

**Scratching the Existential Itch:
Psychological Perspectives on Developing Virtues as Habits of Love
in the Context of Holistic Spirituality¹**

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Abstract:

This paper explores how spiritual practices contribute to virtue formation through the lens of developmental psychology. Spiritual formation concerns how persons are shaped toward God's purposes, and developmental science offers insight into the psychological processes by which such transformation occurs. Human development unfolds relationally, and people thrive when receiving and offering love. From this perspective, formation involves the dynamic integration of cognition, emotion, behaviors, relationships, identity, and purpose over time. When spiritual practices are disconnected from a lived experience of being loved, called, and purposed, they risk becoming routine, performative, or burdensome. However, when engaged holistically, they shape not only behavior but the self. I propose that virtues are best understood as *habits of love*, formed through participation in divine and human relationships and through the integration of meaning, identity, purpose, and the psychological capacities that sustain loving action. This reframing positions spiritual practices not as ends in themselves, but as formative contexts through which people are shaped to uniquely embody God's love in ways that reflect the character of Christ and contribute to the flourishing of others.

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Have you ever had a deep itch? I don't mean an annoying mosquito bite itch. Or a healing scab itch, but a deep systemic itch—one that was indicating something in your body is deeply off. I'm talking hives or the like. Regrettably, I have. At first, I attempted to treat the irritated surface of my skin with a quick remedy, like Benadryl cream. I tried to distract myself. I found hacks online—toothpaste, baking soda—and then I moved onto more serious things like steroids. In my case, it turns out I had an autoimmune issue that was exacerbated by stress and food. It was not until I did a major life overhaul that my body was able to calm down and heal.

Humans have a deep existential itch—a deep, systemic desire for more. More than what mundane life has to offer, but rather something that brings a sense of cohesion, significance, and purpose to their lives. As Augustine (2008) famously wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We recognize that being made in the image of God, we seek the One whose image we bear. All else will keep us seeking—or keep us itching. As Victor Frankel (*) notably argued, humans have a fundamental longing and need for meaning in life, and Christians recognize that faith and the love of God is the ultimate source of meaning and purpose. Experiencing the love of God, as our Creator and through the grace of Jesus Christ through the Spirit, is the bedrock, fuel, and direction of our lives.

Then why aren't people beating down the doors of churches and why is attendance floundering?

These days, pastors and Christian leaders find themselves asking this question and maybe these others: *Why are the people in our pews not seemingly “on fire?” Why do lives not consistently change and grow? Even though we are offering spiritual practices and/or disciplines—why is growth so inconsistent?* I would suggest that all too often the church is scratching the surface of the itch, and not treating it systemically in a way that reorders life in a transformative and sustainable manner. Part of the disconnect between the intentions of the church and what is experienced is a gap in how formation itself is understood.

Many current approaches to spiritual formation are deeply faithful and well-intentioned, yet do not account for psychological perspectives of how people grow and change over time and the fundamental needs that humans have. The current paper offers a psychological perspective of spiritual formation emphasizing the essential role of virtue in orienting and sustaining thriving spirituality—and subsequently addresses

the role of spiritual practices in ways that can begin to meet these ultimate human needs. In other words, I suggest that understanding virtues in the context of holistic spiritual formation is a way to address the “existential itch” and can shed light on how the church might activate the people of God in a substantive and transformational manner in this second quarter of the 21st century.

Although the focus of this paper is psychological perspectives on spiritual practices and virtue development, at the heart of this exploration is *love*. The Christian faith points to a God of love. Humans were created out of this love, redeemed through love, and sustained and flourish in and for love. Humans are co-actors with God and invited to be active participants in God’s ongoing work of love in the world (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). In this divine developmental ecology of love, virtues can be thought of as *habits of love*. Psychologically, they are *patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that allow one to live out God’s love across time and place* (King et al., 2020, 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019). When the focus of the spiritual life deviates from God’s love—when it’s not rooted in God’s love, connected to God, or directed toward God’s love, it goes awry. The same is true for spiritual formation, spiritual practices, and virtue development. The love of God is the beginning, means, and ends of Christian spirituality.

God’s love provides the means and ends of human life. Loving God and loving neighbor in this life and unity with God and/or the unity of all creation through Jesus Christ on the other side of eternity represent this idea (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). This view of a human *telos* (Greek for purpose or goal) of love or living in reciprocity (or becoming *reciprocating selves*, as I have articulated in other places, see Balswick et al., 2016; King, 2026, 2025a, 2025b) stands in contrast to other Christian perspectives of human *telos*, which emphasize the Christian goal of getting into heaven and avoiding hell. This fear based view of *telos*, which is often translated as *perfection*, is not a response to love. Psychology offers great insight into how fear and love prompt different motivation centers and identities (see Frederickson, 2001).

Consequently, in this paper, I suggest that spiritual practices at their best connect us to God’s love—shaping not only our beliefs, sense of meaning, identity, and purpose, but also nurturing the psychological capacities such as emotion regulation, awareness, perspective taking, and empathy that are required to live out virtues such as compassion, generosity, courage, and hope. In addition, a goal of this paper is to offer psychological and practical insights into how spiritual practices can shape virtues as ways of embodying God’s love in a sustained way. In order to do so, I highlight some pertinent issues on why psychology matters in the discussion of spiritual practices and virtue formation, then substantively address psychological perspectives of virtue development focusing on how beliefs become integrated into transcendent narrative

identity and the importance of cultivating psychological capacities in order to embody virtues. The final section focuses on virtue formation in the context of holistic spiritual formation through the lens of the Thrive Spiritual Health Framework (King, 2025, in press) and details implications for ministry.

Why Psychology Matters

Many current approaches to spiritual formation are deeply faithful and well-intentioned, yet they often do not fully account for psychological perspectives of how people grow and change over time. For example, they tend to emphasize right belief and right behavior as primary pathways of transformation disregarding the developmental needs and processes through which beliefs become meaningful, identities are formed, and lives are oriented toward sustained purpose. Psychology provides helpful insight that as embodied persons, a fuller understanding of human change involves cognitions (thoughts), affect (emotions), and behaviors (actions).

Furthermore, psychology emphasizes that humans are meaning-makers whose lives are shaped by how they interpret their experiences, understand who they are, and discern what their lives are for (Barrett & King, 2021). When the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that comprise these deeper processes are not engaged, formation can remain fragmented—resulting in beliefs that are not fully integrated, practices that feel disconnected from daily life, and moral efforts that are difficult to sustain. This helps explain why spiritual practices, on their own, do not always lead to transformation. Practices such as prayer, worship, or Scripture reading are powerful, but they are not automatically formative. Their impact depends on how they are experienced, interpreted, and integrated into a person's life.

Human development occurs through relationships, and people thrive when receiving and offering love (see King, 2025, in press; Lerner et al., 2024). It unfolds through the dynamic integration of cognition, emotion, relationships, identity, and purpose over time. When spiritual practices are disconnected from a sense of being loved, called, and purposed, they can become routine, performative, or even burdensome. When engaged more holistically, however, they can shape not only what people do, but who they are becoming.

What is needed, then, is not a replacement of existing practices, but a more complete account of how formation actually works. Spiritual formation is not simply about informing belief or guiding behavior—it is about forming whole, unique persons. It involves the gradual shaping of how individuals experience love, make meaning of their lives, form their identities, develop the capacities to relate to others, and orient

their lives toward purposes beyond themselves. From this perspective, the goal of formation is not merely doctrinal accuracy or moral compliance, but the development of persons who are moral because they deeply understand that morality supports living in love—living with and for others and God. Moreover, formation should develop virtues as capacities for living in more loving ways with self, others, and God. This vision aligns with a developmental understanding of human thriving as growing into a *reciprocating self*, a person who is both deeply grounded in a coherent sense of identity and increasingly oriented beyond the self in relationships of love and contribution (Balswick et al., 2016; King, 2016, 2025a, 2025b).

Virtue formation provides a way of understanding this process. Rather than focusing only on what people believe or what they do, it invites us to consider how love becomes embodied over time. Virtues are not simply traits to be acquired or behaviors to be performed, but patterns of living that emerge as individuals are shaped by relationships, practices, meaning, and purpose (see King et al., 2020, 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019). They represent the ways in which love becomes reliable—expressed intentionally and coherently across the varied circumstances of life.

Psychology provides insight into how virtues, as *habits of love*, are formed through participation in divine and human relationships, and through the integration of meaning, identity, purpose, and the psychological capacities that enable persons to live out that love in sustained ways. This reframing allows us to see spiritual practices not as ends in themselves, but as formative crucibles through which people are shaped. Through spiritual practices identity is forged that gives meaning and direction to psychological capacities that become patterned to comprise virtues. As I noted, at its core, Christian formation is grounded in the conviction that God is love, and that human life is both formed by and thus oriented toward participation in that love. When love is no longer the organizing center of formation, belief and behavior can become disconnected from the deeper processes that give them meaning, leaving many with practices and convictions that feel thin or insufficient for real life.

Telos, Love, and the Aim of Formation

If we are to take transformation seriously, we must first ask a prior question:
transformation toward what?

In many contemporary conversations, spiritual formation is assumed to mean becoming more knowledgeable, more disciplined, or more morally consistent. While these are important, they do not in themselves answer the deeper question of purpose. Without

clarity about the end toward which formation is directed, even well-intentioned efforts can become fragmented—focused on cultivating traits or behaviors without a coherent vision of what a fully formed life looks like. Furthermore, we can be malformed when we engage spiritual practices legalistically, self-righteously, meritoriously, or with some other false understanding of God and God’s work. Even “practicing unto virtue” can be quite different from “practicing unto the Spirit” or “practicing unto Love.”

In teaching developmental psychology at Fuller Seminary, I have always asked, *What is the purpose of human development?* Getting clarity about a sense of *telos* has been essential for guiding my work on human development and particularly *thriving*. The term thriving is commonly defined as “vigorous growth.” However, not all growth is good. For example, growing in one’s capacities to lie or cheat are generally not considered as thriving. If thriving is growth going well—or good growth—one must ask toward what ends does God intend for us to grow? Who defines “good”? In fact, in a paper co-authored with William Whitney, we wrote about “Who gets to define ‘positive’ in Positive Psychology?” (King & Whitney, 2015).

From a Christian theological perspective, this question cannot be answered apart from the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Humans are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and thus our development is inherently oriented toward reflecting God’s nature in the world. Christological perspective further specifies this calling: the image of God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15), and human thriving involves being conformed to this image (Rom. 8:29). Part of our human *telos* is to become more like Christ and to take on more of the character and ways of Jesus.

However, *conformity* to the image of God in Christ, does not mean *uniformity* (see King, 2021, 2025). Trinitarian perspectives of the *imago Dei* emphasize the importance of both the uniqueness of the three persons of the trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the simultaneous unity of the Godhead. Thus, theological anthropological perspectives affirm the significance of human uniqueness and the importance of unity. We are created as particular beings for relatedness. From this perspective, the *telos* of human development can be understood as becoming a *reciprocating self*—a person who grows as a differentiated individual while living in deepening, loving interdependence with God, others, and creation (Balswick et al., 2016; King, 2016; 2025; King & Baer, 2022). This vision reflects the relational nature of the Triune God: as God is a being in communion, so too humans are created for communion, while affirming the God-given dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each person. The *imago Dei* is therefore not merely an individual attribute or stamp, but an active and essential relational calling. To bear God’s image is to participate in patterns of giving and receiving love that reflect God’s own life.

This framing fundamentally reorients how we understand what it means to live a good life, or to *thrive*. Rather than emphasizing rigid rules and uniformity on one hand, and independence, self-optimization, or personal success on the other hand, human thriving involves holistic growth becoming “fully alive” (John 10:10) in ways that integrate individuality, relationality, and moral purpose within God’s ongoing work of creation and redemption. It is a process of becoming more like Christ as one’s unique self, while growing in relationships of mutuality and service to others. In this sense, thriving is not merely personal flourishing, but participation in the flourishing of others and of creation itself.

To be conformed to the image of Christ is to become the kind of person who can participate in God’s ongoing work in the world. As such, thriving is not only about *who we become*, but about *what we are becoming for*. Thriving is most fully realized as we grow *with and for* God and others. As we more fully participate with the Spirit and with others in God’s ongoing work of creation, redemption, and flourishing. Spiritual formation connected to love shapes persons who can receive God’s love and extend it outward in ways that contribute to the healing and renewal of the world.

At the center of this *telos* is love. Love is not incidental to human development; it is its organizing principle. Thriving is related to how humans individually and corporately experience, respond to, and reflect God’s love. Love is both the *means* and the *end* of development. It is through experiencing God’s love that individuals come to understand themselves as beloved, and it is through responding to that love that they participate in God’s mission in the world. We are called to love others as God has loved us, and to love them in ways that nurtures their capacity to give back—not only to us, but to God and the world.

To say that love is both the means and the *telos* of development is to recognize that the goal of spiritual formation is not merely moral improvement or personal fulfillment, but to form people for participation in a relational reality defined by God’s love—a reality that shapes our inner life and extends into God’s redemptive purposes for the world. Virtues bridge our intentions with how we act in the world.

This theological grounding also clarifies the role of virtue. If the *telos* of human life is to live in love as reciprocating selves participating in God’s ongoing mission in the world then virtues are the capacities that make such a life possible. They are not ends in themselves, but instrumental to human thriving and flourishing societies. They are the habits of love that enable humans to grow as reciprocating selves and thrive. Virtues such as compassion, humility, patience, and courage enable individuals to perceive the needs of others, regulate one’s own desires, and act consistently in ways that reflect love across contexts (King et al., 2024).

This theological vision provides a crucial foundation for understanding the role of spiritual practices. Practices matter deeply—but not as ends in themselves. Their significance lies in how they shape persons into people who can receive and respond to God’s love, develop the capacities necessary for virtue, and participate in God’s ongoing work of flourishing creation. Without this *telos*, practices risk becoming performative. With it, they become pathways into a life of love oriented toward God’s mission in the world.

When the *telos* of formation is understood as becoming persons who live in love—participating in God’s life and mission. Then we must ask: *how such a life actually becomes possible. Why is it that many desire to love well, yet struggle to do so consistently? Why does love so often remain an aspiration rather than a way of life?*

The Christian tradition offers an answer through the concept of virtue. But virtues are frequently reduced to moral traits to be acquired or behaviors to be performed, reinforcing the very patterns of performative faith that many find unsustainable. A more complete account recognizes that virtues are not achievements, but the fruit of formation. Psychology helps us understand that virtues are a habit, and that practices that engage and “train” our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the context of community with a loving and transcendent narrative will habituate humans toward love.

What are Virtues?

From a developmental and theological perspective, virtues are best understood as *habits of love*—patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that take shape over time as individuals are formed through relationships, practices, and meaning-making processes. In this sense, virtues function like *psychological habits*—ways of being that become increasingly automatic and reliable. But this definition, while helpful, is not yet sufficient. What distinguishes virtues from other habits is that they are shaped by meaning and oriented by love.

Through virtues, love does not remain abstract; it becomes differentiated and embodied as compassion, patience, courage, and humility. In this way, virtues are what love looks like when it becomes reliable in the life of a person. As habituated patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting virtues allow one to do what is loving, what is right or good across time and place. They are embodied—we feel them and we act on them, and they are deeply embedded in human experience, relationships, and culture. For example, to be compassionate might require different behaviors in different situations or with different people. Furthermore, given human uniqueness, people will act out being compassionate differently. Different cultures have different customs around expressing gratitude.

People inhabit virtues differently and virtuous actions look different in different settings. However, virtues are aimed toward aligning a person's life with their *telos*—of loving others. In this way, virtues function as embodied habits of love that align a person's life over time with more fully participating in God's work in the world, as their unique selves in growing relationships with others, as they become more like Christ—as reciprocating selves.

At the same time, virtues are not reducible to intention or desire. They depend on the development of underlying psychological capacities—such as empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, and self-control—that enable individuals to enact love in concrete situations. These capacities allow a person to recognize the needs of others, regulate their own impulses, consider multiple perspectives, and respond in ways that align with their values. Without these capacities, even well-intentioned desires to love can remain inconsistent or unrealized.

Importantly, these capacities do not operate in isolation. They are given direction and meaning through experiencing God and making meaning of that experience in relationship with others. When a person understands who they are in relation to a larger story, they develop a *transcendent narrative identity* (King et al., 2020, 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019). This is where beliefs matter. When individuals locate their lives within beliefs about a loving God, the nature of love, and their purposes within that love, their psychological capacities are more likely to be recruited toward moral ends. For example, empathy can be expressed as compassion rather than avoidance, perspective-taking can lead to reconciliation rather than manipulation, and self-control can support faithfulness rather than mere restraint. In this way, identity provides the organizing framework that aligns psychological resources with love-directed action.

Virtues, then, can be understood as constellations of psychological capacities that have been shaped, integrated, and oriented by a transcendent narrative of love. They are not isolated traits but part of a larger system that enables a person to respond appropriately across different situations. For instance, patience allows one to endure difficulty for the sake of a greater good, hope sustains action toward a future not yet realized, gratitude strengthens relational bonds, and humility opens one to growth and to others. Together, these virtues form a kind of *moral regulation system*—supporting what might be called *moral agility*: the ability to discern how to act in ways that reflect love across varying contexts (see King et al., 2024).

This “systems” perspective also helps us see why virtue formation cannot be reduced to a single domain. Virtues are cultivated through the dynamic interplay between the person and their environment—through relationships, practices, communities, and cultural narratives that reinforce particular ways of seeing and acting. They are shaped

over time, becoming increasingly automatic as they are practiced and reinforced. As virtues become habituated, individuals are able to respond with love more consistently, even in complex or challenging situations. This process reflects the deeper developmental aim of the formation of a *reciprocating self*—a person who is both grounded in a coherent sense of identity and oriented toward others in relationships of care, responsibility, and contribution. Becoming such a person requires more than good intentions; it requires a coordinated set of capacities that are given meaning within a community and enable individuals to recognize needs, regulate self-interest, and act in ways that align with their deepest commitments.

This conceptualization is very aligned with MacIntyre's (1981) understanding of virtues as *habitus*. Virtues are cultivated dispositions that are stable ways of perceiving, desiring, and acting enabling people to pursue genuine goods over time. They are not innate traits but are formed through repeated participation in practices embedded within communities with a common unfolding narrative oriented toward a *telos*, a vision of what it means to live well or flourish. In other words, virtues are socially formed habits that enable persons to pursue the goods of practices within a life story aimed at *the good life*.

From this perspective, virtues are not simply outcomes of formation—they are also part of the process itself. As individuals grow in virtues such as patience, compassion, and humility, these qualities further shape how they perceive the world, relate to others, and engage in practices. In this way, virtue formation is both cumulative and self-reinforcing: love shapes capacities, capacities enable virtues, and virtues, in turn, deepen one's capacity to love. In this way, virtue formation is best understood not as the accumulation of moral traits, but as the integration of the self around love—a process through which individuals become increasingly able to live with and for others in ways that reflect the character of Christ and contribute to the flourishing of the world. The next sections give further detail on how identity is formed and gives meaning and direction to our psychological capacities necessary to live out virtues.

From Belief to Identity: How Formation Actually Happens

If virtues are habits of love, and if they depend on the integration of beliefs and psychological capacities, and purpose, then an important question remains: *How does this integration actually occur?* How do beliefs about God, love, and purpose move from ideas we affirm to realities that shape who we are and how we live? This is where the process of meaning-making becomes essential.

Human beings are not formed simply by what they are taught, but by how they interpret and internalize their experiences. Meaning-making refers to the process through which individuals construct and internalize salient beliefs, especially those connected to identity, purpose, and transcendence, into a coherent sense of self (King et al., 2022, Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; 2024; Riveros & Immordino-Yang, 2021). In this way, formation is not merely about acquiring beliefs, but about how those beliefs become *personally meaningful* and integrated into one's narrative identity. People are not formed by what they hear alone or even see exemplified, but by what they come to experience as meaningful.

Psychological research consistently identifies three core dimensions of meaning that are essential for thriving: coherence (how life makes sense), significance (whether one's life matters), and purpose (what one's life is for) (George & Park, 2016; Park & Van Tongeren, 2023; Steger, 2012). These are not abstract concepts; they are lived realities that shape how individuals interpret their experiences and orient their lives. When these dimensions are underdeveloped, beliefs may remain intellectually affirmed but not deeply formative. Additionally, meaning systems may be inconsistent or fragmented often serving as sources of anxiety rather than cohesion and an activating sense of purpose.

Crucially, meaning is not constructed through cognition alone. Drawing on developmental neuroscience, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and colleagues demonstrate that meaning emerges through the integration of thought, emotion, and social experience. Emotion is not secondary to thinking; it is central to how the brain assigns significance to ideas and experiences. When beliefs are accompanied by emotionally salient experiences—such as awe, gratitude, compassion, or a sense of being loved—they are more likely to be internalized and integrated into identity (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019, 2024; see also King et al., 2022 for summary).

This insight helps explain why some spiritual experiences are transformative while others are not. A belief such as “God loves me” may be cognitively understood, but unless it is experienced in ways that engage emotion and relationship, it may not become meaningful enough to shape identity. Meaning-making occurs when individuals not only understand an idea, but feel its significance for their lives and also for the world beyond themselves (Immordino-Yang et al., 2024).

Equally important is the role of caring relationships in this process. Meaning is rarely constructed in isolation. It is scaffolded through relationships in which trusted others help individuals interpret their experiences, connect emotions to values, and make sense of life events. Immordino-Yang and colleague's research points out that adults play a crucial role in helping people link concrete experiences to deeper meanings

(Immordino-Yang et al. 2019; King et al., 22; Riveros & Immordino-Yang, 2021; Riveros et al., 2023). For example, a parent helping a child understand that a simple gift reflects love is not merely shaping behavior, but cultivating the capacity to perceive and internalize relational meaning. Relational contexts such as families, congregations, and mentoring relationships provide opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and modeling that support meaning-making. Within these relationships, individuals are exposed not only to beliefs, but to ways of interpreting life through those beliefs. Over time, this process enables individuals to integrate abstract ideas—such as love, justice, or purpose—into lived realities.

Religious beliefs are important for meaning-making. They address the deepest issues of human life (e.g. creation, human nature, redemption, restoration), and they provide sources of truth that have sacred origin. Research shows that when people encounter transcendence, that poignant emotional experiences and/or profound beliefs have a particularly galvanizing effect on people’s worldviews and sense of identity. Religion and spirituality *sanctify* beliefs—whether they are about God, life, death, marriage, sin, vocation—these beliefs have particular weight and priorities in people’s commitments and identities (King, in press; King et al., 2022, 2024; Mahoney et al., 2022).

Religion and spirituality provide *master narratives* that situates individual lives within a larger story, experiences that evoke self-transcendent emotions, and communities that support reflection and integration (see King et al., 2020; MacLean & Syed, 2015). When these elements come together, they create the conditions under which beliefs can become deeply meaningful, coherent, and identity-shaping. This process gives rise to transcendent narrative identity—the evolving story individuals tell about who they are in relation to God and a larger purpose (King et al., 2024). From this perspective, spiritual formation involves more than transmitting beliefs or encouraging practices. It requires attending to how individuals are making meaning of their experiences, how their identities are being formed, and how their lives are being oriented toward purpose. It is through this integration that virtues emerge.

Forming the Capacities that Make Love Possible

If virtues are habits of love, and if meaning-making and identity shape what people believe about themselves and their purpose, then another essential question remains: *what enables people to actually live out love in the moment?*

Many people sincerely desire to love well—to be patient, compassionate, or faithful—yet find themselves reacting in ways that fall short of those intentions. They may understand what love requires and even see themselves as committed to it, but struggle to respond accordingly in real situations. This gap between intention and action points to an often-overlooked dimension of formation: the development of the psychological capacities that make love possible in practice (see King et al., 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019).

Living a life of love requires more than conviction; it requires the ability to attend, feel, and act in ways that align with that conviction. This includes capacities such as:

- directing and sustaining attention,
- regulating emotions,
- considering the perspectives of others,
- inhibiting impulsive reactions, and
- maintaining commitment to meaningful goals over time.

These capacities enable individuals to notice the needs of others, manage their own internal responses, and act in ways that reflect their values rather than their immediate impulses. Without them, even the most sincere desire to love can be easily disrupted by distraction, emotional reactivity, or competing priorities.

Importantly, these capacities are not fixed traits; they are developed over time through relationships, practices, and lived experience (King, 2025, in press; King et al., 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019). Just as physical strength is built through repeated use, these capacities are strengthened through engagement in contexts that require attention, regulation, and relational responsiveness. Spiritual practices—such as prayer, silence, confession, and service—can play a crucial role in this process by training attention, increasing emotional awareness, and creating space for intentional response rather than automatic reaction.

Yet these capacities, on their own, do not determine how a person will act. They are necessary but not sufficient for virtue. The same capacity for focus can be used for self-serving goals or for loving service; emotional sensitivity can lead to compassion or to overwhelm. What gives these capacities direction is the meaning and identity within which they are embedded and the purposes toward which they are directed.

This is where transcendent narrative identity becomes essential. As individuals come to understand themselves as loved by God, called to participate in God’s purposes, and oriented toward the good of others, their capacities are increasingly recruited in the service of love (King, 2025, in press; King et al., 2024). Attention becomes attuned to

what matters most, emotional regulation supports patience and compassion, and goal-directed behavior aligns with a sense of calling and purpose that allow people to live out God's love.

In this way, the development of these capacities and the formation of identity are deeply intertwined. Identity gives direction to capacities, while capacities enable identity to be enacted. Together, they form the foundation upon which virtues emerge. Virtues such as patience, courage, and humility are not simply chosen in isolated moments; they are made possible by a coordinated set of capacities that allow individuals to respond in ways that reflect love across different situations.

Seen in this light, spiritual formation involves more than shaping what people believe or even how they understand themselves. It includes the intentional cultivation of the inner capacities that allow love to be lived out in real time. When these capacities are underdeveloped, individuals may feel stuck—wanting to grow but lacking the ability to do so consistently. When they are developed and integrated within a love-centered identity, individuals become increasingly able to respond with wisdom, restraint, and compassion.

This perspective also helps clarify the role of spiritual practices. Practices are not merely expressions of devotion; they are training grounds for the capacities of love. They shape how individuals attend, regulate, interpret, and respond—creating the conditions under which virtues can take root and grow.

Why Practices Don't Automatically Transform

Given the central role that spiritual practices play in Christian life, it is often assumed that regular engagement in practices such as prayer, worship, Scripture reading, or service will naturally lead to transformation. Yet both pastoral experience and research suggest otherwise. Many individuals participate faithfully in these practices and still experience limited or uneven growth. This raises an important question: *Why don't practices automatically produce transformation?*

The answer, in light of the preceding sections, is that practices are not inherently transformative. They are formative opportunities, but their impact depends on how they engage the deeper processes of meaning-making, identity formation, and the development of the capacities that enable love to be lived out.

First, practices do not transform when they are disconnected from a clear *telos*. When individuals engage practices without a compelling vision of becoming like Christ as persons who live in love—participating in God's life and mission—those practices can

become ends in themselves. Prayer becomes something to complete, scripture something to master, service something to perform. Without a shared understanding that the aim of formation is the development of a life organized by love, practices can drift toward routine or obligation rather than transformation. From this view, “going through the motions” of spiritual practices without the emotion of connection to love of God, others, self, or creation are less effective. That is not to say that in every spiritual activity we are going to be elevated and inspired by sensations of love and closeness to God or other, but research makes the point that beliefs are more likely to become meaningful and integrated into one’s identity serving to motivate and direct virtue development when there is cognitive, affective, and social components.

Second, practices can lead toward malformation when one’s *telos* is not loving. Practices can foster growth, but without a *telos*, it’s like trying to hit a target you’re not aiming at. When that target is perfectionism, performance, and/or individual success, practices may fuel and direct growth in less satisfying directions. When people have a clearer sense of *telos* as becoming love-based reciprocating selves that are growing more like Christ as their unique selves in growing relationships and service to others, their spiritual practices are more likely to direct them accordingly.

Similarly, practices can even become malformative when they are embedded in distorted understandings of God, self, or others. Practices performed out of fear, obligation, or a need for approval may reinforce anxiety, shame, or self-reliance rather than trust and love. In such cases, individuals may become more disciplined without becoming more loving.

Third, practices do not transform when they fail to engage meaning-making and identity. As discussed earlier, people are not formed by what they do alone, but by how they interpret their experiences. A person may pray regularly, yet continue to experience themselves as unworthy or distant from God. Another may participate in worship but not connect those experiences to a sense of purpose or calling. In these cases, the practice is present, but the meaning has not been internalized. Without processes that help individuals interpret their experiences—often within caring relationships—practices may not reshape how people understand themselves or their lives.

Fourth, practices do not transform when they do not cultivate the capacities required for love. Many practices have the potential to shape attention, emotional awareness, self-regulation, and relational attunement. However, this formation is not automatic. For example, prayer can train attention and foster emotional openness, but it can also become distracted, rushed, or purely cognitive. Service can develop empathy and compassion, but it can also reinforce burnout or self-righteousness if not grounded in

reflection and relational connection. When practices are not intentionally engaged as training in the capacities of love, their developmental potential is often diminished.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that practices are best understood not as automatic mechanisms of change, but as opportunities for formation that must be engaged within a larger ecology of development. Practices become transformative when they are:

- oriented toward a clear *telos* of love and participation in God’s mission,
- interpreted through processes of meaning-making that shape identity,
- embedded in caring relationships that support reflection and integration, and
- engaged in ways that cultivate the psychological capacities necessary for living out love through specific virtues.

When these elements are present, practices begin to function as intended. They help individuals experience God’s love, make meaning of their lives, form a coherent identity, and develop the capacities to respond to others with wisdom and compassion. Over time, this integration gives rise to virtue—not as a direct product of practice alone, but as the fruit of a life increasingly shaped by love.

This reframing does not diminish the importance of spiritual practices; it deepens it. Practices remain essential, but their role is clarified. They are not ends in themselves, nor guarantees of transformation. Rather, they are participatory pathways—contexts in which individuals can encounter God, interpret their experiences, form their identities, and cultivate the capacities that make love possible. When understood in this way, practices move from being tasks to complete to becoming environments in which persons are formed.

Virtue Formation Within a Holistic Ecology

If virtue formation is the process by which love becomes embodied over time, then it cannot be reduced to any single domain of human life, but it is part of an integrated whole. Virtues emerge from beliefs, behaviors, practices, and within loving relationships. They are formed through the integration of the whole person in relationship with God, others, and the world.

The Thrive Spiritual Health Framework highlights the interdependent domains through which persons are formed (King, 2025, in press). The framework is a useful tool for understanding spiritual formation as a non-linear process and involving a holistic ecology—a dynamic system in which encounters with God, relationships, practices, identity, and purpose shape one another over time. Within this ecology, virtues are not

a separate domain, but the embodied expression of this integrated formation. They are what emerges as beliefs, emotions, and behaviors are shaped through participation in transcendent love—God’s love made known and experienced in the life of the person and community.

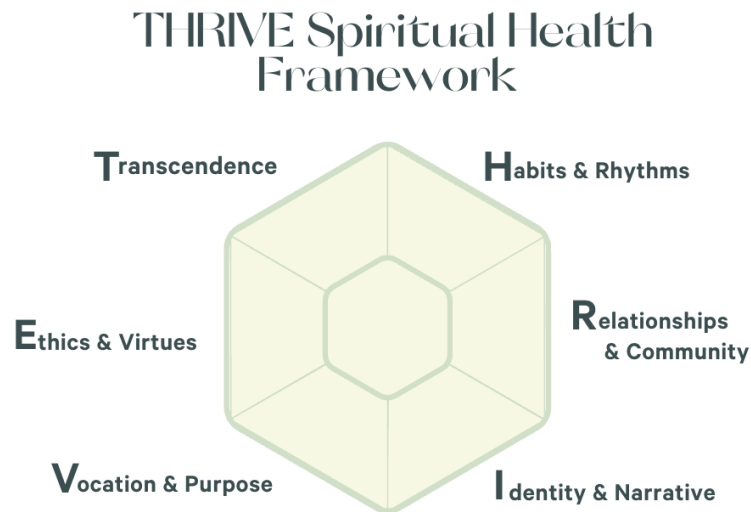


Figure 1: Thrive Spiritual Health Framework

The [Thrive Spiritual Health Framework](#) identifies six integrated facets spelling out the word THRIVE: Transcendence, Habits & Rhythms, Relationships & Community, Identity & Narrative, Vocation & Purpose, and Ethics & Virtues.

Transcendence: Encountering Divine Love

Virtue formation begins with encounters with transcendent love. In the Christian tradition, this is rooted in the reality that God is love and that human life is formed through participation in that love. Experiences of God, whether in worship, prayer, Scripture, or everyday moments of grace, provide the relational foundation for formation. These encounters are not merely cognitive; they are affective and relational. They shape how individuals experience themselves and the world. When individuals encounter God as loving, faithful, and present, they begin to internalize these realities, forming the basis for trust, hope, and openness. Virtues such as faith, gratitude, and

humility are cultivated as individuals learn to receive love before they attempt to extend it.

For ministry, this underscores the importance of creating environments where people can genuinely experience God's love, not simply learn about it.

Habits and Practices: Training for Love

Spiritual practices play a crucial role in virtue formation: but as noted, their significance lies in how they function as rehearsals of love. Practices such as prayer, worship, confession, and service are not ends in themselves; they are contexts in which individuals learn to attend to God, to others, and to their own inner lives. When practices are engaged in ways that are grounded in love, they shape attention, emotional awareness, and responsiveness. Over time, they help form the psychological capacities necessary for virtue—training individuals to pause, reflect, and act in alignment with love rather than impulse. Spiritual practices help habituate the patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that constitute different virtues in different settings.

In ministry contexts, this suggests that practices should be framed not as obligations, but as pathways into love—into clarifying beliefs about God's love, experiences of love, and actions that enable us to experience and offer more love. Spiritual practices are ultimately relational by offering ways of opening oneself to the love of God, others, creation, and ourselves—and learning to live in response to this love.

Relationships and Community: Experiencing and Extending Love

Virtues are inherently relational. They are formed within the context of caring, attuned relationships, where individuals both experience love and are invited to extend it to others. Communities of faith play a central role in this process; they are communities of practice which teach, exemplify, and provide practices and rituals the support virtue formation (King et al., 2024). Within relationships characterized by trust, empathy, and accountability, individuals learn how to interpret their experiences, regulate their emotions, and respond to others in ways that reflect love. Communities not only offer beliefs about doctrines, narratives, ethics, and *telos*, but they also exemplify these beliefs, offer practices and rituals, allow for emotional experiences, and provide meaningful spaces and artifacts that further connect people to God's love (see King et al., 2024). These relational environments serve as the primary context in which virtues such as compassion, patience, forgiveness, and generosity are taught, practiced, and nurtured.

At the same time, relationships can also be sites of misinformation when they are marked by judgment, exclusion, or performance. This highlights the importance of cultivating communities that embody the love they seek to form.

Identity and Narrative: Becoming Beloved and Called

Virtue formation requires more than experience and practice; it requires the formation of identity. As discussed earlier, beliefs become transformative when they are internalized into a person's sense of self—what has been described as a transcendent narrative identity (King et al., 2024; Schnitker et al., 2019). Within a Christian framework, this involves coming to understand oneself as loved by God, called into relationship, and invited to participate in God's purposes. This identity provides coherence, significance, and direction, shaping how individuals interpret their experiences and orient their lives.

Virtues emerge as this identity becomes lived. When beliefs are integrated into identity, they have orienting and motivating power on how a person lives. A person who understands themselves as beloved is more able to act with compassion; one who sees themselves as called is more likely to persevere with courage and hope.

For ministry, this means that formation must attend not only to what people believe, but to who they understand themselves to be.

Purpose and Vocation: Enacting and Living Out Love

Finally, virtues are engaged to live out one's purpose and vocation. Purpose is an actionable enduring goal that is meaningful to oneself and contributes to the world beyond them (Damon, 2008, 2025). Vocation is often understood as a sacred calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009). God is often the caller, that the called responds to in their goals and their roles (King, 2021). Both provide actionable pathways by which individuals live out love through their strengths with and for others. Love is not only experienced and internalized; it is enacted through concrete actions that contribute to the flourishing of others. Virtues bridge one's moral ideals and one's identities to their actions in the world.

Each person embodies love in ways shaped by their unique strengths, gifts, and contexts. Virtues are expressed through these particularities. Courage may be lived out through leadership, compassion through caregiving, justice through advocacy. In this sense, virtue formation is not about uniformity, but about the faithful expression of love through diverse lives. This dimension connects virtue formation directly to *God's*

mission in the world. As individuals grow in virtue, they become increasingly able to participate in God's work of healing, reconciliation, and renewal.

Virtue as the Integration of the Whole

Virtues emerge as constellations of beliefs, emotions, and behaviors are shaped within a life grounded in love. They result from integrated formation across the whole person. This holistic vision helps explain why formation so often feels incomplete when these domains are disconnected. Practices without relationships can become mechanical. Beliefs without identity can remain abstract. Capacities without purpose can be misdirected. But when these elements are integrated, they create the conditions under which love becomes reliable.

Virtues, then, are not simply one facet of spiritual health; they are the visible expression of a life being formed in love.

Implications for Ministry

For pastors and ministry leaders, this framework offers both encouragement and challenge. It affirms that the practices and structures of the church matter deeply—but it also invites a broader vision of formation.

The question is not only whether people are engaging in practices or affirming beliefs, but whether the church is cultivating an environment in which:

- God's love is encountered,
- meaning is made,
- identity is formed,
- relationships are nurturing,
- capacities are developed, and
- purpose is lived out.

In such an ecology, virtue formation becomes not a program or outcome to manage, but a natural expression of lives being shaped by love.

Conclusion: Formed in Love, For Love

The challenge facing the church today is not simply a lack of belief, commitment, or practice. It is a challenge of formation—of how persons are being shaped in what they love, how they understand themselves, and how they live in relation to God and others. In a cultural moment marked by fragmentation and disordered desires, the need is not

only for clearer teaching or more disciplined practice, but for a deeper vision of what it means to become fully human and what it means to live out love in community. A vision for the church must be grounded in love—not only as an ethical aim, but as the ground, means, and *telos* of human development. Because God is love, human flourishing is found not in self-sufficiency or performance, but in participation in a life of reciprocal, self-giving love. To be formed in Christ is to be formed in love: to receive it, to be shaped by it, and to extend it in ways that contribute to the flourishing of others.

Within this understanding, virtues take on renewed significance. They are not moral achievements to be acquired, nor traits to be displayed, but embodied habits of love—patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that make love reliable in the life of a person. Virtues emerge not from isolated effort, but from communities of practice and the integration of meaning, identity, relationships, and the capacities that enable love to be lived out in real time. They represent the ways in which love becomes stable, durable, and responsive across the varied circumstances of life.

This understanding also reframes the role of spiritual practices. Practices matter deeply, but they are not ends in themselves. They become transformative when they are part of a larger ecology of formation. That is when they help individuals encounter God's love embedded in community and make meaning of their experiences, form a coherent identity, hone a sense of purpose, and develop the capacities necessary to live in love. When detached from this ecology, practices risk becoming routine or performative. When integrated within it, they become pathways into a life that reflects the character of Christ. The Thrive Spiritual Health Framework offers a way of holding this integrative vision together. The framework emphasizes that formation is not linear or compartmentalized, but holistic—shaped through encounters with transcendence, engagement in practices, participation in relationships, the formation of identity, and the enactment of purpose. Thus, virtues are not separate from these domains; they are the visible expression of their integration. They are what emerges when the whole person is formed in love.

For pastors and ministry leaders, this vision emphasizing love invites both encouragement and reorientation. It affirms that the work of formation is not simply about increasing participation in practices or ensuring doctrinal understanding, but about cultivating environments in which people can be formed in love. This includes creating spaces where God's love is genuinely encountered, where meaning is made in the midst of real life, where identities are shaped around being loved and called, where relationships embody grace and truth, and where people are equipped to live out their unique callings in the world. Ultimately, the question is not simply whether people are

practicing their faith, but whether they are becoming the kind of people who can live in love. The task of the church is not merely to produce belief or behavior, but to participate in God's ongoing work of forming persons—persons who are able to receive and reflect divine love in ways that bring coherence to their lives, healing to their relationships, and hope to the world.

I began with an idea about a deep systemic itch that is only satisfied by experiencing the love of God and enacting it through virtues as we purposefully participate in God's ongoing work in the world. This led to a question about why *people aren't beating down the doors of churches and why is attendance floundering?* If I've made my case, the answer is that churches are not reflecting love and inviting people into a deep formation process which enables them to experience that transformative love of a God who seeks to work in the world through humans who are formed and act purposefully. The church has enormous opportunities to work toward a flourishing world if it offers a vision of love and a place where capacities to give love and receive love are developed. When spiritual formation nurtures virtues as habits of love, it scratches that itch—it touches our deepest longings and draws us into lives where love is both fulfilling and sustaining.

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