

# **The Role of Theology in the Definitions of Spirituality, Spiritual Maturity, and Measuring Spiritual Development**

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This chapter is an attempt to spur the discussion for a more theologically based and broadly applicable definition of spirituality and the subsequent understandings of spiritual maturity and spiritual formation/development,<sup>1</sup> all with the field of children's spirituality in mind.

## **The Need**

At the very foundation of research about children's spirituality is the need to define spirituality itself. Most authors writing on the topic of children's spirituality, if they do not start out by specifically defining their definition of spirituality, their definition quickly becomes evident in how they say spirituality relates to children. In general, an agreed upon definition of spirituality has yet to be settled upon in the field, and probably won't be any time soon (Anthony 2006).

As it stands, definitions of spirituality, given by Christian scholars in the field of children's spirituality, often fall into one of the following categories:

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, spiritual formation and spiritual development will be treated as interchangeable concepts.

<sup>2</sup> At the 2016 conference of the Society of Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Holly Allen submitted to the attendees a "Working definition" of spirituality—written by herself and Ryan Porche—which ended up actually being titled "Spiritual Formation" (Allen 2016). Even though she discussed needing to define spirituality, what she submitted was actually a definition for spiritual formation. Allen's definition:

Spiritual Formation is a lifelong, intentional, and communal process of growing in our 1

- 1) The definition **may largely fall along the lines of developing a relationship with God** within the context of a community of relationships, and may or may not include mention of the Holy Spirit or Jesus.
- 2) The definition **may not necessarily address the spirituality of all human beings**, but rather focus only on the potential of a child once one becomes a Christian or is raised in a Christian setting. These types of definitions are either separating the science of human development from theology or not allowing theology to fully impact the definition from the foundation. Perhaps this is done because it is easier to define Christian children’s spirituality that applies only to people within one’s own faith, versus defining spirituality from a perspective that may cause disagreement in discussion with those of other faiths.
- 3) Parallel to the previous point, there is a **tendency for Christians to jump right into attempting to answer the question, “What is Christian spiritual growth or development?”**<sup>2</sup> instead of first defining spirituality. This tendency is putting the cart before the horse.

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Spiritual Formation is a lifelong, intentional, and communal process of growing in our ability to attend and relate to God, submitting ourselves to His transforming power through the Holy Spirit in order to become increasingly more like Jesus in every aspect of our lives—practicing restored relationship with God, ourselves, and others.

– Lipscomb Academy, Ryan Porche, and Holly Allen (Allen 2016).

Theology needs to provide the basis for understanding human development and enlighten a definition of spirituality that addresses children with and without Christ. This chapter is meant to spark a conversation in hopes that we will dive deeper together, looking to understand *all* that God made children (and us, and humanity at large) to be. We are holistic beings, and as Christians, believe that God created us. However much we try to isolate a definition of spirituality from theology, it would only succeed in giving a partial understanding of a definition that will not be fully helpful for Christian practitioners or researchers.

### **Theological Understanding of Spirituality**

Even in the broader and longer established field of Christian Spirituality scholars have not settled upon a definition (Jensen 2009, 9). It is impossible to dive deeply into centuries of theology and in-depth Bible study on the whole of spirituality in just one chapter, however this chapter will be an attempt to move the conversation further along in the field of Children’s Spirituality. Below are some theological perspectives and Biblical passages to take into consideration.

Evan B. Howard makes the case that “Nearly all of the literature published on Christian spirituality . . . to some degree” or other, “refers specifically to relationship with God through Jesus Christ” (2008, 16). John R. Tyson says, “‘Christian Spirituality’ describes the relationship, union, and conformity with God that a Christian experiences

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This definition gives a wonderful aim and direction for human spirituality, but it does not address how it applies universally, to all people. It has skipped over a broadly applicable, theological understanding of spirituality and jumped directly into an ideal description of Christian life.

through his or her reception of the grace of God, and a corresponding willingness to turn from sin and (to use a Pauline phrase) ‘to walk according to the Spirit’” (1999).<sup>3</sup> Right away these understandings, though focusing on relationship with the Triune God, do not include a spirituality that encompasses non-Christians. How should or can non-Christians be included in a Christian perspective or definition of spirituality? Are we saying that spirituality is only for Christians?

Glen G. Scorgie, in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, says spirituality is seen to be a **universal human attribute** (2011, 27–28). The Bible verifies this through the following passages. James 2:26<sup>4</sup> states that without a spirit a body is dead. It can thus be assumed that every living being has a spirit. 1 Corinthians 5:5<sup>5</sup> points out that people have a spirit and that part of the goal is for it to be eternally saved. All **people have the potential and were created to be eternally saved**.

Romans 8:11-16<sup>6</sup> makes a contribution regarding relationship showing that a person’s spirit can relate with the Holy Spirit and be brought into a relationship with God through Christ, as children of God. And Acts 2:42<sup>7</sup> lists fellowship with other believers

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 6:1-19

<sup>4</sup> “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>5</sup> “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>6</sup> But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>7</sup> “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

as part of a list of important activities in the same category as prayer, communion and continuing in the doctrine of the apostles. This taps into the idea of relationality that David Hay and Rebecca Nye’s work popularized (2006). **People were created for relationship with God and with each other.** 1 Corinthians 6:17 shows the result of relationship with God saying the one “...who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him,” and it is through this oneness, this abiding in him, and he abiding reciprocally, that fruit is born (John 15:5<sup>8</sup>). **People were made to become one with God through Christ and produce resulting fruit.**

With only this cursory glance at Scripture, if I were to make an initial attempt at a broad theological understanding of spirituality that encompasses Christians and non-Christians, from a Christian perspective, it could be:

*Human spirituality is a relational aspect of each human being, that includes the capacity to relate to God and others, and was designed to be complete and come into maturity of eternal union with God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

## **Spiritual Maturity**

With this preliminary working definition of spirituality that is theologically based, an understanding of spiritual maturity and ultimately spiritual formation/development can be built. Before looking at how development or formation happens, there must be an understanding of what we are meant to develop or form into. What would it look like to be spiritually mature from a theological perspective?

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<sup>8</sup> “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

First of all, when Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, he answered, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is [the] first and great commandment. And [the] second [is] like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (NKJV 1996, c1982, Matthew 22:37–40). Everything God has asked of us relates to first loving God, and second, loving others. **Love and unity, the epitome of relationality, is the most important of all that God made people to be.** Jesus prayed that his followers would be one with him in the Father (John 17:21), and in verse 26, finishes his prayer with “And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare [it], that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

Secondly, looking at how “maturity” is used in the New Testament gives a few more hints at what spiritual maturity may look like. In Philippians 3:8–15, perfection is said to be knowing Jesus, and in the process, becoming like him. Though people may not fully attain that in this life, also according to Philippians 3:8–15, knowing Jesus and becoming more like him is what the mature continue to pursue. Ephesians 4:11–16 speaks of maturity only attainable in the context of the Body of Christ. The church is to be a loving unity that is joined together in submission to Jesus, with each person growing to be more of who God made them to be until they reach what is said in verse 13 to be

“the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV 1984). 2 Corinthians 3:18<sup>9</sup> expands on becoming more like Jesus saying God is at work to transform those who follow Jesus into the image of his Son by the power of his Spirit. Then yet other passages give us clues as to what this transforming work the Spirit of God looks like in people. Galatians 5:22–23<sup>10</sup> speaks of the fruit of the Spirit, and 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 shares about the gifts of the Spirit. Hebrews 5:14 also says that the mature can “distinguish good from evil” (NIV 1984).

From these passages it could be said that,

***Maturity is pursuing knowing Jesus, and in the process, becoming more like him. It is bound by love for God and each other, includes being able to distinguish good from evil, and is ultimately attained only as part of the Body of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.***

But how do we get to this point? How do we pursue knowing God with the results of becoming more like Christ? That is where spiritual formation/development can finally come in. It is necessary to know the goal of spirituality before figuring out how to attain it. Otherwise, it is like shooting aimlessly in the dark, hoping to hit a target by chance.

## **Spiritual Formation/Development**

Catherine Stonehouse says, “The spiritual life is formed through practices that help to open the person to God and break down barriers that hinder his or her perception of God” (Stonehouse 1998, 21). I am not arguing that practices can’t play a part to “help

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<sup>9</sup> “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>10</sup> “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

to open” people “to God and break down barriers that hinder” our perceptions. Indeed, I believe they can. However, good counseling, or other self-help/coaching tools and religious rituals may also be able to do some of this. “Practices” alone could become a self-empowered pursuit, and at worst, lead to the kind of legalism Paul was escaping in Philippians 3.

Scorgie says, “Whenever formation is dislocated from its proper relational context and neglect of necessary divine impulses, it becomes a mere portfolio of spiritual disciplines and another grinding self-improvement project” (2011, 28). Scorgie’s admonition highlights a few important keys in this one sentence; 1) the importance of keeping relationality with Jesus central to an understanding of spiritual formation, 2) the role of divine empowerment, and 3) the danger of turning spiritual formation into a human-strength-powered, self-improvement exercise.

So how are people to be transformed or matured? Scripture tells us that it is actually the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms us into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:18) and that both God and people have roles to play. John Wimber and Kevin Springer said, “Spiritual growth . . . is a product of the initiating, empowering work of the Holy Spirit *and* of our active cooperation . . . If *either* divine initiative *or* human response is missing, we will not grow” (1991, 140, emphasis in original). Based on Galatians 2:20; 5:22–23, Wimber and Springer make it clear that even though our cooperation is needed, the spiritual maturity discussed in the Bible, becoming like Christ, can only be achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (1991, 3,10). It is the Spirit of Christ who brings the transformation. 1 Corinthians 6:17



says the one “. . . who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (NKJV 1996, c1982). This joining increases the potential of a human spirit. It is only through “abiding” in Christ that we can produce fruit (John 15). Philippians 2:12–13<sup>11</sup> speaks of both; people needing to work out their own salvation, and God who works in his people to do what he desires. Ephesians 1:17–19 speaks of knowledge of God coming through revelation.<sup>12</sup>

Without the Spirit of Christ a person is limited to the potential of the human spirit and will only get as far as their human efforts can take them. Without the Holy Spirit, people can develop and “improve,” but into what? What is their goal? If knowing Jesus and becoming more like him is the goal, people need the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to attain that. Non-Christian and non-theological beliefs regarding spirituality and spiritual maturity will have different goals and different, less empowered ways to attain them; ways that are possible through human strength alone. On the other hand, Christians have access to empowerment beyond the strength and limits of the human spirit.

To be clear, I am not saying the Holy Spirit is only working among those who are followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at work throughout the world (John 16:8). Yet there is a transformative power done from the inside out, within those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. In John 14:16–17 Jesus says, “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot

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<sup>11</sup>“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>12</sup>“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, <sup>18</sup>the eyes of your understanding<sup>[a]</sup> being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power” (NKJV 1996, c1982).

receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (NKJV 1996, c1982). If spiritual development is considered growing in and through relationship with Jesus through the indwelling Spirit of God, which results in being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Jesus, this is a type of development only accomplishable in the lives of those who have received the Spirit of Christ in them.

What exactly is the evidence of this transformative work of the Holy Spirit that should be seen in the lives of those who have the Spirit of Christ in them? There is knowing Jesus mentioned in 1 John 14, and there is the resulting transformation to be like him. Some of the scriptures that describe what being like Jesus looks like are the beatitudes in Matthew 5 (King 2016).<sup>13</sup> Wimber and Springer cite various passages from 1 Peter to describe what they believe is an accurate description of a mature life.<sup>14</sup> Wimber and Springer also mention Galatians 5:22 which lists the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>15</sup> And 1 Corinthians 12:7–12 describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> The Spirit produces

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<sup>13</sup> The beatitudes include being: poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted for righteousness sake (NKJV 1996, c1982, Matthew 5:3–12).

<sup>14</sup> “[R]id yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind . . . [L]ive as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king . . . Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, “whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it” . . . Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 2:1, 16-17; 3:8-11, 15-16) (NKJV 1996, c1982).

<sup>15</sup> The fruit of the Holy Spirit are “ . . . love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Wimber and Springer 1991, 10).

<sup>16</sup> “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit [of all]: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of

fruit and gifts, growing people more completely into the image of Jesus. Yet, according to 1 Corinthians 12:7–12, all people are not given the same or all of the gifts. And Ephesians 4:11–16 says God gave the various roles in the church (apostles, prophets, teachers, etc.)

. . . for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (NKJV 1996, c1982).

So then how is spiritual growth to be measured or compared? Is it even possible to measure spiritual growth in any uniform way? This passage in Ephesians above makes it clear the Body of Christ's relational edification of itself in love described is not attainable on an individual basis, but rather in the Body of Christ as a whole. Each person has a role to play, and together, become the fullness of Christ. In the field of children's spirituality, it has been an elusive holy grail to discover what the possible progression of spiritual development might look like. Building on what 1 Corinthians 12:7–12 and Ephesians 4:11–16 say about the diversity of gifts and that spiritual maturity is accomplished as the Body of Christ, then each person is given different gifts with the purpose of being transformed uniquely, and relationally, into the image of Christ. Christ's Body is being corporately transformed, with individuals having different gifts as different

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miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another [different] kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also [is] Christ" (NKJV 1996, c1982).

parts of the Body. This implies that each individual's spiritual gifts will grow uniquely toward a different looking role. Because each person's growth is unique, their relationship and the growth of their relationship with God and others will also be unique. Someone's growth into becoming a mature "arm" per se and how they will relate to God and others, will not look like another's development into a full grown "eye," and the relationship that person has with God and others. Evidence of growth can be seen outwardly through increase in the fruit of the Spirit and increase in mature usage of the gifts of the Spirit, but with each individual's spiritual journey being completely unique. Each person's relationship with God and with others, and development of the fruit and gifts of the Spirit in their lives, will be as unique as each person's love story, and journey of growth into their selected career.

Based on the brief and preliminary points above, I offer an expanded working definition of spirituality. It starts out with a theologically based, universally applicable definition of spirituality, and includes elaboration on the goal of maturity and how the process of spiritual growth is accomplished.

***Human spirituality is a relational aspect of each human being, that includes the capacity to relate to God and others, and was designed to be complete and come into maturity of eternal union with God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit with the resulting Christ-like fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit, all in the context of being unique individuals within the Body of Christ.***

This definition addresses spirituality, maturity and spiritual development, the latter two enabled by the theological grounding of the first.

This definition creates a challenge in that it is not one that is easily used as a foundational place to dialogue with those studying children's spirituality from a non-Christian perspective. The capacity of the human spirit without God or in the context of community can be explored without a theological foundation or even with one member of the dialogue having a theological foundation. However, if a person's understanding of spirituality is theologically based, the ultimate goal of spirituality and the way it is accomplished will be different than the goals and means of any other approach. The Scriptures speak of oneness with Christ and being transformed into the image of Christ, with the Holy Spirit and our response, as the means. But someone not using the Scriptures could decide the goal of spirituality is whatever they believe is the highest potential of the human spirit. Surely there are spiritual aspects of the human spirit that can be cultivated without God, but as James Loder said, "the answer to 'What is a lifetime?' and 'Why do I live it?' must finally be bestowed by the Creator Spirit" (1998, 32–33). Trying to understand the goal and purpose of life using the human spirit alone will end in futility.

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