

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

By Todd R. Marrah

The sign in front of a Unitarian church near one of our campuses reads, “Our church believes God’s goodness is in all and we don’t believe that anyone is a sinner.”

We can certainly agree that God is good and that while He is everywhere present that does not make all things or people good. Our society seems increasingly interested in condoning all decisions and actions as valid and good.

One of the key distinctives of Christian schools is the pursuit of the spiritual transformation of individuals in our communities. The word *transformation* communicates a need to be moved from that which is weaker to that which is stronger, from that which is disconnected to that which is connected, from that which is primarily in darkness to that which is increasingly enlightened, from sin to redemption. One of the primary goals of the Christian school is to be a conduit through which Christ transforms the lives of people into His image.

The Holy Spirit works in the lives of our students to transform their character into likeness with the inner being of Jesus (Luke 2:52). Christian schools look to align themselves to this work as our students grow in wisdom (discerning mind), stature (physical/emotional maturity), in favor with God (spiritual relationship), and favor with man (social, relational). In a sense, as Christian school educators we share the calling of John the Baptist: “preparing the way for the Lord” (Luke 1:17) in the lives of our students. Contrary to our neighborhood sign, God’s Word clearly identifies the need for spiritual transformation of the heart, head, and hands.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE HEART

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick: who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Due to the Fall, the hearts of our students are not inherently inclined to the Lord. The sinful nature proceeds out of the heart (Mark 7:21–23). That heart stands in need of transformation. Christian school educators would do well to frequently ask, “How does the transformation of the heart work?” and “How can that transformation happen in our school?” Two previous articles published in *CSE* (volume 14, number 3; volume 15, number 1) articulated the ongoing body of research in the area of the spiritual formation of ACSI students. That research highlights a

relational model of spirituality with the basic premise that all spiritual transformation happens in relationships. So, the spiritual transformation of the heart happens in relationships, including the ones we can have in our schools. We must be highly relational communities.

In the early years of the research, I was becoming increasingly convinced about this relational data and was working to translate it into day-to-day school life. Over the summer, we have many camps for our students. Two of my daughters were at a volleyball camp in our gymnasium. My then-5th-grade daughter, Hope, was running to hit a volleyball and tripped over another girl’s leg. In trying to break her fall, she broke her arm. It was a compound fracture. The coach quickly sent for me in my office. While waiting for the emergency squad, I held Hope, spoke gently to her, and stroked her hair. The varsity team went off in the corner and prayed for us.

Thankfully, Hope received excellent care from the hospital. Several weeks later, one of our seniors came to me offering words of life. She said she was amazed to see how much I loved my daughter and that she was seeing me in a new light. What she meant as words of life were deeply convicting in my soul. I was thinking, “Why is she so shocked that you are a deeply loving man?” I had been her principal for years; she should have already known of my love.

When school began that fall, I shared a new vision with the faculty. My commitment was that every faculty member would know of my love for him or her, and I asked them to commit that every student would leave our school every day knowing how much he or she was loved. Our relational community was becoming a more deeply loving community. Scripture reveals that our hearts are transformed in loving relationship. In fact, Jesus left His throne to come to the earth to more fully establish the loving relationship He had in mind for His people. Each of us is loved into loving. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In like manner, our students will be loved into loving. That love increasingly flows from a transformed heart.

What strategies can we implement in our schools that create space for the Holy Spirit’s work in loving relationships that transform hearts? How do we know if transformation is happening? Are we succeeding? How can we measure it?

TRANSFORMATION OF THE HEAD

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9). The minds of our students are not naturally thinking God’s thoughts. In fact, we are told to be “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind” (Romans 12:2).

Harry Blamires famously begins his book *The Christian Mind* by saying, “There is no longer a Christian mind” (2005, 3). He argues that most professing Christians no longer think Christianly. Christian schools have an incredible opportunity to teach children over a period of many years. We must commit to go beyond teaching children what to think and focus on how to think and how to do so biblically. Paul instructs the Corinthians to take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). The transformation of the mind is about renewal by replacing man’s thoughts with God’s thoughts.

I wonder if our classes (including Bible) and teaching methodologies target the spiritual transformation of our students’ minds. Perhaps part of the answer lies in asking ourselves whether each course (and specifically our Bible content) is focused on students knowing about God or focused on students actually knowing God, on passing the quiz or pursuing a relationship with Jesus. In my own Bible course, I find myself talking less and structuring more time between the students and the Lord.

In Matthew 7, Jesus indicates that some will come before His throne ready to pass the quiz for entrance into heaven. They give a defense saying, “Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?” (7:22). Jesus’ response is, “I never knew you, depart from me.” (7:23).

What an amazing answer from Jesus! What does He mean by “I never knew you”? He knows them better than they know themselves. He knows everything about them, even the number of hairs on their head. So why is He saying He never knew them? It is because there are different kinds of knowing. Jesus is speaking about a relational knowing.

What strategies can we implement in our schools that provide space for the Holy Spirit to develop a relational knowing with our students? What if course content and school structure—particularly in Bible classes, chapel, retreats, and so on—focused on students developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, practicing the spiritual disciplines, and learning to intimately know Christ Jesus their Lord?

Tree of Life’s spiritual transformation strategy includes working toward a comprehensive scope and sequence for the spiritual development of our students. In addition, we are using several instruments to measure our students’ spiritual transformation, including Michael Zigarelli’s *Christian Character Index* and Phil Graybeal/ACSI’s *Spiritual Formation Assessment*.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE HANDS

The mother of James and John approached Jesus requesting that He grant that her sons sit on the right and left hand of Jesus in His kingdom (Matt 20:21). Similarly,

our students’ natural bent is toward entitlement; they prefer receiving over giving and being served over serving. Entitlement is best overcome by growing in gratitude, and a self-serving focus is best overcome by ministering to the needs of others.

As reported in the previously mentioned *CSE* articles, research indicates that students have a strong sense of being connected to God as they grow in gratitude. Strategies for increasing gratitude have become a central theme in our school. Those include acts of service, staff and student devotions, notes of appreciation, prayer and daily gratitude journals, and a gratitude wallboard for public displays of gratefulness. Our school year theme this year is Colossians 2:6–7, which ends with the admonition that we be “overflowing with thanksgiving.” Our community is exploring what overflowing with thanksgiving looks and acts like.

We do know the impact of one with such a perspective. The One who came to serve and not to be served transformed everything.

What can Christian schools do to help students take their eyes off of themselves and focus on the Lord and the needs of others? What gratitude strategies can we implement to help provide space for the Holy Spirit to transform hands?

Paul’s sentiments summarize our mission well when he calls the Galatians his children and says he labors until Christ is formed in them. By the Holy Spirit, may our labor produce similar fruit.

Reference

Blamires, Harry. 2005. *The Christian mind: How should a Christian think?* Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI/Purposeful Design Publications.

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**SCRIPTURE REVEALS
THAT OUR HEARTS
ARE TRANSFORMED IN
LOVING RELATIONSHIP.**