

Spiritual Formation in Bible and Theological Colleges

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Introduction

This paper is about spiritual formation of the men and women, who pass through our bible and theological colleges, to serve Christ in the churches and communities they belong to. Spirit-filled life is a prerequisite for every Christian, especially those called into “full time” service of the Lord. Only those who are filled, and set aside by the Holy Spirit, are qualified to serve the Lord. The record of the holy scriptures bears clear testimony to this fact. Moses, the prophets, John the Baptist, our Lord Jesus, and the apostles, were men who were full of the Holy Spirit.

The thesis of this paper is that, unless our students are filled with the Holy Spirit, and demonstrate this in their daily lives, they have no right to be in the Christian ministry. This paper further argues that, without the Holy Spirit living in a person, spiritual formation is an impossibility.

The points covered in this paper are:

Spiritual Formation in the Melanesian Context

Christian Spiritual Formation

The Program for Christian Spiritual Formation

Spiritual Formation in our Colleges

1. Spiritual Formation in the Melanesian Context

In the traditional Melanesian context, spiritual formation was never seen as an academic exercise, for the simple reason that a Melanesian lived with spirit-consciousness from birth to death. A Melanesian always considered himself spiritual, because he lived, and moved, within the spirit world.

The animist lives in a world filled with spirit powers, between whom, and himself, there is a constant communication. Everything around him, the stones, the trees, the very air he breathes, is charged with mystical properties and power, which may, at any time, come into his life for good or evil.¹

When we reflect on the activities of the traditional societies, it is possible to speak of spiritual formation at formal, semi-formal, and informal levels.

A. Spiritual Formation at the Formal Level

At the formal level, spiritual formation took place in the context of initiation. Traditional initiation rites served to link the past with the present, the living with the “living dead”, the natural with the supernatural, the visible with the invisible. These initiation rites introduced the people to the roots of their existence, gave them their education for life, assured them of their place in the community, and introduced them to their social responsibilities.²

Reflecting on the third and final initiation rites he went through in 1972, the Honorable Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea’s first Prime Minister, observed: “for me, the installation ceremony meant I had, again, struck root at home, reintegration with the clan, family, village”.³

I view initiation ceremonies as spiritual formation activities, because many of the disciplines the initiates were required to observe are similar to the disciplines required in Christian spiritual formation. In some societies, the initiation rites are carried out in junior, intermediate, and senior stages.

(1) The Disciplines at Junior Stage

The disciplines the initiates undergo during the junior stage are:

¹ A. C. Frerichs, *Anatu Conquers in New Guinea*, Columbus OH: The Wartburg Press, 1957, p. 121.

² Joshua K. Daimoi, “Interpreting Melanesian and Biblical Initiation Rites for the Christian Community in Papua New Guinea”, unpublished paper, 1982, p. 2.

³ *Gigibori: a magazine of Papua New Guinea Cultures* 1-1 (1974), Institute of Studies, in association with Niugini Press, p. 32.

(a) Tests of Discipline and Physical Endurance

In some places, the initiates are made to crawl between the legs of their initiators. As they passed through, one by one, the initiators lashed them with lime sticks, or burned them with glowing tobacco. They are also made to crawl through an enclosure filled with bees, ants, beetles – anything that bites.⁴ Among the Bukawa people on the north-east coast of the Huon Peninsula, the initiates are put in a men’s club house, and the initiators literally smoke them.⁵

(b) The Art of Self-defence

Using small bows and arrows, the initiates are taught to attack each other, and defend themselves; a kind of military exercise.

(c) Fast Observation

The initiates have to undergo fasting exercises to purify themselves from all the impurity they have been associated with from living with their mothers and aunties.

(d) Stories of *Tumbuna*

For the first time, the initiates are led into the “surface” secrets of their societies. They hear stories of *tumbuna* – the history of their people, their tribal origins, etc. They are introduced to the names of their gods, and ancestral spirits, whom they will encounter in the third and final stage, of their initiation. I call the information, received at this stage, “surface” secrets, because these are introductory stories, preparing them for the “deep” secrets, lessons of senior stage.

(e) Circumcision

This act carries with it religious and social implications. The letting of blood, for some societies, represents the cleansing of the initiate of the impure maternal blood. It is also seen as the removal of weakness, and the acquiring of new strength. Those who are circumcised are required to observe certain taboos to hasten healing.⁶

⁴ M. Somare, *Sana*, Port Moresby PNG: Niugini Press, 1975, p. 26.

⁵ Wesley Kigasung, “The Value of Bukawa Initiation”, in James Knight, ed., *Challenges and Possibilities for the Study of Religion in Melanesia*, Point (2/1978), p. 132.

⁶ Gernot Fugmann, (1978), p. 266.

(f) Female Initiation

With the female initiates, the first stage lessons take place well before the initiation period. In some societies, female initiation commences with the onset of first menstruation. Since menstruation blood is considered dangerous, the girl is instructed, ahead of time, on the appropriate procedures, and activities, she is required to follow.⁷

(2) Disciplines at Intermediate Stage:

(a) Entering the Spirit House

During the intermediate stage, the concentration is mainly on the ethical and religious life of the society. At this stage, the initiates are introduced into the spirit house – *haus tambaran* (Sepik), or moved out into a men's house, much smaller than the one they had entered into during the junior stage (Orokolo). Their entrance into these sacred houses is a deep spiritual experience for them. Here, they spend time learning about their ancestors, and the spirits, which belong to their society. Through this process, they receive spiritual authority from the spirit world, through their elders. From this moment onward, life will not be the same anymore.

(b) Recognising and Identifying Sounds

In the Sepik area, while the initiates are in the *haus tambaran*, they are made to recognise the different flute tunes and *garamut* (drum) rhythms for the different clans and occasions.

(c) Names and Functions of the Spirits

Since each clan and tribe has its own god, each initiate must know the name of his god, the location, and function of this god. This knowledge is crucial to his survival. Unless he knows the name, function, and the ritual, associated with his god, or his clan spirit, he is a fatalist. No other gods will protect him, or offer him success and prosperity.

(d) Laws of the Community

Much of the initiate's time is spent in learning laws associated with food taboos, designs to be used on canoes, prows, spears, paddles, house

⁷ Cheryl Camp, "A Female Initiation Rite of the Neigrie Area", in Habel, Norman C., ed., *Powers, Plumes, and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, Adelaide SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, Flinders University, 1979, pp. 68-73.

posts, eating utensils, etc. Each initiate must carefully learn, and memorise, the laws and designs, which belong to his community. This is important for his own well-being, and that of his future generation.

(e) Stories of Origin

During this time, the initiates learn, in a more detailed way, the legends and myths about the origins of animals, plants, and customs.

(f) Honour and Obligation

In community-oriented societies, honour and obligation are virtues no man can ignore. The second stage of Orokelo initiation is centred on the wearing of *Kovave* – the first mask of the young man. The *Kovave* is prepared in secret, with religious incantations. This is a mask of honour and obligation. The initiate is considered a friend of *Kovave*. He has a strong obligation to the people, who give him a mask to wear. In accepting the *Kovave*, the initiate places himself under obligation to his sponsors to make their gardens, and care for them in their old age.

(2) Disciplines at Senior Stage

In places where the initiation is carried out in three stages, this final stage, on the whole, is a repetition of the intermediate stage. The one great difference is that, during the third stage, the initiates are led into the deepest part of the forest, or the innermost area of the men's house, where images for spirits are kept. They have the privilege of sighting these images for themselves. From this moment onward, they are full members of their society. They have become full male adults. They have the privilege and responsibility of sharing in all the activities of the community.

B. Spiritual Formation at Semi-formal Level

I am using this sub-heading to cover that traditional spirituality, which was passed on to others outside initiation ceremonies. There was a simpler way of passing on spiritual knowledge to another person, without going through the initiation ceremony. This was done at the point of death. Normally, the father would pass on his knowledge about the spirit world, at the point of his death, to his first-born son. This spiritual knowledge was normally regarded as a family possession, and it was important to pass it on to the new generation, for their survival and well-being. The father would normally call his son to him, and whisper into his

ears the family secret, with all the necessary rituals. What the son receives from his father would be passed on to his first-born son at the point of his death. This is what used to happen among my own people, the Sentanis of Irian Jaya.

C. Spiritual Formation at Informal Level

This process is carried out through observation, and by being generally aware of the presence of the invisible forces surrounding human beings. Since Melanesians lived in spirit-consciousness, life came to be regarded as being very sacred. Wherever a person happens to be, he is very much aware of the presence of spiritual beings. Every sound he hears, the dreams he dreams, and the visions he sees, all have meaning. These experiences enabled the Melanesian to become more certain of the existence, and reality, of a spiritual world, a world outside his own, over which he has no control.

2. Christian Spiritual Formation

Christian spirituality cannot be achieved without the Holy Spirit being resident in the individual. Christian spiritual formation requires God and man to be working in full partnership. The actual proportion of his partnership is not as important as the cooperation needed on the part of man to make it happen. Spiritual formation is for man's benefit, more so than for God's. God, who is Spirit, is self-existent, a spiritual being, who has no need for spiritual growth.

Since the fall of the first pair of human beings, man has forfeited his right to eat of the tree of life. Consequently, man needs his creator to impart to him true spirituality. The starting point for true spirituality is the experience of new birth, through the Holy Spirit. Spiritual formation is not possible without the Holy Spirit. "I am telling out the truth," replied Jesus, "No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but he is born spiritually of the Spirit, do not be surprised because I tell you that you must be born again." (John 3:5-7 GNB). "Spiritual life is produced by

the presence, and empowering, of the Holy Spirit, not simply by the comprehension of doctrinal propositions of strategies of renewal”.⁸

Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the power from above came down on them (Luke 24:49). Ten days later, the Lord fulfilled His promise, by sending the Holy Spirit on the waiting disciples (see Acts 2). The Holy Spirit is actively at work in the world today. Our task is to make ourselves available to Him, so He can possess us, and build into our lives, those great qualities of true spirituality. This was Paul’s deep concern for believers everywhere. “Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18 GNB). According to this verse, every Christian is to be continually filled, or controlled, by the Holy Spirit. This filling is dependent on our availability. As we submit to the Holy Spirit, on a daily basis, so He will fill us with His presence, by building into our lives Christ-like qualities of life. Furthermore, the verse gives a command. It expresses to us God’s highest desire for all His children. We have no option, but to obey and submit. True holiness, which is the beginning, the going on, and the end, of Christian spirituality, is the result of total surrender to the Holy Spirit. Writing to the Galatians, Paul says: “What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature. If the Spirit leads you, then you are not subject to the Law. The Spirit has given us life; He must also control our lives” (Gal 4:19). The goal of Christian spiritual formation is the development and growth into Christ’s nature, through the Holy Spirit abiding in the believer.

3. The Program for Christian Spiritual Formation

In the preceding section, I have sought to establish the point that Christian spiritual formation is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life, from start to finish, is the work of grace. The Holy Spiritual formation is also dependent on the partnership between God and man. I will now outline some of the disciplines, which I, as a believer, need to undertake to fulfil my part of the responsibility towards spiritual maturity.

⁸ Richard E. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: an Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1979, p. 79.

A. Jesus Christ, Lord of My Life

Christianity is centred in Christ. Without Christ, there can be no Christianity. Believers are like open Bibles in the eyes of others, to point others to Christ, our lives need to be fully united to Him. The Lord clearly reminds us of this in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are branches, whoever remains in Me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me” (GNB). Wholesome spiritual formation and growth cannot take place without Christ controlling every part of our lives. Growing in Christ does not take place in a vacuum. There are other related disciplines, which form an integral part of Christ’s Lordship over our lives, which are set out in points B. to F.

B. The Word of God

The word of God is the key to spiritual formation. The apostle Paul summed all this up in 2 Tim 3:16,17: “All scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified, and equipped to do every kind of good deed.” The truth stated by these verses is clear. Everyone, called to serve God, must spend more time in the word of God than in text books, however excellent they may be. The primary responsibility of our Colleges is daily to challenge the staff and the students with the word of God. Daily quiet time, for private reading of God’s word and meditation, has to have high priority in our curriculum. An extended reflection and renewal time, once a week, would assist the students to reflect on what God has done for them, and to plan the new week prayerfully. At CLTC, we have introduced this idea into our Monday morning programme. We have found different reactions from the students.

The word of God should also be the centre of our preaching and teaching. As well as enlightening the minds of our students and staff, all our preaching and teaching should be directed towards Christ-centred living and action, which is the goal of our spiritual formation.

C. Prayer

One way we fellowship with God is through prayer. Prayer is both worship and intercession. Prayer is learned by praying. According to Luke, the Lord’s appearance was transformed as He was praying. “While He was praying, His face changed its appearance, and His clothes became

dazzling white” (Luke 9:29 GNB). Here is a challenge for staff and students alike. The world will see more of Jesus when we have spent more time alone with Him. Through prayer, we move with God into the battlefields of the world. We need to evangelise the world on our knees. We must learn to preach on bended knees. People will be easily moved towards God when we have first moved them to Him by our prayers.

Praying is a very taxing exercise. Only those who persevere will harvest the reward. Prayer, and the reading of God’s word, go hand in hand. What we read must form the content of our praying. “If you remain in Me, and My words remain you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it” (John 15:7).

D. Fellowship

We become like the people we spend time with. Christian fellowship is a place of nurture. Spiritual formation cannot happen in isolation. As iron sharpens iron, so we get shaped up when our lives touch each other in Christian fellowship, the joys and sorrows we experience together sharpen our spiritual growth, so we become a blessing to each other. “Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father, the God from whom all help comes! He helps us in our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the help that we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor 1:3-4 GNB).

E. Witness

A transformed life is like an open Bible, read and followed by all. One transformed life speaks stronger than 100 sermons preached. Spiritual formation must be carried out with the view to world evangelisation. D. T. Niles, in 1951, defined evangelism as follows:

Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food. The Christian does not offer out of his bounty. He has no bounty. He is simply a guest at his Master’s table, and, as evangelist, he calls others, too. The evangelistic relation is to be “alongside of” not “over against”. The Christian stands alongside the non-Christian, and points to the gospel, the holy action of God. It is not his knowledge of God that he shares, it is to God Himself

that he points. The Christian gospel is the Word become flesh. This is more than the Word become speech.⁹

To be able to call others to feed on His bounty, the Christian must remain in touch with that supply day by day. Unless we are renewed daily by God's gracious bounty, we have nothing to set before a needy world.

F. Serving Others

The Christian, like his Master, is to live by serving others, and dying for others. Having experienced the truth of John 3:16, the Christian is to live by practising 1 John 3:16, which reads: "This is how we know what love is: Christ gave His life for us. We, too, then, ought to give our lives for our brothers." Serving others was the Lord's own great goal for His life "The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them" (John 15:13). True spirituality is marked by serving others, rather than shouting at them. Determination to stay loyal at one's post, until the battle is won, is the real mark of Christian commitment, and mature spirituality.

What we have seen in this part of the paper, clearly shows that any programme, aimed at Christian spiritual formation, must have Christ at its centre, must be based on the Word of God, covered by prayer, nourished by Christian fellowship, made strong by witness to the world, and deepened by commitment to serve others. Such a program will give serious thought to knowing, being, and doing.

4. Spiritual Formation in our Colleges

Most of our Colleges offer courses, which extend from one to five, or six, years. The years the students spend in our Colleges are important years of their lives. We can look on these years as traditional initiation periods, when the young men went into isolation for varying lengths of time. Our churches and communities expect us to do something with the men and women they send to us. They expect us to turn our men and women with deep spiritual commitment, by the time they graduate.

In a land dominated by spirit beings, this expectation is not unrealistic. Spiritual darkness can only be cast out by greater spiritual

⁹ D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life*, New York NY: Harper & Bros, 1951.

power. When Jesus was challenged, concerning the authority by which He drove out demons, He replied: “No, it is not Beelzebul, but God’s Spirit, who gives Me the power to drive out demons, which means that the Kingdom of God has already come upon you” (Matt 12:28). The Lord Jesus ushered in God’s Kingdom. The Holy Spirit, who operated through the Lord Jesus, is available to us, to fulfil the same ministry. Spiritual formation of our students must, therefore, take top priority in our training programmes, since the Christian ministry calls us to walk in our Lord’s footsteps.

Returning to the traditional spiritual formation, I would like to make a few suggestions to guide us in formulating spiritual formation programmes in our Colleges. As we have noted, the initiation ceremonies are divided into Junior, Intermediate, and Senior stages. It may be helpful to divide our spiritual formation programmes into these three stages. The breakdown we would have, is as follows: Junior – years 1-2, or year 1 only; Intermediate – years 3-4, or years 2-3; Senior – years 5-6, or years 4-5. The various stages will be based according to the duration of the courses we offer.

I would like to further suggest that we consider our total training programmes as spiritual-formation disciplines. Thus, we would divide our devotional and study material to fit in with the stages described in Part 1 of this paper. As an example, instead of grouping all the students together, studying the same devotional material, that we should select material, which will best suit the different stages the students are in. This means students in the Junior years will deal with narrative forms of devotional material, rather than those in the Intermediate and Senior stages, who have to deal with solid doctrinal materials.

Since our emphasis is on spiritual formation, all our teaching must be geared towards that goal. All subjects taught in the classroom must continually challenge the students, and the teacher, to search their own hearts, always leading them to a greater depth of spiritual growth. The students and the staff should encourage, and challenge, each other to this end continually, through community service, and personal testimonies.

Proper spiritual formation cannot be confined to classroom, or worship times, only. The daily work duties, and sporting times, should also be viewed in the same way. Christianity holds everything sacred,

because life itself is sacred. It is in the routing work duties, and the sporting activities, that our true spirituality shows its true colours. Accordingly, our training programmes must have included in them work duty, and sporting periods. In traditional situations, people were very conscious of spirit beings, wherever they were.

Melanesians do not differentiate religious and non-religious experience. For them, I believe, an experience, or experience in general, is a total encounter for the living person, within the universe that is alive and explosive. In fact, for Melanesians, there are no religious and other experiences. An experience, for a Melanesian, I believe, is the person's encounter with the spirit, the law, economics, politics, and life's own total whole.¹⁰

Conclusion

It is our task, in the Melanesian context, to make our students, and ourselves, to be conscious of God, in the totality of life, in the universe that surrounds us. Training, in Melanesia, therefore, must be deeply rooted in true spirituality. Biblically understood, this spirituality is rooted in Christ, through the mediatorship of the Holy Spirit. While God will do His part, we must faithfully carry out our part, by staying in the word of God, prayer, fellowship, witness, and serving others.

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¹⁰ Bernard M. Narokobi, "What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?", in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues, Point* (1&2/1977), pp. 7-8.

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