

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

# PRIMER:

A BRIEF **BIBLICAL** &   
**THEOLOGICAL** PERSPECTIVE  
ON SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

RUTH HALEY BARTON

*"I am in labor until*  
**CHRIST IS FORMED IN YOU."**  
GALATIANS 4:19



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Haley Barton (Doctor of Divinity, Northern Seminary) is founder of the Transforming Center. A teacher, spiritual director, and retreat leader, she is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life including *Life Together in Christ*, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Sacred Rhythms*, and *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*.

Since spiritual transformation is a prerequisite to discernment, it is important that your group shares a clear understanding of what spiritual transformation is, how it takes place in our lives and its significance to the mission of the Church. The following is a brief theological perspective that is grounded in Scripture, animated by a Trinitarian approach to the spiritual life, and is informed by the richness of our Christian heritage. It would be helpful for you to go over this together in order to affirm a shared understanding of this important element of becoming a community for discernment. Also, encourage members of your leadership group to spend time with Scripture passages cited so as to solidify their own biblical understanding of spiritual transformation.

## CHRIST FORMED IN US

Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us ...for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and for the sake of others. (Galatians 4:19; Romans 8:29; Romans 12:1, 2) The possibility that human beings can be transformed to such an extent that they image Christ is central to the message of the gospel and therefore it is central to the mission of the Church. Spiritual transformation in the lives of redeemed people is a testimony to the power of the Gospel and results in an increasing capacity to discern and do the will of God. (Romans 12:2).

**QUESTION:** Do you agree or disagree that spiritual transformation is "central to the message of the Gospel and therefore central to the mission of the Church?" If not, why not? If so, discuss whether or not spiritual transformation is central to the mission of *your* church.

## RENEWING THE MIND

It is God's will and delight that we actively resist being conformed to this world and seek instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The Greek word *nous* (translated *mind* in Romans 12:2) includes, but goes far beyond, intellectual or cognitive knowing. It denotes the seat of reflective consciousness and encompasses a person's faculties of perception and understanding as well as the patterns of feeling, judging and determining that shape our actions and responses in the world. Thus, any approach to transformation that seeks to bring about real change must go beyond merely grasping information at the cognitive level to full knowledge that impacts our deepest inner orientations and trust structures, false-self patterns, and any obstacles that prevent us from fully surrendering to God. This kind of change involves clear teaching about the nature of the Christian life, concrete practices that help us internalize truth in ways that change how we respond in the world, and a community that supports and catalyzes the process.

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**QUESTION:** Are people in your church experiencing a renewing of their minds as described here—levels of transformation that affect their “deepest inner orientations and trust structures, false self-patterns and obstacles that prevent them from surrendering to God”? If yes, take time to describe the evidence for this. If not, why not?

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## THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Spiritual transformation is something of a paradox: it is natural and it is supernatural. It is natural for Christ followers to grow and to change just as it is natural for human beings to grow from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood. The seed of the Christ life (“everything we need for life and godliness”) is planted within us at salvation and if the conditions are right, that seed will grow and flourish. The process of transformation is also supernatural in that it is something only God can accomplish in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The third person of the Trinity has been given as our advocate, teacher and counselor to lead us into truth as we are able to bear it (John 15 and 16) and to communicate the depths of God. (I Corinthians 2:9-16) We can find ways to open to this process of transformation as it is guided by the Spirit, but we cannot control it or make it happen ourselves. The wind of the Spirit blows where it will. (John 3:8)

Paul alludes to the paradox of the natural and the supernatural by using two metaphors. The first is the process by which an embryo is formed in its mother’s womb: *I am in labor until Christ be formed (morphoo) in you*. Even though human beings have their part to play in conceiving and giving birth to children—and even though we think we understand certain facts about it—there is something that remains a mystery. No matter how much we think we understand it, the process of conception and birth is always a miracle. It is something God does. Every single time.

It is the same with the process of metamorphosis, to which Paul refers in Romans 12:2. *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed (metamorphoo) by the renewing of your mind*. The Greek word metamorphoo refers to the process by which a caterpillar enters into the darkness of the cocoon in order to emerge, eventually, changed almost beyond recognition. Through the process of metamorphosis, the caterpillar transcends its previous existence to take on a completely different form with a completely different set of capacities. The caterpillar’s transformation seems to have little to do with cognitive understanding about the process of metamorphosis; something more primal and God-ordained is at work.

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**QUESTION:** Many Christian people say they believe in the Holy Spirit, but they actually live as “functional atheists,” trying to accomplish spiritual transformation on their own. How do you relate to the Holy Spirit and find ways to open to the Spirit’s transforming work? How does the life and practice of your community support openness to the Spirit?

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## EMBRACING MYSTERY

Both the formation of the embryo in its mother’s womb and the transformation of a caterpillar in the cocoon are natural phenomena in the physical world, but there is something about both that is a God-thing. These metaphors place the process of spiritual transformation squarely in the category we call mystery—something outside the range of normal human activity and understanding that can only be understood through divine revelation and brought about by divine activity.

In fact, everything we affirm as central to our Christian faith is somewhere in Scripture referred to as a mystery. We are servants and stewards of God’s mysteries (I Corinthians 4:1) ... The mystery

of God (I Corinthians 2:1) ... The mystery of God's will (Ephesians 1:9) ... the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:4) ... the mystery of the Gospel (Ephesians 6:19) ... the mystery of marriage which is applied to Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31, 32) ... the mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27) ... God's mystery which is Christ himself (Colossians 2:2) ... the mystery of the faith (I Timothy 3:9) ... just to name a few.

The journey of transformation requires some measure of willingness to relinquish control and give ourselves over to a process we cannot fully understand nor can we predict the outcome. If we are not comfortable with mystery, we are not comfortable with the very gospel we preach. We know we will be more like Christ but we cannot predict exactly what the person of Christ lived in and through us will look like or where it will take us.

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**QUESTION:** How do you respond to the idea that “everything we affirm as central to our Christian faith is somewhere described as a mystery? How comfortable are you with mystery?”

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## THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

While we cannot transform ourselves into the image of Christ, we *can* create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place. This is where spiritual practices come in. Spiritual practices are not ways to make brownie points with God or to prove our spiritual superiority to others. They are not a self-help program by which we take control of our journey and change ourselves. Rather, spiritual disciplines are concrete activities we engage in in order to make ourselves available for the work that only God can do.

This is what Paul is referring to when he appeals to the Christians in Rome to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1) He is saying we can be intentional about creating the conditions for transformation by engaging disciplines that help us surrender ourselves to God –not just in theory but in reality. As Richard Foster describes it, “[Spiritual] disciplines are the main way we offer our bodies up to God as a living sacrifice. We are doing what we can do with our bodies, our minds, our hearts. God then takes this simple offering of ourselves and does with it what we cannot do, producing within us deeply ingrained habits of love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (*Renovare Perspective*, April 1999)

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**QUESTION:** What do most individuals in your setting understand about the role of spiritual disciplines in the spiritual life? How are they finding ways to create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place? How are you finding ways?

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## THE NECESSITY OF COMMUNITY

Spiritual transformation takes place incrementally over time with others in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God. In general, while we are still on this earth, our transformation will happen by degrees (II Corinthians 3:18) and we need each other in order to grow. (I Corinthians 12)

Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation (in Romans 12 and in the other epistles) is always given in the context of community—the body of Christ with its many members. We are given to one another in the body of Christ for mutual edification and to spur one another on to love and good deeds. Our spiritual gifts are given, not primarily for our own benefit or self-aggrandizement, but so we can be agents of grace for one another, building up the Body of which we are only one part. As Robert Mulholland writes, “We can no more be conformed to the image of

Christ outside corporate spirituality than a coal can continue to burn outside of the fire.” (*Invitation to a Journey*, p.145)

While our spiritual practices certainly include private disciplines (solitude and silence, prayer and meditation, scripture, self-examination and confession, retreat, discernment), to be effective, our practices must also include disciplines in community (corporate prayer and worship, teaching, communion, Sabbath, hospitality, caring for those in need, spiritual friendship and direction), and disciplines of engagement with the world (evangelism, caring for the poor, compassion, justice, etc.)

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**QUESTION:** How does your life together in community support and catalyze the process of spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals? What disciplines do you practice together as a way of experiencing transformation in community?

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## FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS

Spiritual transformation is both an end in itself in that it brings glory to God *and* it is a means to other ends in that it enables us to mediate the presence of Christ to others and to discern loving action in the world. The litmus test of mature spirituality is obedience to Christ’s commandments (Matthew 28:18-20), which always involves an increasing capacity to love God and to love others. (Mark 12:30, 31; I Corinthians 12; I John 4:7)

Loving presence and God-guided action in the world includes sharing our faith (evangelism), giving generously of our resources, reconciliation and peacemaking (interpersonally and also across lines of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and people groups), working for justice, exercising compassion and care for the poor, and working for the betterment of life in the human community in Jesus’ name.

All true Christian spiritual formation is for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and *for the sake of others* or it is not *Christian* formation. For this we toil and struggle with all the energy that God so powerfully inspires within us.

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**QUESTION:** How have you experienced your transformation as being 1—for the glory of God, 2—for the abundance of your own life, and 3—for the sake of others? If you were to ask those you interact with regularly or people in the community around you whether or not your spirituality has been for their sakes, what would they say?

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**ONE FINAL QUESTION:** What would it look like for your church or ministry to embrace spiritual transformation as central to the message of the Gospel and therefore central to the mission of the Church? Be specific.

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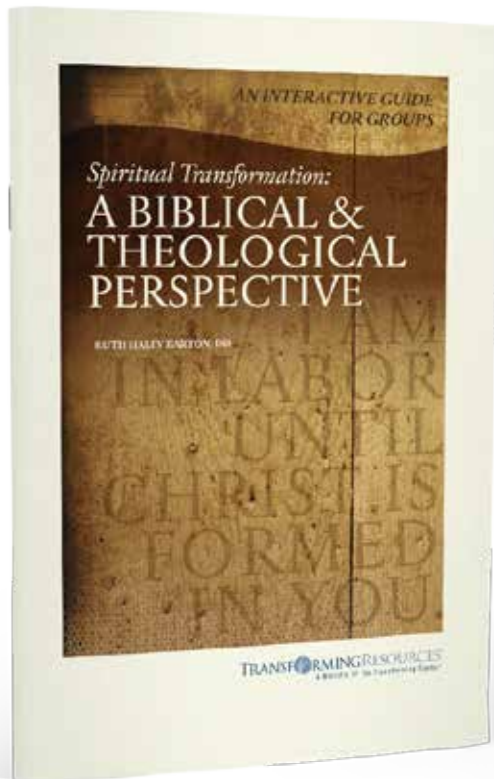
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# EXPANDED VERSION AVAILABLE



## The primer is an abbreviated version of *Spiritual Transformation: A Biblical & Theological Perspective*

Ideal for leadership groups, ministry teams, small groups, and Christian education settings. By working through this resource your group can develop an understanding that spiritual transformation is central to the message of the Gospel and therefore, central to the mission of the Church.

This 20-page booklet includes:

- Biblical teaching on the basic components of spiritual transformation
- Scripture references
- Questions for discussion
- Space for personal reflection and note taking.

Use *Spiritual Transformation: A Biblical & Theological Perspective* with your leadership team and congregation.

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