



MARTIN INSTITUTE
Dallas Willard Research Center
WESTMONT COLLEGE

CHRISTIAN FORMATION WORKSHOP
2026

PRACTICE UNTO VIRTUE

The Role of Christian Practices in
Virtue Formation

Christian Formation Workshop 2026

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The Role of Christian Practices in Virtue
Formation

OPENING COMMENTS

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Martin Institute Mission

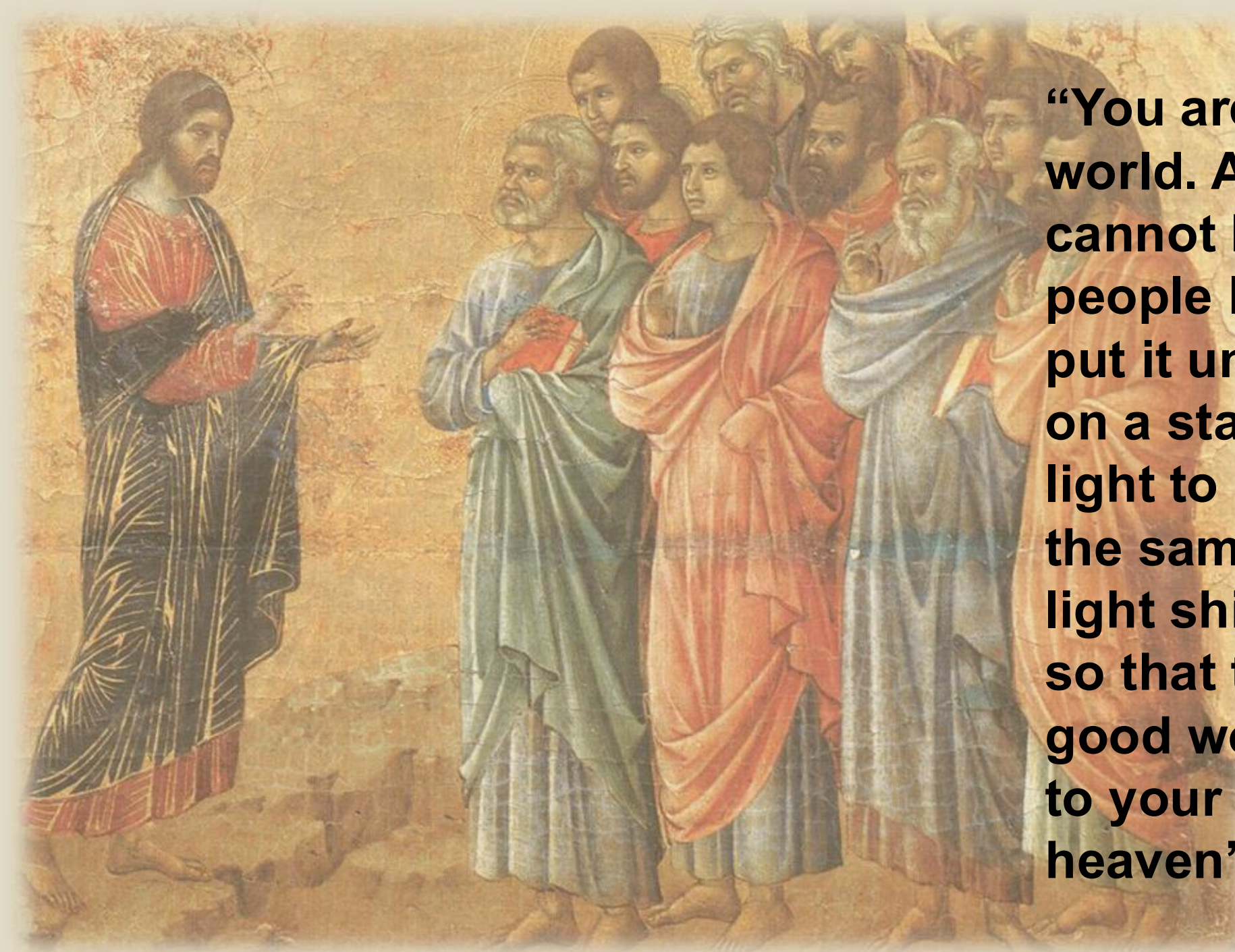
Embedded within Westmont College, the Martin Institute and Dallas Willard Research Center were established in 2011 to assist Christian individuals and organizations in understanding, communicating, and implementing reliable and realistic pathways of becoming more like Christ for the good of the church and for the sake of the world.

Martin Institute Mission

We believe that the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge of Christian spiritual and moral formation is the central work of Christian scholars, pastors, and ministry leaders. No other work worth doing will be done as well without persons inhabiting that work who are seeking first the intelligible and wise pathway of being conformed to the image of Christ.

Four Wild and Crazy Ideas

1. *The world would likely be much better off if there were more persons substantially more like Jesus.*



“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:14–16).

Four Wild and Crazy Ideas

1. *The world would likely be much better off if there were more persons substantially more like Jesus.*
2. *Possessing knowledge of Jesus' transformational way of life is vitally important to the process of being substantially conformed to his image.*

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“We proclaim Christ, *warning* everyone and *teaching* everyone *with all wisdom*, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Four Wild and Crazy Ideas

1. *The world would likely be much better off if there were more persons substantially more like Jesus.*
2. *Possessing knowledge of Jesus' transformational way of life is vitally important to the process of being substantially conformed to his image.*
3. *In many cases, we are dealing with a lack of understanding of what teaching and training would be required for persons to learn to do all that Christ commanded.*

Our Failure to Know

1. No understanding (We have no idea)
2. Presumed understanding (We have the right idea, but no adequate basis for it)
3. Misunderstanding (We have the wrong idea)
4. Incomplete or partial understanding (We have the right idea, but only part of the picture)
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“If I were to say that what I want to show people is that what really matters is utter trust in God; that this trust cannot be there until we have lost all self-trust and are rooted in poverty; that we must be willing to go to God with empty hands, and that the whole

meaning of our existence and the one consuming desire of the heart of God is that we should let ourselves be loved, many spiritual persons would smile at my naïveté. They are likely to murmur: ‘But we know all that; we can read that in any spiritual book. Does she think she is telling us something new?’ All I can say is that, although I too have known this in theory, it is only now that it is integrated into my life. At least so it seems. Probably in five years time or even next year, I will realize that now I know next to nothing about it” (Burrows, *Before the Living God*, 2).



“

Most Christians had been told by me as by many others to attend the services of the church, give of time and money, pray, read the Bible, do good to others, and witness to their faith. . . . It was painfully clear to me that, with rare and beautiful exceptions, Christians were not able to do even these few necessary things in a way that was really good for them, as things that would be an avenue to life filled and possessed by God. . . . I finally decided their problem was a theological deficiency, a lack in teaching, understanding, and practical direction. And the problem, I also decided, was one that the usual forms of ministry and teaching obviously do not remedy.”

DALLAS WILLARD, *THE SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLINES*

Our Failure to Know

Any embodied process of becoming, developing, or pursuing a goal is governed by a set of ideas about that process:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- To what degree is that attainable?
- How important or valuable is it to attain that outcome?
- How do we make progress toward achieving what is attainable?
- And, lastly, what are the reliable sources of knowledge needed to come to accurate answers to these questions?

Four Wild and Crazy Ideas

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2. *Possessing knowledge of Jesus' transformational way of life is vitally important to the process of being substantially conformed to his image.*
3. *In many cases, we are dealing with a lack of understanding of what teaching and training would be required for persons to learn to do all that Christ commanded.*
4. *In the absence of knowledge and informed practice, the fundamental purpose of Christian and church life has likely been displaced by other purposes and activities.*

Practice Unto Virtue

Supernatural Formation by the Spirit due
to Sanctifying Grace



Fasting

Dependence
on God

Self-control
like behavior

Virtuous
Self-control

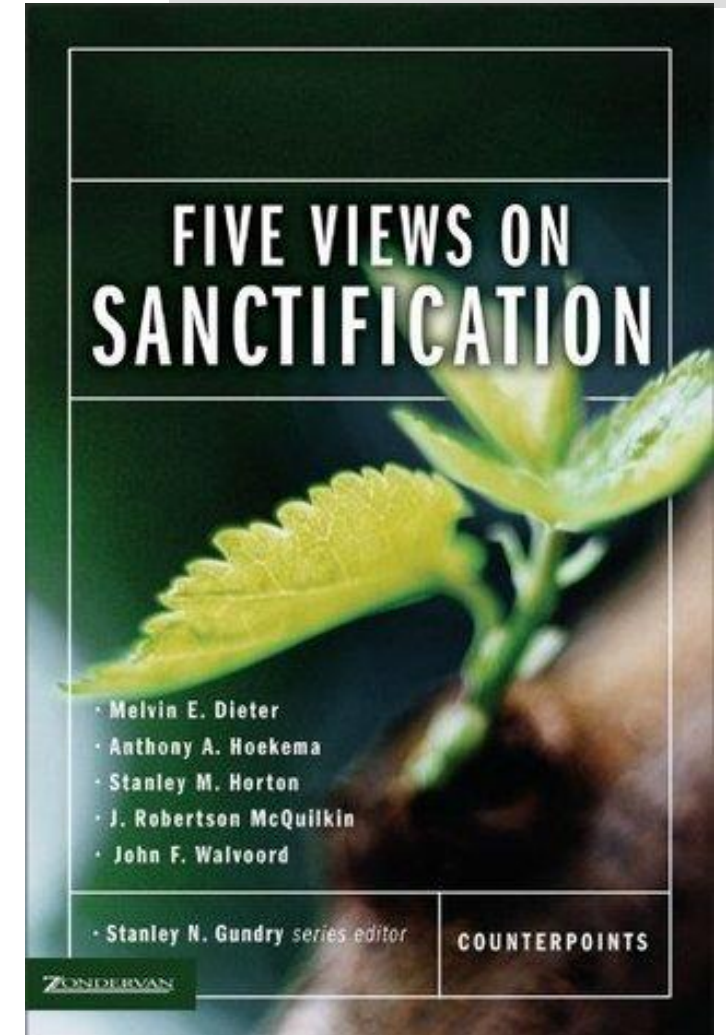
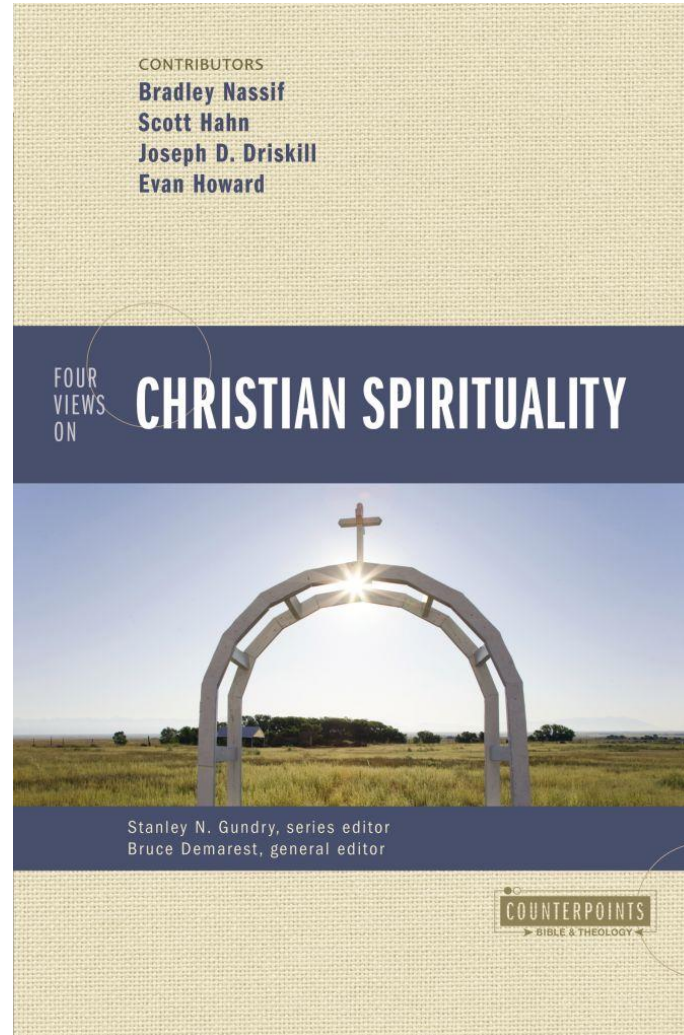
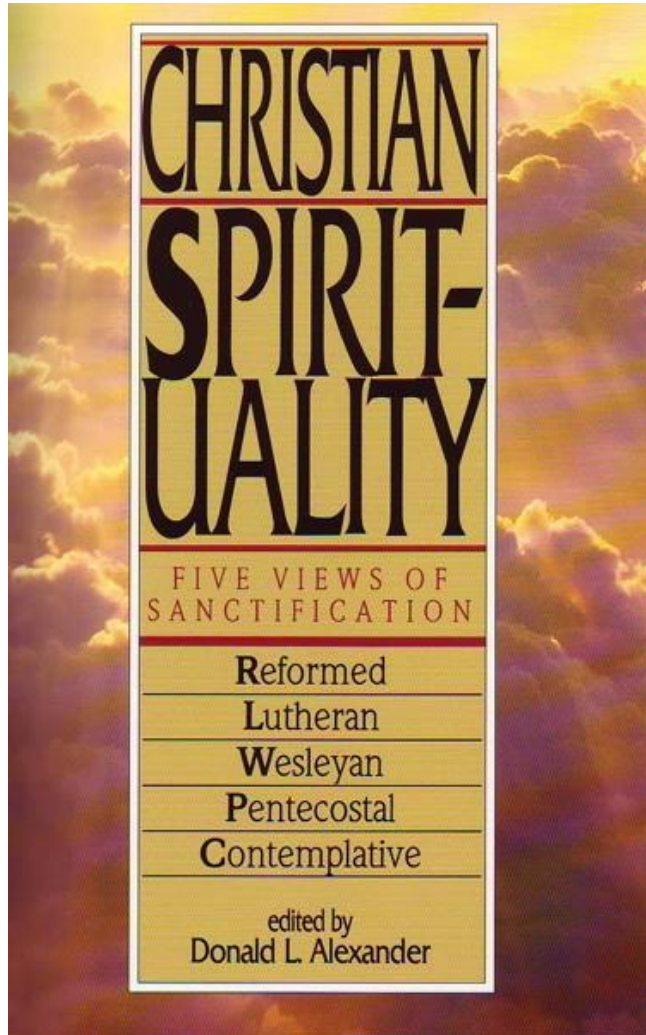
Natural Formation by the Spirit due to Common Grace



J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1877).

“It is, however, of great importance that the whole subject should be placed on right foundations, and that the movement about it should not be damaged by crude, disproportioned, and one-sided statements. If such statements abound, we must not be surprised. Satan knows well the power of true holiness, and the immense injury which increased attention to it will do to his kingdom. It is his interest, therefore, to promote strife and controversy about this part of God’s truth. Just as in time past he has succeeded in mystifying and confusing men’s minds about justification, so he is laboring in the present day to make men ‘darken counsel by words without knowledge’ about sanctification.”

Disparate Models





“In both my personal and pastoral experience, the problem is not that people don’t want to change (most do) or aren’t trying to change (most are); it’s that they don’t know *how* to change. We don’t have a good grasp on how the human soul goes from spiritual birth to spiritual maturity.”

- John Mark Comer

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

- Knowledge of Christian formation is **incomprehensible**.
- Knowledge of Christian formation is **problematic for growth**.
- Knowledge of Christian formation is **irrelevant for growth**.

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“Go therefore and make disciples...*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” (Mt 28:19, 20).

“[Apollos] had been *instructed in the way of the Lord*....he spoke and taught *accurately* the things concerning Jesus...but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God *more accurately*” (Acts 18:25, 26).

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:5–6).

Praying to impress others → pray where only God can see you

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt 6:7–9).

Praying to impress God → pray with the realization that your Father is already paying attention

Barriers to Knowledge of Christian Spiritual Formation

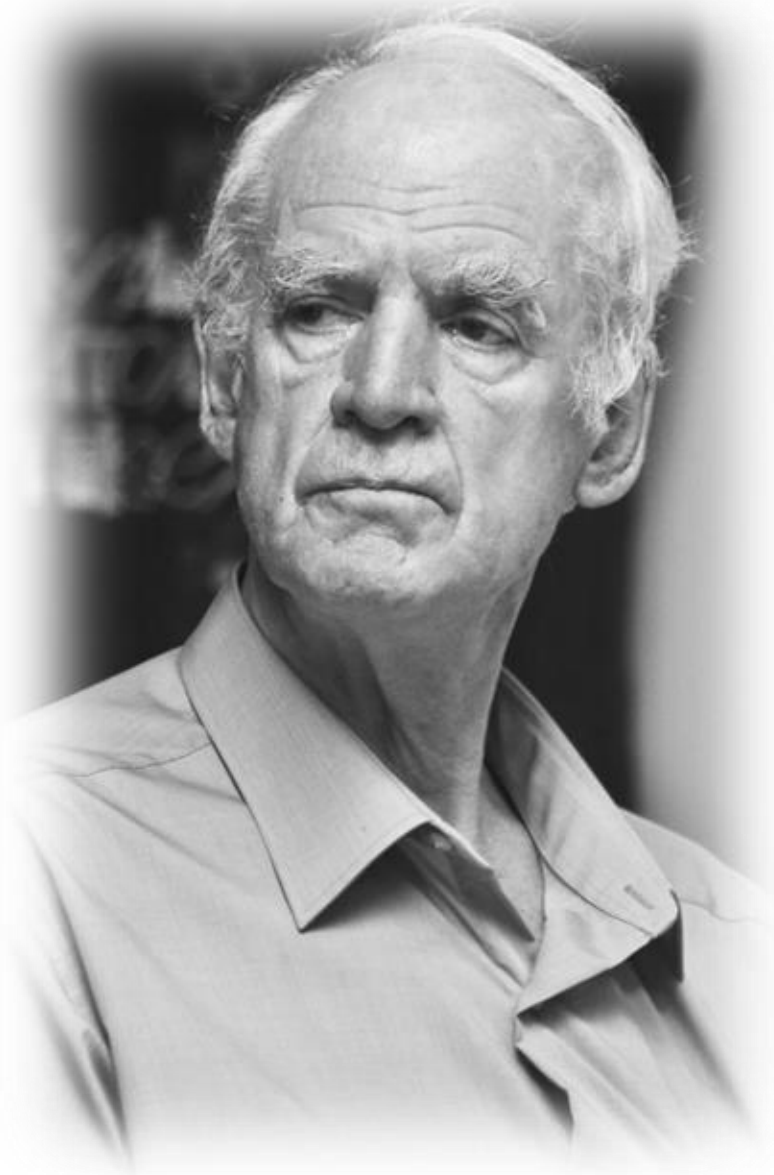
- Doubting Thomas
- “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He had received the promises, yet he was ready to offer up his only son. God had told him, ‘Through Isaac descendants will carry on your name,’ and he reasoned that God could even raise him from the dead” (Heb 11:17–19).
- “reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way” (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 2.16).

Barriers to Knowledge of Christian Spiritual Formation

- 1) A Historical Barrier to Knowledge: Faith Divorced from Reason and Knowledge
- 2) A Cultural Barrier to Knowledge: The Seeming Unreality of Spiritual Life

THE
SEEMING UNREALITY
OF THE
SPIRITUAL LIFE
HENRY CHURCHILL KING

“Though, by hypothesis, God is the one realest of all facts and the most loving of all beings, he does not seem to be thrust upon us as such at all. After all is said, is this not the real and great difficulty for the Christian view? And for the establishment of real conviction, and of joyful spiritual living, does not [much] depend upon meeting effectively this...constant, underlying difficulty of the seeming unreality of the spiritual life?”



Immanent Frame of Modernity:

The modern tendency to view our lives as complete and full without appeal to God, transcendence, or the supernatural. It's not so much that God doesn't exist. It's that we don't need him.



5 STRANGER THINGS

NETFLIX

VOL. 1 NOV 26
VOL. 2 CHRISTMAS
THE FINALE NEW YEAR'S EVE

Barriers to Knowledge of Christian Spiritual Formation

- 1) A Historical Barrier to Knowledge: Faith Divorced from Reason and Knowledge
- 2) A Cultural Barrier to Knowledge: The Seeming Unreality of Spiritual Life
- 3) An Ecclesial Barrier to Knowledge: Spiritual Life is Exchanged for Church Life



“

The Church exists for nothing else but to draw persons into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.”

C. S. LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*



“It is far from easy to keep
living where God is.
Therefore, God gives you
people who help to hold
you in that place and call
you back to it every time
you wander off.”

- Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of
Love*

Barriers to Knowledge of Christian Spiritual Formation

- 1) A Historical Barrier to Knowledge: Faith Divorced from Reason and Knowledge
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- 3) An Ecclesial Barrier to Knowledge: Spiritual Life is Exchanged for Church Life
- 4) A Personal Barrier to Knowledge: Entrenched Resistance to God

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise person who built their house on rock.

The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, but it did not collapse because its foundation had been laid on rock.

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them is like a foolish person who built their house on sand. The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, and it collapsed—it was utterly destroyed!” (Mt 7:24–27).

“There is a line in William Blake that says that 'we are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love'...in this line we are given a clue both to the greatness of the human condition: that it is irradiated by love; but also the firm reminder of how much remains to be done to prepare a man to *bear* the 'beams of love.' Here in this last firm reminder are hints both of man's longing for exposure to these 'beams of love' and yet his fear of what may be involved to come within its transforming power. For if to pray means to change, it is no wonder that men, even devoted men, hurry to fashion protective clothing, leaden aprons that resist all radiation, even beam-proof shelters within corporate religious exercises in order to elude the 'beams of love' and to stay as they are.”

- Douglas V. Steere forward to Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*.

Part IV: The “Recently Forgotten” Knowledge of Christian Spiritual Formation

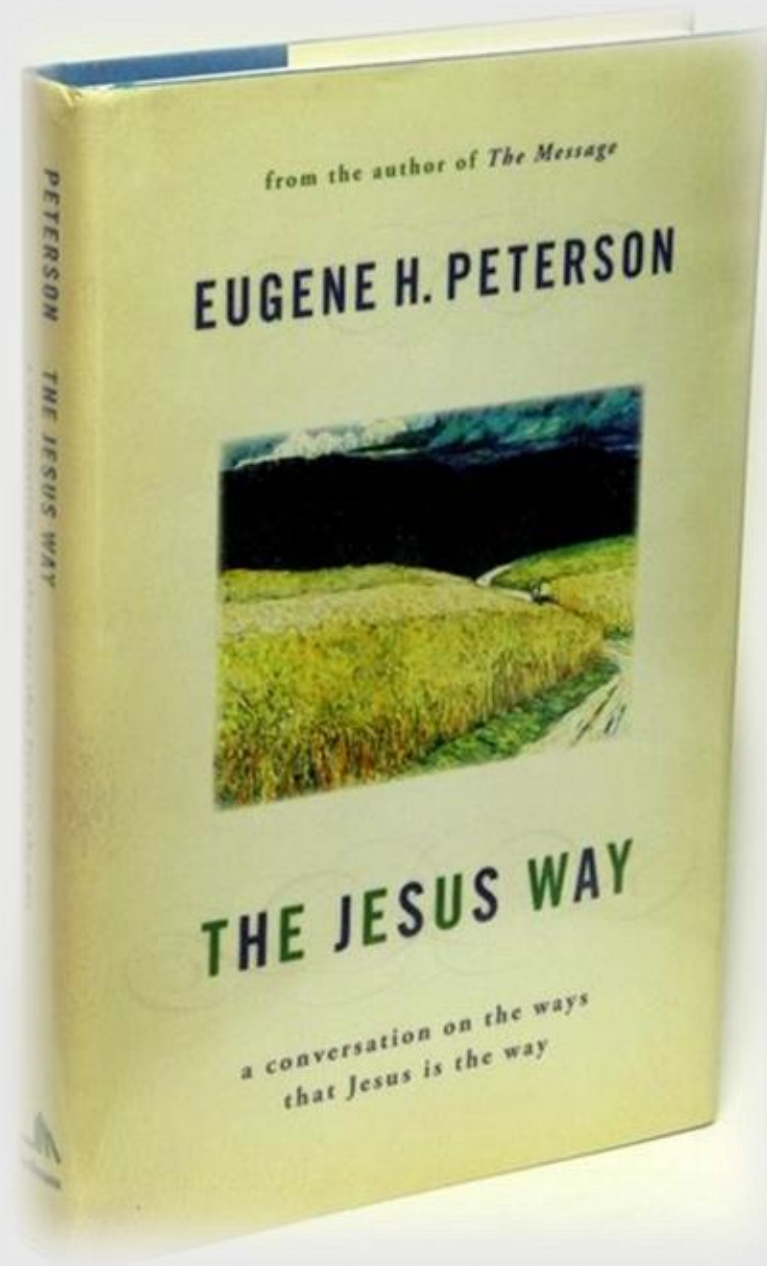
“Nothing is more crucial to our lives or more central to the heart of God than the transformation of the human personality....We must see it as our highest, most holy task—this being formed and conformed and transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately there is an abysmal ignorance today about the most elemental spiritual ingredients involved in character formation” (Foster, *Seeking the Kingdom*).

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“Go therefore and make disciples...*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” (Mt 28:19, 20).

“[Apollos] had been *instructed in the way of the Lord*....he spoke and taught *accurately* the things concerning Jesus...but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God *more accurately*” (Acts 18:25, 26).



“I am interested in the ways Jesus leads because they are necessarily the ways by which I follow. I cannot follow Jesus any which way I like. My following must be consonant with his leading. The way Jesus leads and the way that I follow Jesus are symbiotic. And this symbiosis is not treated with sufficient seriousness and depth in the Christian community of North America.”

The Role of Knowledge in Becoming Like Christ

“Smith observed, however, that younger generations are experimenting with spirituality without knowledge of or connection to religious traditions, resulting in an emerging spirituality that is marked by fragmentation and incoherence. Drawing on the survey’s findings, Smith challenges religious organizations, including churches, to identify the spiritual practices and traditions that are at the core of their identities and to find ways that they can be shared more broadly with individuals (especially young people) who are seeking opportunities to explore their spiritual interests and questions and connect with something beyond themselves.”

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Six Steps of Reclaiming Knowledge of Sanctification

- **Step One:** Conduct a Searching and Fearless Spiritual Maturity Inventory
- **Step Two:** Identify Our Primary Teacher
- **Step Three:** Locate a Community of Disciples
- **Step Four:** Take Every Thought and Thinking Captive to Christ
- **Step Five:** Attend to Your Methodology
- **Step Six:** Put the Ideas to the Test of Christian Experience