

LECTURES

For Moravian Theological College, Mbeya, Tanzania

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These lectures were presented on various subjects at the Moravian Theological College at the time of my visit, June to August 1995. In December of 1994 I received the kind invitation to lecture and to assist with the development of the projected B.D. program, an honor to which I was happy to respond. I arrived on June 17 and delivered these lectures to the students on June 19-26. I dedicate them to the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, its students, its staff, and its future -- to the honor and glory of God.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION II — How our lives are shaped — Becoming the Message

The second concern of spiritual formation which I indicated yesterday that we would deal with today is: How can our Christian life be formed and shaped? Thus spiritual formation is a sort of spiritual psychology, for it explores the dynamics and possibilities of human life and spiritual development, what we have often called spiritual growth and spiritual journey.

The Bible is very clear that personal, spiritual and moral development are called for. It describes the impact of both Christ and the Spirit upon our lives and speaks of the relationship with God, who is our Abba, as a fundamental resource for life. It speaks of growth in righteousness and holiness and love. In our title we talked of becoming the message because the coming into being of the Christian reality within each of us is part of our witness to the reality of the Gospel. *Our words about what persons can be with God will not be believed unless persons see us becoming this.*

Now the New Testament was written over a very short period of time -- about 40 years. Most of the church in its struggle to exist and bear its witness did not have the luxury of reflecting on HOW Christian growth and formation and becoming happened. It primarily affirmed THAT is happened. To explore the HOW has really been left to the church. The Mystics like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, Meister Eckart and others were in some sense the psychologists of spiritual growth, exploring its nature. Also one cannot neglect the great Swiss psychiatrist Karl Jung whose theory of human personality and spirituality so many contemporary Christians have used.

The Nature of the Person

In the chapter on understanding the human being in my book on spiritual formation, I talk of the person as consisting of four worlds or dimensions: there is the *outer world*, the historical context and family environment which influences each person in particular ways.

Then there is the *inner world*, the world of our conscious awareness and of our unconscious, perhaps even the world of our collective unconscious inherited genetically from the experience of the human race, and including all of the memories of our experiences and the persons we have known. When we dream, we become aware there is a whole world inside us. This world is extensively unconscious and therefore unavailable to us and only partly conscious. Consciousness is like the tip of an iceberg. In consciousness is the location of our ego, that constellation of memories and identity which defines us and enables us to make some decisions about what we will be and do. This inner world is as important as the outer world

and influences all that we do.

Then there is the *biological world*, the body in which we live and through which we function. Something only has to go wrong with our bodies to realize how important they are. Much of mental illness has now been shown to be based in problems of body chemistry.

Lastly, but actually most important, there is the *spiritual world*. The spiritual world consists of the soul that God has placed within us, which enables our spiritual communion with God and which will survive death. But the spiritual world does not just consist of what is spiritual in us, but the whole spiritual realm of life which touches us and affects us. God is a crucial part of our spiritual world and we must open our lives to God's participation. If there is such a being as Satan and if there are evil powers, then such are also part of the spiritual world which may affect us and become part of our spiritual life. If we believe in the "communion of the saints", as we say in the Creed, the ancestors may also be part of our lives, something that I understand is an important issue in Africa because of aspects of traditional religion.

These four worlds are what it means to be human and they influence all that we do and are. Thus if we are to grow and mature, we must pay some sort of attention to them and learn how to work with them and live with them.

One way to deal with some of these worlds is to reject them as bad, but that does not really produce helpful results. If the outer world is bad we neglect the opportunities for discovery and growth that are part of being present to the world. If we regard the inner world as bad, we push it down as far as we can inside of us and try to pretend that it isn't there or that it will all go away. We do this to our harm, because it will continue to operate on its own, without any possibility of control, if we pretend it isn't there. If we regard our biological world as bad with its strange feelings (such as desire and anger) or we reject it because it doesn't meet our expectations (in terms of beauty or function), we reject and further disable the very vehicle by which we live life. Some Christians have been pretty good at regarding all this as bad. However we read the message in the story of the Fall, Christ's entry into life in Incarnation has to change our estimation of these worlds in which we live. Christ's entry into the world also means that we do not have to be frightened of evil in the spiritual world, rather do we need to be aware of it to deal with it through Christ. In some way we have to embrace with love these worlds in which we live, even though some of them may at times be problematic and even frightening.

The Nature of Formation

Now, what's possible in human formation and transformation as we live with our four worlds. Paul is actually the closest person among the NT authors to a psychologist. He reflects on so many issues and shares his reflections with us, including the nature of the human experience of God and its effect on human life and development.

Paul may at first have understood that his conversion experience of Christ would transform and change everything, that in the power of God he would no longer have to deal with the human struggles which were a part of life. We really don't know much of the early Christian experience of Paul, except as he later reflects on his conversion, his Jewish tradition, and contacts with the Palestinian church in such as Gal. 1-2. We have no writing from him for the first 14-16 years of his Christian life. The Paul we meet in the earliest of his epistles (in my understanding Galatians) is a mature Paul who has been tested in the difficulties of Christian ministry and the possibilities of Christian life and experience. Paul in his letters is a realist. He knows what is possible and what is not. In II Cor. 4 Paul says that the God who brought creation into being and let light shine out of darkness reflects from our hearts the glory that was in the face of Jesus (4:6), but this is a treasure that we have "in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (4:7). We remain human, but are not crushed or driven to despair. Only

when this earthly tent (body) is destroyed will we be able to put on our heavenly body (5:1-2). *At no time in this life will we **not** be human, however we carry within us the treasure of God's presence.*

What does this mean? To me it means that Christian development or formation is not some sort of spiritual transformation which changes or eliminates our humanity, but rather it lies in the extent to which we discover the spiritual dimensions of life and the way we responsibly and creatively live them out within the possibilities and limits of our bodies, our inner and biological worlds. Underneath all that we become there is always the given of our human existence.

What then are our Christian developmental and formative tasks. What sort of development should we strive for in our humanness:

One is *the moral aspect* of the person's formation, engaging us in becoming a person with values and commitments, though not without mistakes and failures. Those who seriously reject the moral responsibilities of life and reject life's ultimate goal in God may ultimately be rejected by God, though not without sorrow and pain in God. God does not easily let go those whom God sends into the world.

Another is *the spiritual aspect* of formation. It involves the process of discovering our own spirituality and the reality of God and God's world, concerns which are easily neglected as one engages in the tasks of life in this world. It is as if, when we are born and move into the experiences of this life, we begin forgetting from Where we came (the spiritual world) and to Whom we go (God). Discovering our spirituality and God is part of our developmental process.

Then there is *the interpersonal aspect* of formation. In the New Testament this is characterized as *love*. Our ability to love affects the possibility of interpersonal relationship, for love has to do with relating to others beyond our own needs and self interest, the ability to care for others and to be patient and persistent in relationship. This is so important that the NT is clear that God in Christ has modeled this for us.

With our learning to care for others we *need to learn how to care for creation*, a proper love of the world. To develop love for others and creation is necessary if we are to function in meaningful ways in God's world. An interesting aspect of living in this world is that we have learned about caring for creation from within creation, not as something apart from us.

All of this is part of *being for God in the world*. Being for God in the world is essential for the world. There was a time before modern science when it was felt that the forces of nature and history were the primary ways of God's being in the world. Within the last three centuries we have been developing an understanding of both nature and history which sees them as operating largely by their own dynamics. Thus we have come to realize that the primary way of God's being present is where the world comes to consciousness and can be responsible: in humanity. We need to learn to be willing and open to God, allowing our lives to be formed by God. Therefore we become those who can be used in God's purposes and who can re-present God. Thus the Kingdom of God is within and among us (two possible translations of Lk. 17:21).

Missing from this brief lecture is the discussion of those disciplines, learned in the history of the Christian community, which open our lives to God and allow God to form our lives. One could mention various forms of prayer, the meditative and devotional use of the biblical text, journaling to gain a sense of God's direction in our lives, the use of retreats, contemplation or quietly being attentive to God, regular worship, stewardship, spiritual direction, etc.. There is not time to discuss them, but they cannot go unmentioned.