

The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Reading

Each month this year from February through November, our congregation will be encouraged to read a book selection written by authors who are modern interpreters of the Christian spiritual formation experience based on Scripture, the early church, and the classic spiritual tradition. While not “classics,” the purpose of each of these books is to assist Christ-followers in a purposeful and meaningful journey of being formed in Christ.

Marjorie Thompson in her book, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, beautifully explains the nature and purpose of spiritual reading. May the books selected for this year’s emphasis on being “formed in Christ” be read with the spirit and purpose described below:

What makes our reading spiritual has as much to do with intention, attitude, and manner we bring to the words as it does with the nature and content of those words. Spiritual reading is reflective and prayerful. It is concerned not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. That is because the purpose of spiritual reading is to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular text...We are seeking not merely information but formation.

Information is basically utilitarian; it is a means to some other end. We glean facts to strengthen our arguments; we garner knowledge to make our conversation convincing; we seek help with problem solving, ideas for programming, evidence for cases, and illustrations for teaching. The same information may be used for a variety of purposes. I call this approach the strip-mining method of reading; we are preoccupied with digging up the little gems of wisdom from their larger context to apply to whatever task is at hand.

Formation, on the contrary, is generally understood as an end in itself. It has to do with the dynamics of change in the human heart, change that reshapes us into the kind of being God intends for us to be. As this occurs, personal behavior, human relationships, and social structures will be affected quite inevitably for the better, but we do not use formative practices in order to achieve such ends...

Spiritual reading is a meditative approach to the written word. It requires unhurried time and an open heart. If the purpose of our reading is to be addressed by God, we will need to practice attentive listening and a willingness to respond to what we hear. Many kinds of literature can be read in this manner...

It is the attitude we bring to spiritual reading that allows God to transform the text from interesting words to words with the power to change our very being. That attitude is an expectation that we will, through the words we read, be encountered by the loving presence and radical challenge of the living God. That attitude is a willingness to be addressed, discerned, and penetrated by the tender but decisive power of the Holy Spirit. That attitude is a desire to respond fully and freely to what is heard, so that God may restore us to the wholeness of our life in Christ—the divine image obscured in our depths, yet even being called into the light of day to reveal the glory of the children of God!¹

¹ Thompson, Majorie J., *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 20-21, 31.

As we move through this year's emphasis on being "formed in Christ," one of the spiritual practices seminars that will be offered will specifically address the practice of spiritual reading. In the tradition of the Church, spiritual reading refers to the reading of Scripture and spiritual classics as a means of nourishing one's faith. The primary focus of this seminar will be the reading of scripture but will also include suggestions for the reading of some of the spiritual classics.