

What Might Happen If...?

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Spiritual formation—

the process of forming someone spiritually. How does that happen? Does the Christian school have anything to do with it? If so, what? Is the school doing anything that gets in the way rather than helping? What might we have to do to get out of the way?



Let me start with a few premises.

1. **Spiritual formation is the work of God**, not something human beings can bring about. We can help create circumstances that pave the way for God to do His work—or we can make it more difficult for Him.
2. Growth in spiritual formation **comes about through being in the presence of God**, in all kinds of circumstances—from great success to miserable failure, from great sorrow to great celebration, in times of assurance or uncertainty. Being in His presence means we will encounter Him in very personal ways.
3. In the growth process, God communicates to us in a variety of ways, but all of them require us to **be still, be quiet, pay attention, watch, and listen carefully**.
4. The ultimate force in our growth process is trust. Trust restores and renews our relationship with God, thus inviting the Holy Spirit to do His work in developing us.

So what does the Christian school do to either assist in or hinder this process? Let's start with the hindering possibilities.

What might happen if the class period had scheduled times for reflection?

- School is typically a place of performance, ruled by the law of “do this, get that.” You are expected to grow by working hard, living within the boundaries set for you, giving your best, and doing things the right way. You are then judged to be spiritually mature (well-formed) if you have done what you are supposed to do and done it well. If you do not fit into the patterns and live up to the expectations placed upon you, you are judged spiritually immature. Standing depends upon the work you do, and it is expected that you will follow the orthodox paths to getting where you are expected to be.

- You are encouraged to talk about the presence of God, but seldom given any time to open yourself to Him. “Presence” itself, with anyone, is hard to come by. There is too much to accomplish and too little time to do it. We are forced to be *efficient* rather than *present* to succeed.
- There is so much going on in school, and we are so used to a rat race pace, that being quiet and paying close attention to anyone—let alone God—makes us nervous. We do not know what to do with it, and the watching world would accuse us of wasting time.
- Trusting is a risky business. We talk about trusting God all the time, but our lives are lived out with untrustworthy people in circumstances we cannot control, and we are trained not to fail. Often, the way we live betrays a belief that life really depends upon us—we have to make it happen, and we cannot really trust God to unfold it for us.

What, then, could the Christian school do to aid in the process? How can we partner with God in spiritual transformation?

Perhaps we begin by trying to make the school a truly “safe place”—safe to explore, to experiment, to reach, to fail, to enter into the pain and suffering and failure of others and let them enter into ours. A place to learn how to engage the broken world as a redemptive agent.

What might happen if the curriculum included courses or modules in discerning the Spirit of God?

That would probably mean rejecting the idea that top performance in everything, as an individual or a team or a school, is our primary measure of whether we are okay. It might mean redefining “excellence” instead of allowing a secular culture to define what it means. It might mean creating a culture where failure is not taboo. We might even recognize it as one of God’s most effective tools in growing us spiritually, and therefore find ways to incorporate it into our students’ experience. What kind of trust might be built if our school became a place where students could not only survive failure, but even view it as the launching pad for new learning and experience?

- What might happen if the class period (and school day, and school year) had scheduled times for reflection? Time to be quiet and converse with God about what has been taught or experienced? What if the desire for accomplishment was matched by the desire to hear what God has to say?
- What might happen if the curriculum included courses or modules in discerning the Spirit of God? What if we consciously attempted to teach students to listen, pay attention, be still, and observe carefully—to stroll instead of race?

- What might happen if our school became a place where risk-taking was encouraged? Especially taking risks by moving into the broken parts of our communities, into the broken lives of those who have been disenfranchised and marginalized, by attempting to bring light into the darkness of the world? Would that not require more trust than trusting God to help us beat the “world” at its own game?

What might happen if our school became a place where risk-taking was encouraged?

If God so often forms us through our experiences with failure, with coming up against things we do not know how to handle, experiencing life in its hardness and discovering the embracing arms of Jesus to receive us there—would we not aid our students in their spiritual formation by providing opportunity to experience some of these things? And if He so often chooses to speak to us, assure us, and love us in the quiet, should we not attempt to put some of that into school life?

It seems to me that doing so would make us partners with God in the spiritual formation process. Failing to do so makes us a hindrance to Him. Which will we choose?

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