horn at you, or they may give you the one-fingered salute, or they may do all sorts of things--they may shoot you. They do that in California. Well, the responses that then arise are expressions of embodied will. When someone "disses" another person, the other person does not say, "Hum. I have been dissed. What shall I do?" No. It's WHOOSH! Just like that. That's what I call an "epidermal response," because it lies right at the surface of your 'skin'--your thought and feeling.

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If you've got that picture, I hope I can now say very clearly what it means to have been spiritually formed in Christ, for spiritual formation in Christ transforms your embodied will. It transforms your embodied will so that what comes out of you automatically are the words and deeds of Christ. Now we never get to the point where we can stop thinking about our responses. We will always have to reflect. We will always have desires we should not act upon. There's nothing wrong with desires in themselves. It's when they become our masters that the wrong comes, which is the common circumstance in human life.

So let me say to you very formally: Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will. It is the process through which (and you know Gal. 4:19) Christ is formed in you and me. Think of Paul's magnificent statement: "The life which I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Not faith in, but the faith of. I have taken his faith into me. I am now being inwardly the person that Christ has called me to be, and this inward faith has now spread throughout my socially embodied self.

Let me be as clear as possible. When we speak of spiritual formation we are speaking of the formation of the human spirit. And the spirit is the will or the heart and by extension, the character. And that, in practice, lives mainly in our bodies. The one reason why the idea of spiritual transformation through being merely preached at and taught doesn't work is because it does not involve the body in the process of transformation. One of the ironies of spiritual formation is that every "spiritual" discipline is a bodily behavior. We have to involve the body in spiritual formation because that's where we live and what we live from. So now spiritual formation is formation of the inner being of the human being, resulting in transformation of the whole person, including the body in its social context. Spiritual formation is never merely inward.

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Now contrast that. Many people will speak of spiritual formation with reference to a particular tradition. For example, there's a Benedictine tradition in the Catholic church, and a Franciscan one. And I assure you that with reference to every Protestant group, there is a "spiritual formation" that qualifies those in that group to be one of that group, no matter if the language, "spiritual formation," is used to refer to the process involved.

I got on a plane in Chicago some time back to go to Louisville to speak at the Southern Baptist seminary there, and I'll tell you almost everyone on that plane looked like a Southern Baptist. Now you say, "What does a Southern Baptist look like?" I couldn't tell you if I had to, but they sure look that way, whatever it is. And I believe you will recognize that for such groups there is a set way of acting, speaking, doing things--of course this involves doctrines and church order and so on as well--and one way of speaking of spiritual formation is to say that people are being formed to do that. They're being formed in _____ group culture. You fill in the blank.

And this is where culture becomes tremendously important. Please don't understand me as saying there's anything wrong with culture. It is absolutely essential to human beings to be socially embodied. This is a part of the "vessel" that contains the treasure (II Cor. 4:7), and none of us escape it. We are all shaped in some such way. But that isn't spiritual formation in the sense in which we speak of Christ being formed in you and in which Paul could say "I was determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." We go beyond all those group differences in genuine spiritual formation in Christ, and this is the true ecumenicism of the Christian church across the ages and across faith-and-practices. We reach the unity of obedience to Christ from the inward formation of "Christ in us, the hope of glory."

And yet another contrast must be drawn. Sometimes we think of spiritual formation as formation by the Holy Spirit. Once again: That's essential. We can't evade it--formation by the Holy Spirit. But now I have to say something that may be challenging for you to think about: Spiritual formation is not all by the Holy Spirit. None without the Holy Spirit. But there's always more involved. And here again we run into the problems of passivity over against activity. Here lies the deepest challenge to the very idea of obedience to Christ in our times. We have to recognize that spiritual formation in us is something that is also done to us by those around us, by ourselves, and by activities which we voluntarily undertake.

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Spiritual formation in Christ would, then, ideally result in a person whose reflective will for good, fully informed and possessed by Christ, has settled into their body in its social context to such an extent that their natural responses were always to think and feel and do as Christ himself would. Their epidermal as well as their deliberate responses are then those of Christ. When you see this and return to the message we heard previously today about Isaiah, you'll see where the ability to stand alone comes from. Standing alone comes from Christ in the inner person. When Christ is there within, even the social context is one where the reflective will for Christlikeness understands what's happening, makes the right choice, and in faith sees it through, with love and joy and peace and longsuffering and gentleness and goodness and kindness and faithfulness and self-control: the fruit of the spirit. The fruit of the spirit in the inner person expresses itself in that way.

In such a person, the saying of the apostle which we all know, "The things that I would not that I do, and the things that I would, that I do not," (Romans 7:19) is reversed: "The good that I would I do, and the evil that I would not I do not." Again: Of this person we no longer have the diagnosis, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:14)

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Now if the Vision of this glorious kind of life is there, then the next step is Intention. I must decide that I will live that kind of life. And then, finally--and this is the area of what we call "spiritual disciplines," undertaken in the effort to actually obey Christ--we have to have a Method.

There has to be method. Suppose, for example, my intention is to become the kind of person who can heartily bless those who curse me. Or maybe they don't even curse me. They just think I am wrong or irrelevant. Jesus said to love your enemies, but how about those who bug you? That would be a real challenge too, wouldn't it? You see we have to get real with all these matters. I have to be able to learn what it is within me that keeps me from being able to do all that and to do something about it. And perhaps it is that I have not devoted myself sufficiently to being alone with God, or to the taking in of his Word, so that I can actually trust Him to bless me when others are cursing me. So what I have to do is to find the ways--the method--through which I can build my confidence in God's goodness, and break the power of habit in me of cursing back. Note the wonderful words from the old hymn, "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, and sets the prisoner free." Cancelled sin still has people in bondage. To say it's cancelled doesn't mean you're done with it. And to be "done with it" requires a method that may involve counseling, certainly involves the ministry of the word, and certainly involves worship. We're pretty good with these practices, but the ones that look more "Catholic," like solitude, silence, and so on, we're not so good with those. And usually I find they deal with the areas where our deepest problem lies.

So we have to find the ways of taking our body into solitude and silence, into service, as well as into worship, into prayer, as well as into study; and we have to plan our lives around this objective of fulfilling the vision that our intention has set before us. That, briefly, is how spiritual formation in Christ is done: vision, intention and method, in that order. In this way we succeed, as Paul says in Romans 6:13, in "yielding ourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God." It can be done. It can be yours and it can be mine, and we can give it to other people, if, in the fellowship of Christ, we offer them the vision, exemplify and help them with the intention, and teach them the method.

One of the things I most like about flying is when you take off through the clouds and finally break through them into the sunlight. We had a takeoff like that this morning in Los Angeles. And it is so thrilling to break into the sunlight. Spiritually, in "the inner man," we are meant to be a different species of human being. (Eph. 2:15) That's the picture, the New Testament picture--a different kind of humanity. And we can manifestly become that if we will set ourselves to learn and accept inward spiritual formation from the hand of Jesus Christ. Very likely we will not become perfect for some time yet; but we can, as Paul urged the Philippians to do, "become blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world." (Phil. 2:15)