

# In the Habit of Sloth

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In 1978, Stephen King, known primarily for his horror books, published the novel *The Stand*. The book was reprinted in 1990 as a *Complete and Uncut Edition*, restoring over 400 pages which had been cut from the original printing, bringing it to over 1,100 pages. The massive work is an epic tale of good versus evil set in a post-apocalyptic America that has been ravaged by the “Super flu.” Indeed, much of the first third to half of the book is made up of the spread of this deadly virus—a virus created in a military lab which escaped when a security guard broke quarantine. The manipulated flu virus is incredibly contagious and virulent, spreading quickly and easily throughout the population and wiping out something like 99.4 percent of humanity. Following this, the book turns into a struggle between two communities: one of darkness, and one of light.

One of the most interesting and disturbing moments in the book comes when the “good” survivors, now gathered in Boulder, turn the power back on and have to then engage in “clean up,” that is, the task of removing and burying all the bodies left in the wake of the pandemic. In the 1994 miniseries adaptation of the book, the grisly moment is well portrayed. The leader of the clean-up crew begins his task at a church. He attempts to fortify his workers by telling them to think of the bodies as stacks of wood, and he explains that they’re starting with the churches in town because, historically, people in deadly epidemics tended to gather in places of worship. When they open the doors of the church, they find it full of bodies.

Of course, such would not have been the case had 2020’s coronavirus pandemic had a 99.4 percent mortality rate. The churches would have been found

emptied and locked, and the historical precedent of humans receiving their last solace in a place of worship would have been broken. Regardless of one's point of view on the closure of churches at the height of COVID, the pandemic has in some ways proven to be a true apocalypse—a true revelation of the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of many Christians who previously attended church out of a habit that was easily broken.<sup>1</sup> There can be little doubt that there will be lasting effects on the spiritual transformation of many Christians.

In this article I will analyze ways in which the pandemic has affected discipleship in many churches—specifically how it has affected spiritual formation.<sup>2</sup> I will begin with offering a more detailed definition of “spiritual formation” in a Christian context. I will then offer a discussion of three aspects of human life that must be transformed for a person to experience lasting personal change, namely Ideas, Roots, and Social Integration. Each of these aspects has been challenged by the pandemic, but perhaps especially the latter two. Finally, I will offer a few suggestions for engaging congregations in each of these aspects of lasting personal change.

### **Spiritual Formation: A Definition**

Spiritual formation is an often used and misunderstood concept in much of popular American Christianity. It is often viewed as a search for personal fulfillment with only internal implications—developing the spiritual life, drawing nearer to God, practicing self-care or self-fulfillment and the like. Classically, however, spiritual formation in Christianity has meant to form the internal heart of a person into the character of Christ, and thus has major external implications. Spiritual disciplines—habits meant to draw Christians into the life of God, such as regular prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, and the like—were

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend this to be a negative reflection. I will argue below that our habits are vital to our moral and spiritual development, and thus, church attendance out of habit is extremely important. I brush my teeth primarily from habit, but this does not suggest that brushing my teeth is any less efficacious for doing so.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “spiritual formation” has many different connotations in today's world. I use the phrase to describe the entire process of discipleship: developing and maintaining a spiritual life toward entering into a deeper relationship with God, and in doing so being transformed more fully into his image and likeness, thus developing lasting personal change.

meant, from the beginning, to produce fruit in believers. This fruit is nothing less than the incarnation of the gospel in their lives. As Paulo Freire argues,

[The incarnate Word] could never be learned if, at the same time, its meaning were not also grasped, and its meaning could not be grasped if it were not, also, incarnate in us. This is the basic invitation that Christ made, and continues to make to us, that we come to know the truth of this message through practicing it, down to the most minute detail...

I cannot know the Gospels if I take them simply as words that come to rest in me or if, seeing myself as empty, I try to fill myself with these words. This would be the way to bureaucratize the Word, to empty it, to deny it, to rob it of its eternal *coming to be* in order to turn it into a formal rite. On the contrary, I understand the Gospels, well or badly, to the degree that, well or badly, I live them.<sup>3</sup>

Dallas Willard has defined spiritual formation as “a Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self—our ‘spiritual’ side—in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.” To this he adds, “In the degree to which such a spiritual transformation to inner Christlikeness is successful, the outer life of the individual will become a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus. We will simply ‘walk the walk,’ as we say.”<sup>4</sup> Thus spiritual formation may be defined as a series of habits and practices that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, draw Christians closer to knowing the heart of the gospel through practicing it. These habits and practices of course include the habits of spirituality noted above, but also must include an element of service and communal involvement.

It is important, here, to note that spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is intended to draw Christians, through experience of the disciplines, more deeply into knowledge of Christ, moving from intentionality to fulfillment through the process of intuition. The disciplines are meant to provide more than simple spiritual fulfillment, they are meant to experientially draw Christians into the knowledge of Christ. Ultimately, spiritual formation is the

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<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, “Know, practice, and teach the Gospels,” *Religious Education* 79/4 (1984): 547–48.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *Living a Transformed Life Adequate to Our Calling*. Unpublished paper presented at the Augustine Group (2005).

decentering of the self and the placing of Jesus Christ and his gospel at the heart of the believer's life. Only a life formed in such a way can live faithfully to the gospel in a world in which the self demands to be the center of all things. The problem of the centering of the human self is perhaps more acute in our society than in any in history, and, I believe, more acute following the first several months of 2020 than in any time in our history. The church must engage in personal transformation, in spiritual formation, if she is to remain salt and light in the world today.

### **Three Aspects of Lasting Personal Change**

How, though, do Christians develop spiritual formation—personal transformation—in such a way that will last? As briefly introduced above, lasting personal change requires transformation in three main areas: 1) Ideas (in basic comprehension and thinking); 2) Roots (habits, daily rhythms, personal practices); and 3) Social integration (a renegotiation of identity within a social context). Insofar as a person experiences transformation in each of these areas he is likely to maintain the transformation and continue working toward the trajectory of transformation established; conversely, to the extent in which these areas are not influenced toward transformation, spiritual formation itself is transitory and short lived.<sup>5</sup>

Transformation in each of these areas is facilitated in different ways. Transformation of ideas can occur, often, through epistemologically challenging events and ideas, through differing interpretive (hermeneutical) frameworks, and through critical reflection on data and events. A person who bumps into an idea or experience that challenges familiar knowledge taken for granted, the result is confusion and cognitive dissonance. This experience has been called in educational theory an *epistemological shudder*.<sup>6</sup> These events are chaotic and may serve as moments which provide a different perspective on data and experiences. Therefore, they often lead to a transformation in thought, and thus a breaking apart and radical adjustment of what Berger and

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<sup>5</sup> The development of this framework was done by my friend and former colleague at Austin Graduate School of Theology, Daniel Napier. It can be found in his forthcoming book, *The Philosophy of Jesus: The Nazarene's Way Among the Ancient Schools*.

<sup>6</sup> M. Lozinsky and I. Collinson, *Epistemological Shudder: The X-Files, Myths, and Mimetic Capital*. Paper presented at the University of New South Wales Post Graduate Conference School of English and Modern Languages (June 1999).

Luckmann refer to as the world taken for granted.<sup>7</sup> This is a key moment of transformation toward the kind of knowledge of the gospel for which Freire calls, and thus toward true spiritual formation.

Second, transformation of roots, i.e., habits and practices, is vital to lasting spiritual (trans)formation. Habits and practices both form and are formed by our desires, and therefore are central to human identity as desiring animals. Habits are usually transformed through the somewhat mechanical process of repetition: humans who desire a change of habits must focus for some time on changing their daily routines in order to incorporate some new habit. James K. A. Smith has argued that liturgy provides a substructure to habits and practices, that the practices of liturgy—whether the liturgy of the church or the liturgy of the consumerist mall—inform our self-understanding and our vision of the “good life.”<sup>8</sup> In order to adjust habits and practices, then, it is necessary to start new ones. This is not new insight, of course, as, for instance, Aristotle argued that diligent practice of habits develop within a person a character toward *eudaemonia*, or “fulfillment.”<sup>9</sup> Thus for a person to achieve lasting spiritual formation they must experience a transformation of habits and practices.

Finally, in order for a person to attain lasting spiritual formation, he must engage in a process of socially integrating his new person. This is a difficult task insofar as human community is often held together through common commitments. A person who has radically spiritually changed—for example, a person who has recognized that the call of the gospel demands change in their attitudes toward issues of sexuality—will often find great resistance in their current social group. This will call for a re-negotiation of social identity both with their peer group as well as with groups outside of their peer group. Often this means a severing of ties with a previous group, which can have devastating consequences for the spiritually transformed person. Though this may

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<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Penguin, 1966), cf. 19–46.

<sup>8</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nichomachean ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934).

be the most difficult area of change, it is also perhaps the most vital, as human community and support are so important for developing spiritually.<sup>10</sup>

### **Change in the Wrong Direction: The Pandemic's Effect on Spiritual Formation**

No one could have known in January of 2020 what was descending upon the United States. Those of us who live in the middle of the country can, most likely, vividly remember the march of the coronavirus from the major coastal cities and travel hubs to our own places of residence. It was eerie and frightening, and as the lockdowns began there was something of an apocalyptic feel to the times. It was a Thursday when the small congregation to which I minister found that we would be closing our doors and transitioning to a live-streamed service the following Sunday. We scrambled (a church of technophobes) but were able to broadcast on that first Sunday, and for many more thereafter. It was comforting, those first several weeks, to gather with our church family, even if only virtually. In fact, our congregation actually *grew* as people who had not visited our Sunday services began “attending” our live streams.

There were concerns, though, even during those times. Many church leaders found themselves wondering whether the church would recover members who had been attending virtually. Further, how would the needs of discipling and pastoral care—not to mention the day-to-day needs of ministry—be met? What would the church look like once the pandemic passed?

Few of us could have imagined, then, the extent of the lockdowns and the rebuilding effort needed. We assumed that the pandemic would, in fact, end. More and more that assumption seems mistaken. As the pandemic carries on, and as vaccines prove to be less effective than hoped (by the public at least), church leaders face a difficult challenge in inspiring a demoralized and increasingly indifferent church body.

The pandemic—and its attendant social consequences—has affected each area of human life in which change is required for lasting transformation. First, in terms of Ideas, American society is increasingly experiencing an epistemological shudder regarding the very order on which the nation has been

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<sup>10</sup> See John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), for an extensive and excellent account of the loss of community and its consequences.

founded. This can be most clearly seen in the violent riots and the rapid rise of the narrative of “systemic racism” following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, as well as the events surrounding the 2020 election, culminating in the horrifying storming of the U.S. Capitol. Trust in the American order has been deeply shaken, and this loss of trust has bled over into other institutions, including the church.

Along with Ideas, Social Integration has been deeply affected by the isolation from *real* community, and its replacement with the toxic environment of (anti-) social media. Several studies have indicated a correlation between higher social media use during the pandemic and a rise in depression and other negative mental health issues, further exacerbating the link between social media use and depression apart from the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> The loss of a community within which one may form and maintain a transformed identity has no doubt had tremendous effect on spiritual formation.

Whereas each of these areas is worthy of an exploration in and of itself, it is the aspect of Roots, of habits and practices, that I believe has been most affected by the pandemic. The pandemic lockdowns and the ongoing nature of the pandemic itself has led to radical disruptions of the daily lives of practically everyone on the planet, including the *habits* of daily life—for example, rising early to shower and go to work, regular activities with friends after work, and, most notably for this essay, attending the gathering of the church.

Initially, our concern about the loss of habits may be minimal: there is a tendency in our culture to see “habit” as largely meaningless to true

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Julia Brailovskaia, Inga Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, et. al., “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak: Addictive Social Media Use, Depression, Anxiety and Stress in Quarantine – an Exploratory Study in Germany and Lithuania,” *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* vol. 5 (July 2021): 1–6, which suggests that “the enhanced use of [Social Media] could contribute to negative consequences. It could foster addictive tendencies and the increase of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms. Experimental research that was conducted previously to the COVID-19 outbreak described a longitudinal significant increase of well-being in individuals who were advised to reduce their daily [Social Media Use] for the duration of two weeks...” (p. 5). Hundreds of studies have been and are being conducted on this phenomenon. For a link between social media use and depression, see Roy H. Perlis, Jon Green, et al., “Association Between Social Media Use and Self-reported Symptoms of Depression in US Adults,” *JAMA Network Open* 4/11 (Nov. 2021). doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.36113.

dedication—so, for example, the loss of the habit of church attendance is not a *bad* thing, insofar as one should attend church intentionally and mindfully, and anything other than that is disingenuous, or, worse, hypocritical. This greatly underestimates the function of habit in human life and the dangers of the loss of *good* habits for human (and Christian) flourishing.

Human beings are creatures of habit. Cognitive psychologists have been suggesting for some time that much (perhaps most) of human life is actually defined by “automaticity,” by the movement of conscious choice to unconscious action.<sup>12</sup> Consider learning how to drive: initially, even the simplest parts of driving must be consciously considered—“this is a key, it goes here... turn it till the car begins to start,” and so on. Through the practice of driving, however, all of these processes are off-loaded to the subconscious mind, so much so that one may drive *without ever thinking about driving*. Drawing on this research, Smith argues that

Whether we intentionally choose to participate in a practice or unintentionally just find ourselves immersed in it over time, the result is the same: the dispositions become inscribed into our unconscious so that we ‘automatically’ respond the way we’ve been conditioned.... Since research indicates that only about 5 percent of our daily activity is the product of conscious, intentional actions that we ‘choose,’ one can see that there’s a lot at stake in the formation of our automatic unconscious.<sup>13</sup>

In short, our habits are central to our character—we most often *react* in situations from the unconscious life which has been formed, one way or another, by regular practices in which we engage. In this way, the pandemic has been particularly challenging insofar as it disrupted the habitual discipline of church attendance (as well as many other disciplines)—a habit which, at minimum, instills the character of duty in a human.

It is important to recognize, too, that habits are not simply lost but are rather *replaced* by other habits. As churches closed their doors during the pandemic, and as the pandemic continues to rage, many Christians not only fell out of the habit of attending the gathered worship of the church, they also—

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. John A. Bargh and Tanya L. Chartrand, “The Unbearable Automaticity of Being,” *American Psychologist* 54/7 (July 1999): 462–79.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 81.



unintentionally—fell *into* the habit of sloth. Many of those who no longer attend in-person worship began by joining the church “live” on streaming video, and many of those did so casually, sleeping later than they would have on a normal Sunday, not getting themselves ready to attend, and then joining the service for “pajama church.” It is a small step from this to “I’ll watch it later,” and a smaller step from this to a loss of any commitment to the gathered people of God altogether.

All of this is, of course, devastating to spiritual formation—to the decentering of the self and the movement toward becoming more Christlike. Central to that movement is the formation of the inner-self, the “unconscious,” into that which responds to various situations, *habitually*, as Jesus would, through the regular “thick” practices of Christian worship.<sup>14</sup> At the heart of a person formed by the practices of the pandemic church mentioned above is an inability to choose, habitually, the disciplined life—the narrow way—of Jesus. How do we recover from such developments?

### **Recovering the Habits of Discipline**

How do we help our congregations recover the disciplined Christian life? Many church leaders are of course reflecting on this question. It’s important to note, here, that the pandemic did not *cause* this loss of discipline, it merely exacerbated and accelerated it. Church attendance has been dipping for many years, and Christian formation has been in decline even among those who continued to attend. In this way the pandemic has been “apocalyptic” in the sense of revealing what was already there. The problem, then, is not one that can be solved simply by turning off the livestream. How, then, can we address it? There are many possible solutions to explore, but I will offer a few.

First, the church needs to reclaim the vision of the beautiful life on offer in Jesus, and our corporate worship should be an expression of this vision. A worship grounded in the story of God and in our place within that story helps to form what Charles Taylor has referred to as our “social imaginary”—our unconscious view of our place in society and our interaction with it.<sup>15</sup> We tend to think of morality and character as being formed through deliberative

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<sup>14</sup> See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), see chapter 2.

processes, through engaging with various rational propositions. In truth, though, it is the deeper, unconscious understanding of the world and our place in it that most influences our actions and ethics. And this world is carried not so much in rational propositions as it is in “images, stories, and legends.”<sup>16</sup> As Smith explains, Christian worship, then, should intentionally be built around equipping Christians to enter into the society of the church, to share a common vision with that society, and to orient the desires of the Christian toward the vision of reality on offer therein. In other words, the story of the gospel and the life that it offers should be central to every act of Christian worship.

Second, the church needs to invite Christians into that beautiful life as actors with agency. This will have several implications, perhaps most importantly an understanding of the Christian in worship as a participant rather than a consumer—the opposite implication of live streamed worship, which by its very nature invites passivity. If there are those who continue to attend our corporate worship solely online, then it is vital that they do so as active participants as far as possible. We should encourage them to engage in all of the rituals *within* worship: standing for readings, singing along with the congregation rather than simply listening to the recorded or live singing, and liturgical responses. We should also encourage them to engage in all of the typical rituals that precede the corporate gathering—rising early, grooming, dressing for worship, and the like—so that they may maintain the habits associated with gathering with God’s people.

Finally, we must stress to people the importance of habit forming. We are creatures of habit, and habit is and will be a part of our lives regardless of whether we choose to make them so or not. We will be in the habit of discipleship, or we will be in the habit of sloth. Walking the way with Jesus is not a passive habit—it does not develop naturally to fill the void as the habit of sloth does. It requires a commitment to regular practice until it becomes so written on the heart as to be second nature. It requires effort, but it promises great reward.

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

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