

A COMPANION GUIDE TO
The Jesus Creed

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NOT FOR SALE

INTRODUCTION

In *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* I ask one simple question: what did Jesus mean by spiritual formation? The Christian world is abuzz with suggestions: some of them classical and some of them brand new. But, we need to ask, how would Jesus have defined spiritual formation. The answer is clear: Jesus expressed his view of spiritual formation in the ancient categories of his own heritage. That heritage expressed the fundamental relationship to God in what is now called the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). This is what Jesus learned from his father and mother, and it is what he passed on to his own followers. With one breath-taking amendment: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (see Mark 12:31). What remains when all is shaken down is this: love God and love others.

So, according to Jesus, the fundamental characteristic of a person who is spiritually formed is this: such a person loves God (by following Jesus) and loves others. To love God by following Jesus, and to love others, means also that a spiritually formed person embraces the stories of others who live out the Jesus Creed. I gave as illustrations of such stories, the examples of Joseph, Mary, Peter, John, and the women of compassion. Those who love God and love others have a third characteristic: they live out the kingdom values of that Jesus Creed. Kingdom values are hard to purchase in the modern moral market place: they include total transformation; the mustard seed principle (the little deed is the large act); and the restoration of persons to society, joy, and an eternal perspective on their present life.

Because of who Jesus is, two more characteristics are notable: a spiritually formed person loves Jesus personally and participates in his very life. Loving Jesus involves trusting him, abiding in him, surrendering to him, being restored to him when we fail, forgiving others, and reaching out with the good news of the kingdom. Again, because of who Jesus is, his life could be uniquely lived for others. In *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* I went through six events in the life of Jesus, illustrating how each of those events was an act of love by Jesus for us: his baptism, his temptation, his transfiguration, his last supper, his death, and his resurrection. Whenever a sweep of Jesus’ life and teachings is made, many items are left untouched. So, I am asking you to pick up some of those pieces yourself either through personal study or joining with others like you who want to learn more about the Jesus Creed. This Companion Guide is designed to enable readers of *The Jesus Creed* to deepen their love of God and love of others in a variety of ways. It is written for groups but can easily be adapted by individuals who prefer to study each session alone.

The ideal posture

To benefit from the Companion Guide it is best if each person has a Bible, *The Jesus Creed* book, the Companion Guide, and a pen and paper. Spend a few minutes “centering down” (as the Quakers say) to find that inner quiet that prepares us both to speak with *Abba* and to hear

from *Abba*. Since the Companion Guide is designed for a group to reflect together on the reading, and on other biblical passages, it is important to be receptive to whatever the Spirit might say.

The question of time

How long might it take to do a lesson? This question is often asked of those who lead retreats and who write about spiritual formation. The answer is predictable: time is not the issue. The Companion Guide is constructed to help people hear from God and to help them consider changes. Sometimes we will hear from God quickly; at other times we will not. Sometimes our world will be shaken; other times it will not be. Sometimes we will brush against Eternity in a solemn, barely detectable moment. At other times, we may struggle for days, weeks, or even months. This is how spiritual formation occurs. There are no magical formulas for communion with *Abba*. Take all the time you need. Often you may find that the group session will not be enough; you will want to spend some time alone, in the privacy of your home, pondering items that have entered into your heart.

The wise know that what we read and what enters our mind and heart, over time, forms us spiritually. So, be less concerned with the time it takes or obtaining immediate results than with enduring shifts in the mind and heart. Our concern is to fill ourselves with the wholesome splendor of God's Word, for it is in contact with God that our lives are spiritually formed. Having said that, I believe that each session in the Companion Guide can be completed in a group session together, though some may find themselves so enrapt in prayer or meditation on a scriptural text that time will seem both to stand still and pass in a flash. Because of time constraints some may find they will only complete part of each exercise. This is fine; we are in no hurry. We are trying to hear from God. For that we have plenty of time.

Basic format

The *Companion Guide* has a basic format: each session begins with reciting the Jesus Creed and ends with reciting the Lord's Prayer. In between, each session works through the following: formation principle, formation prayer, formation exercises, and (for those who want to extend the session) further exploration.

The *formation principle* is a summary of the theme of a single chapter in *The Jesus Creed*. Someone in the group may want to summarize the chapter in more detail, while someone else might want to do the same for the Gospel passages shaping each chapter. Some groups may wish to begin by reading the Gospel readings under the chapter title of each chapter in *The Jesus Creed*.

The *formation prayer* can be prayed aloud, or silently, and can be adjusted to meet the needs of the group. The formation prayer is designed to turn each chapter of *The Jesus Creed* into a brief prayer.

The *formation exercises* are a step-by-step process of internalizing the formation reflection and the formation prayer. Genuine progress can be made by the genuinely honest. Truth-telling is a non-negotiable factor for all spiritual growth because we are dealing here with our deepest selves. For genuine spiritual formation to occur, each of us needs to be ready to change.

In each *spiritual exercise* I recommend that groups “identify together” specific personal connections to the formation reflection, “reflect together” on specific items suggested from the chapter, “listen” individually to what the Lord might be saying, and “imagine” as specifically as possible how to integrate what is being learned. “Imagining” is important because the Jesus Creed teaches that we are to love God with our minds. To do this, we must let our minds ruminate, meditate, contemplate, and cogitate (to use the classic words). We are to let our minds wander into the wilds of God’s grace. To do this, we must “imagine.” We can be surprised how much of faith begins with imagination—with vision and with wonder. Spiritual directors ask students to grow by changing, so the Companion Guide as a final group exercise will ask each of us to “commit” to new behaviors as an experiment of faith.

The *further exploration* section is designed for a group (if there is time), but it will be especially helpful for the individual who wants to follow up the group session with deeper study. The further exploration section focuses primarily on the Gospels since the concern of The Jesus Creed and this Companion Guide is how Jesus understood spiritual formation. I have no expectations that each person will ponder each passage each day. The various passages are given as suggested readings. Many find that “journaling” both intensifies and solidifies the session. To “journal” one needs simply to write out, usually in a notebook, dedicated exclusively to spiritual journaling, what comes to mind during the session.

Reading a chapter is rarely enough for any of us. This Companion Guide has one central aim: to help each of us deepen the Jesus Creed into the soul of our being, to rub it into the tissues of our heart, and so to let it shape our entire life. In both The Jesus Creed and the Companion Guide I urge each of us to learn to recite the Jesus Creed as a daily rhythm. I know from experience that it can become what Evelyn Underhill called a “prayer of aspiration,” that is, the frequent and attentive use of little phrases of love and worship, which help us, as it were, to keep our minds pointing the right way, so that these little phrases never lose their power of forming and maintaining in us an adoring temper of soul. . . . The habit of aspiration is difficult to form, but once acquired exerts a growing influence over the soul’s life.

Precisely. The Jesus Creed can be just that: a rhythmical prayer of aspiration. All day long.

The Jesus Creed

‘Hear, O Israel,
the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind, and with all your strength.’
The second is this:
‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’
There is no commandment greater than these.

The Jesus Creed

“The best use of life is love.
The best expression of love is time.
The best time to love is now.”
–Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, p. 128.

Recite the Jesus Creed together

FORMATION PRINCIPLE:
*Spiritual formation is about loving God
and loving others. In particular, loving
God means to follow Jesus personally.*

FORMATION PRAYER:
*Abba, quicken my heart so that I may love you
and others by following Jesus.
Drive from my heart any unworthy loves.
Through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

FORMATION EXERCISES:

- IDENTIFY TOGETHER how some of your favorite Christian writers conceptualize the Christian life or spiritual formation. (Give concrete examples.) How does one’s conceptualization actually shape that formation?
- REFLECT TOGETHER on how the Shema of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and the Jesus Creed are similar and how they differ. What is the significance of the differences? What is the value of memorizing and reciting the Jesus Creed? What do you learn about the Jesus Creed from the statement above by Rick Warren?
- LISTEN to what God is saying to you about loving him and loving others. Hear the word of Jesus: “Come, follow me” (Mark 1:17a). How is this a form of loving God?
- IMAGINE your life—with your family, with your co-workers, and with your church community—as a life dedicated to loving God and loving others. What could that life look like today and tomorrow?
- COMMIT your lives to the Jesus Creed—to loving God and to loving others.

Recite the Lord's Prayer together

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Ponder the following persons who were challenged by the call of God to live out the Jesus Creed. Individuals may want to journal some reflections.

- ~ Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25) ~ Mary (Luke 1) ~ Peter (Luke 5:1-11)
- ~ Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) ~ Women (Luke 8:1-3)

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