

A Critical Evaluation of John Robert Stevens' Theology of Spiritual Formation in Dialogue with Søren Kierkegaard: A Dissertation Summary¹

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Abstract

John Robert Stevens (1919–1983) was a Pentecostal/Charismatic minister whose teachings emphasize Christian maturity. Utilizing the existential voice of Søren Kierkegaard as a dialogical partner, this project identifies, synthesizes, systematizes, assesses, analyses, and critiques John Robert Stevens' teachings on a walk with God. Stevens' concept of a walk with God includes the primary interrelated topics of Christlikeness, the Kingdom, and the believer's relationship with God. According to Stevens, Christian formation is an existential and relational endeavour. It naturally arises from a daily focus of relating to God in the course of life, and consistently moving in the direction of God's will. True spiritual formation results from an ongoing, obedient relationship with God, who is the only source of genuine transformation. The dialogue with Kierkegaard—the father of existentialism—highlights and sharpens Stevens' view of Christian spiritual formation.

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spirituality, existentialism, relationship, walk, holism

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

The late John Robert Stevens (1919–1983) grew up in Iowa, in the United States. He graduated from LIFE Bible College with his G.Th. (Graduate in Theology) in 1947. In 1951, Stevens founded a worldwide fellowship of churches, and his ministry grew concurrently with the Charismatic movement. This ministry particularly flourished in the 1970s when his emphasis on the individual's relationship with God struck a chord with the hippie generation in the United States. At the height of his ministry, there were more than one hundred churches functioning under his ministry (Stevens 1976b:n.p.). That most of Stevens' books remain in print, particularly in Logos Bible Software format, is a testament to the continued interest in his biblical teachings.

The main question this project seeks to answer is this: what unique contributions does Stevens' theology of a 'walk with God' make to our fuller understanding of the nature of Christian spiritual formation? It is proposed that the writings of John Robert Stevens on the concept of a 'walk with God' present a holistic and relational theory of Christian spiritual formation. Stevens (1971a:81–82; 1987:694) utilizes the term 'walk with God' to encompass the active, transformational relationship with God which results in maturity. Interestingly, Stevens' theory of spiritual formation functions in ways which could be characterized as existential. Stevens' approach to spiritual formation emphasizes authenticity and prioritizes the process of becoming over the process of gaining knowledge, all of which relates him to the overarching existentialist project. Among the existentialist authors, Søren Kierkegaard stands as the most fitting dialogical partner for exploring Stevens' approach to spiritual formation. In addition to the general commonalities between Stevens and Kierkegaard—such as commitment, authenticity, and becoming—the productive compatibility of Stevens and Kierkegaard is found in that they both place a relationship with God at the centre of the human quest for spiritual maturation (Kierkegaard 1990:325–326; Moore 2007:xxi–xxvi; Stevens 2007a:163–164).

2. The Four Axes of Spiritual Formation

Due to the youth of the academic study of spiritual formation, there are not yet firmly established criteria by which we might assess and critique any proposed theory.

A primary contribution of this dissertation was to propose four primary axes which must be detailed and critiqued in order to adequately examine any theory: (1) the stated goal or purpose of spiritual formation, at times found in the author's definition of spiritual formation; (2) the paradigmatic concept which frames the theory; (3) the theo-philosophical principles which form the foundation of the theory as a whole; and (4) the resultant activities, keyed to these first three aspects, which cause spiritual growth. These four axes together comprise a discreet model by which Stevens' theory of spiritual formation may be described and critiqued. Further, the assessment of the holism of his theory is best achieved by examining how each axis interrelates with the others. The following is a short review of the various approaches to these four axes of spiritual formation in current literature.

Along the axis of the goals of spiritual formation, the scholarly literature divides into three major categories: Christotelic, personality and character, and universal. Christotelic goals focus on Christ as the embodiment of the endpoint of Christian spiritual formation (Packer 2009; Howard 2012). The next category emphasizes the growth of the character of the individual, either morally or in finding the true self (Wright 2010; Benner 2011). The final category involves universal goals which address spiritual formation in the context of the overarching plan of God—that is, how spiritual maturity affects God's will for mankind and the world (Habermas 2008; Greenman and Kalantzis 2010). Some theories address more than one of these categories of goals simultaneously.

The axis of paradigmatic concepts divides into six major categories: journey, developmental, educational, Biblical, devotional, and relational. Journey paradigms discuss spiritual formation as a movement through a spiritual landscape toward a goal given by God (Demarest 2009; Nouwen 2010). Developmental paradigms emphasize progressive growth, often in terms of stages of maturity (Dawson 2007; Ashbrook 2009). Educational paradigms discuss spiritual formation in the context of Christian education (Gangel and Wilhoit 1998; Habermas 2008). Biblical paradigms are images or concepts taken directly from Scripture (Anderson and Reese 2009; Peterson 2010). Theories in the devotional category present paradigmatic concepts related to the devotional life, such as the disciplines (Foster 2002; Willard 2009b). Relational paradigms utilize imagery of the believer's relationship with God as the central guiding concept of Christian spiritual formation (Benner 2009c; Foster 2009).

Along the theo-philosophical axis, foundational principles of spiritual formation divide into six major categories: systematic theology, doctrinal theology, biblical theology, denominational/historical theology, interdisciplinary studies, and relational brands of theology. Systematic approaches utilize the Bible as a whole in the effort to generate proper fundamentals of spiritual formation (Wright 2010; Willard 2014a). Doctrinal approaches view spiritual formation through doctrinal topics such as eschatology, the Trinity, discipleship, and the social gospel (Searle and Searle 2013; Vondey 2015). Biblical theology approaches focus on specific books or authors of the Bible (Jenkins 2011; Kendall 2015). Historical and denominational theology approaches view spiritual formation primarily through the study of the Christian authors of old or through specific denominational viewpoints (Valantasis 2005; Sims 2013). Interdisciplinary studies utilize work in a wide range of fields—such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and general religious studies (Conn 1999:96; Shults and Sandage 2006). Relational theo-philosophical foundations focus on the theology behind a relationship with God (Jenkins 2011; Farley 2014).

The axis of activities divides into five primary categories: devotional, study, denominational, spiritual counselling and direction, and attitudinal. Devotional activities are often referred to as the disciplines, including prayer, reading of Scripture, fasting, repentance, community, worship, and communion (Peterson 2000; Boa 2001; Mulholland 2001). The study category focuses on the formative power of the studying of the Word of God (Graybeal and Roller 2009a; Curran 2010). The category of denominational activities includes formative activities which arise from particular denominational viewpoints (Alvarado 2012; Howard 2012). The activities of spiritual counselling and direction are common enough to warrant their own category among the activities of spiritual formation (Moon and Benner 2004; Anderson and Reese 2009). Finally, there are activities recommended in the literature which are more descriptive of necessary attitudes in spiritual formation which must be actively pursued, such as obedience, love, and surrender (Christenson 2001; Koessler 2003).

3. A Synthesis of Stevens' Theory of Spiritual Formation

In his original writings, Stevens did not present a systematized overview of his conception of a walk with God. This section identifies the major components of a walk with God, systematizes these components, and synthesizes Stevens' writings into a cohesive summary of Stevens' position.

The writings of Søren Kierkegaard will provide a contrapuntal voice by which Stevens' concepts may be immediately compared and clarified. This study follows the structure of the four-axis model presented above.

Along the axis of goal, Stevens' theory maintains five components: Christlikeness, the establishment of the Kingdom, a relationship with God, individual purpose, and community maturity (Stevens 1974b:35; 1976a:175; 1976c:42–43; 2007a:501, 814–815). Christlikeness represents the completion of the process identified in Romans 8:29, that believers would be conformed to the image of the Son. The establishment of the Kingdom is a universal telos which situates the individual's progressive maturity in the bigger picture of God's plan for creation. The believer's relationship with God is the central component of each axis. While Stevens sees the relationship with God as the generator of change, it is vital to recognize that Stevens also situates a relationship with God as a goal of spiritual formation. The more maturity a believer achieves, the deeper and closer the relationship with God will become. The goal of a walk with God also involves identifying and pursuing the believer's individual purpose, which is primarily aligned with the furthering of God's will. Finally, the goal of spiritual formation must include the believing community, for spiritual maturity functions on both an individual and corporate level.

Kierkegaard and Stevens differ in important ways in how to account for the goal of spiritual formation. For Kierkegaard, the God relation is the means by which the human becomes and maintains his/her status as a single individual—that is an authentic being with divinely-discovered identity, focused on the highest good (Moore 2007:xxvi–xxvii). For Stevens, the relationship with God is presented as a goal in itself. For Kierkegaard, relationality is a path. For Stevens, relationality is a motivating telos. Stevens seems more concerned with framing the process of Christian maturity as a process toward deeper communion with the Father in order to accomplish his will, rather than the achievement of self-fulfilment. In this way, becoming like Christ is the central defining telos of Stevens' theory. Further distinction between the two is found in the eschatological element of the formative goal. Kierkegaard is focused primarily on how the individual is received by Christ upon his return. Stevens, on the other hand, views the establishment of the Kingdom by mature believers as an inextricable goal of Christian spiritual formation.

The paradigmatic concept of Stevens' theory is a walk with God. For Stevens (1980:104), the concept of a walk with God begins with

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where they ‘walked and talked’ with God. However, the first individual in Scripture who is directly stated to have walked with God is Enoch (Gen 5:24). Following Enoch, two prominent figures in Genesis, Noah and Abraham, are also said to have walked with God (Gen 6:9, 17:1, 24:40). In developing this paradigm, Stevens also looks to the NT examples of those who followed Jesus—particularly his disciples. Stevens points to the uses of the verb ‘walk’ in Ephesians as further scriptural examples of the concept, and he maintains that the epistle presents Christianity as a way of life embodied in the walking (Stevens 1974:63; 1976a:150). For Stevens, a walk with God embodies a Christian way of life centred on the believer’s submission to Christ as Lord (Stevens 1976a:218; 1986:608).

For Stevens, the concept of a walk with God comprises ten primary elements: relationship, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, submission, dedication, love, hunger, directional progress, God’s dealings, authenticity, and community relationships. A walk with God is primarily relational. This paradigmatic concept encapsulates an ongoing, practical, progressive relationship with God. A walk with God is founded upon the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The concept of Lordship identifies the nature of the relationship, which is one of obedience. In this manner, a walk with God is characterized by submission and dedication. In submission, the believer submits to God’s direction while walking with him. In dedication, the believer commits to stay close with God, to seek his will, and to respond to his direction. The relationship of a walk with God, however, is untenable without the motivating forces of love and spiritual hunger. The walk with God incorporates the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28–30) as the foundational connective tissue of the formative divine relationship. The concept of spiritual hunger describes the believer’s own internal desire for God and his righteousness. This is closely related to Kierkegaard’s concept of passion, which drives the inward journey of becoming. A walk with God is characterized by directional progress both internally and externally—that is, the believer will move forward in a journey toward greater maturity, and accomplish God’s will in the process. However, spiritual formation is dependent upon the dealings of God, in which God arranges difficult circumstances in order to encourage the believer’s seeking of God for his equipping through transformation. God’s dealings are a part of the purifying process in which the sin nature is removed. A walk with God requires authenticity on the part of the believer.

Authenticity, in turn, is made up of honesty, a rejection of empty religiosity, and a genuine desire to walk with God. Finally, a walk

with God cannot be undertaken alone, but functions in a community setting.

In some ways, the paradigmatic concept of a walk with God is similar to the paradigmatic concepts of journey often used in the context of spiritual formation. While Kierkegaard is aware of the paradigm of journey as it is used to exemplify human life, his treatment of it is peculiarly Kierkegaardian. He states that the spiritual road we must walk only exists 'when we walk on it. That is, the road is how it is walked' (Kierkegaard 2007:289–290). Kierkegaard often emphasizes the 'how' over the 'what', but here he seems to state that we must see the how as the what. For Kierkegaard, the road is only present when it is walked on. It seems this corresponds with Stevens' emphasis on the relationship with God (Kierkegaard's 'how') over the orbiting trappings of a walk with God. For Stevens, spiritual formation is so highly dependent upon the individual's relationship with God that attempting to identify the path through activity or direction first is not only counterproductive but nonsensical (Stevens 1976a:168). There is a destination and a path, but these cease to exist if the individual is not walking with God. Kierkegaard (1967:150) reiterates the biblical truth that Christ is the way in this context. Stevens would certainly agree with the application of this scripture.

Perhaps, though, the most dialogically insightful comparison regarding the paradigms of Kierkegaard and Stevens comes in Kierkegaard's characterization of the sacrifice of Isaac. Kierkegaard holds that the defining moment which proved Abraham esteemed his relationship with God above all else was not actually his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Rather, it was his ability to hear God stopping him from following through, and his resulting choice to stay his hand. Abraham's true obedience was his ability to change his mind quickly once he heard the voice of the Lord (Kierkegaard 2007:89–90). The hallmark of each paradigm is not necessarily the obedience to God beyond all other considerations, but rather the ongoing relationship which becomes the definition of the individual's being and choices. Stevens' paradigmatic concept of a walk with God places the relationship with God standing above all things, even God's prior commands. This ongoing attitude in a walk with God keeps the believer in a process of successive transformation, for the relationship itself is the path of Christian maturity.

The theo-philosophical foundations of Stevens' theory involve the interrelated concepts of Christlikeness, the sin nature, God's role

in spiritual transformation, pneumatology, relationship, revelation, and biblical anthropology (Stevens 1986:608; 1987:568-569; 2007a:407; 2007b:279–281). Stevens' theological foundations are primarily standard Christian tenets viewed from the angle of relational spiritual formation. The central theological foundation of Stevens' theory is the salvation through Christ provided by the Father. This foundation includes the process of becoming like Christ—for his salvation is meant to completely transform the believer into a new creature. The achievement of Christlikeness is a prevalent theme of the NT (John 1:12; 2 Pet 1:4a; Rom 8:17; Heb 2:10–11), and Stevens sees it as the end goal of salvation. This foundation addresses the sin nature and the need to remove it in favour of Christ's nature. In order to understand the process of spiritual formation, the believer must understand the nature of the object of transformation. The human being is naturally sinful in his or her ontological state. Genuine spiritual formation must address the sin nature, if any genuine change is to occur. Further, the sin nature is unable to change itself. This theological principle forms the heart of Stevens' view that Christian transformation only occurs by the hand of God, through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit. This, in turn, fuels the recognition of the next major theological truth in the theory, which is God's role in transformation.

This foundation places God as the originator of transformation. God sent Christ to the earth to reconcile man back to God. The reconciliation of relationship is both a means and an end of spiritual formation. The relationship with God through Christ generates change. However, the mature believer is equipped to relate to God in deeper ways. Pneumatologically, the Holy Spirit is integral to spiritual formation, for he is intimately involved in the process of becoming a new creation (Gal 3:3, 6:14–15). This direct connection between the Holy Spirit and a walk with God is seen more directly in the Pauline concept of walking by the Spirit (Gal 5:25). Stevens' theological foundation of relationship in a walk with God is further found in a Trinitarian grounding—that is, the believer pursues and maintains interconnected but distinct relationships with Father, Son, and Spirit. This relationality is pervasive in Stevens' theory, as the believer is spiritually impotent toward transformation and is therefore dependent upon the Trinity in the achievement of any genuine change. The foremost theological principle which drives this relationship is revelation. Stevens sees revelation as available and necessary in the present.

Revelation arises from Scripture and will always find confirmation in the Bible, but its receipt by the believer is not constrained to the

holy text. Revelation is an internal reception of the Word of God which naturally results in change. It is therefore a tool of relationship and of formation simultaneously. Finally, Stevens' theory cannot be understood outside of a spirit-focused biblical anthropology. Stevens emphasizes the difference between soul and spirit, stating that the spirit is the aspect of the human which is able to connect with God. This all must occur through the use of the believer's spirit, rather than his soul or body. God is a Spirit, and he can only be related to by spirit. The believer must therefore be aware of his or her spirit as the faculty by which the transformational relationship with God is pursued. These theological foundations together place Scriptural and theological truths as the basis of a walk with God.

The foremost general difference between Stevens and Kierkegaard is the weighting between philosophy and theology. Kierkegaard is more philosophical in his approach. Stevens is more biblical. Regardless, the role of Jesus Christ and the incarnation is central to both. The requirement of a relationship with God in the pursuit of transformation—while recognized from different angles—is also agreed upon as being of superlative importance. Kierkegaard pursues philosophical paradoxes and absurdities in order to show that pure rationality is insufficient in addressing the spiritual nature of a relationship with God. Stevens takes a different approach in that he focuses on systematically connecting scriptures in order to present a holistic view of a spiritual relationship with God in the Christian context. Kierkegaard desires to disrupt his reader's rationality with the intent to focus the believer on a subjective faith, which he sees as the only effective approach in attempting to achieve a true relationship with the Christian God. Stevens on the other hand desires to work with the reader's understanding in order to present practical applications of spiritual biblical truths. However, Kierkegaard's requirement of subjective epistemology is also compatible with Stevens' theory in that the believer must be personal in the application of the Word of God. Stevens would never assert that God's truth is subjective, but he would certainly agree that pure rationality is insufficient to the task of an authentic, spiritual reception of the Word. For Stevens (1987:886), revelation stands as the spiritual principle which answers the deficiencies of reason.

The primary activities in Stevens' theory are true to its relational centring: authenticity, intensity, awareness and focus, God's dealings, transference, the Word, repentance, and waiting on the Lord (Stevens 1971b:73–74; 1972:154–155; 1981:78; 1986:615–616). Some of these activities are not conventionally identified as

spiritually formative actions. Rather, they are internal attitudes or focuses which must be intentionally undertaken by the believer. Through Stevens' relational lens, activities of spiritual formation must contribute to the believer's relationship with God. For this reason, formative activities may actually be attitudes, such as authenticity, intensity, and awareness. In a walk with God, he accomplishes the movement of formation (Stevens 1987:568–569). If the activities of spiritual formation are merely an expression of self-discipline, they will be ineffective. However, if the activities of spiritual formation lead to increased intercourse with God, they will produce Christian maturity. This general attitude regarding the primacy of an enacted relationship with the divine—that is, a walk with God—informs Stevens' attitude on the activities. Acting is of utmost importance, but the form of such action arises from a focus on God himself. The attitude of authenticity allows for honesty and transparency in a relationship with God. Such authenticity allows God 'access' to the human being for the accomplishment of his formative goals. Intensity is required of the believer to continually seek God and his will. Awareness of God is a requirement in relating to him. The believer must cultivate a spiritual awareness of God in order to walk with him. Other activities describe the believer's reception of God, such as God's dealings and transference. God's dealings are God's own disciplinary activities which mature his children. Transference involves the impartation of godliness by God to the believer. Devotional activities such as the reading of the Word, repentance, and waiting on the Lord must also be enacted relationally. The reading of the Word is a practical activity which facilitates impartation of Christ's own attributes. Repentance pushes out the sin nature and seeks God for Christ's nature. Waiting on the Lord is perhaps the most relational activity of all, for it positions the believer to forego all other concerns in favour of hearing the voice of the Lord and receiving from him.

Kierkegaard's account of formative activities is also made up primarily of attitudinal stances or internal metaphysical acts. This is both complementary and confirmatory to Stevens' approach. For example, Kierkegaard's treatment of passion, choice, and the death to self corresponds with Stevens' treatment of intensity, authenticity, and the dealings of God. These activities are products of the fundamental relationality of both theories.

However, the difference between the two theories is Stevens' greater emphasis on the role of God. Kierkegaard is very focused on the activities which exemplify the state of being as an authentic

single individual. Kierkegaard certainly recognizes that God is the ultimate source of spiritual change, but he approaches the activities of the God relation as primarily acts of human will. Stevens, on the other hand, prioritizes God's role in transformation. The believer may be able to take action which garners God's response, but the ultimate executor of transformation is God.

This synthetic summary reveals that Stevens' writings on a walk with God represent a holistic and relational approach to spiritual formation. All elements of his theory function together as a whole, centred upon the spiritually formative efficacy of an ongoing relationship with God in Christ. The concept of relationship is the quintessence of Stevens' theory. The relationship with God functions throughout, from goal to activities, from end to means. The paradigmatic concept of a walk with God captures this in a biblical metaphor. A walk with God as well as such variants as 'walking in the Spirit' is ubiquitously resonant with the text of the Bible and is therefore particularly ripe to adequately represent a theory of Christian spiritual formation. The theological foundations include the reconciliatory power of Christ's sacrifice, which brings humanity back into relationship with God. This enables the process of maturation, for a relationship with God ensures an ongoing connection with the divine source of transformation. The pervasiveness of the principle of relationship is perhaps best seen in Stevens' formulation of the activities of spiritual formation. Such attitudes as intensity and awareness are not commonly construed as activities, but the relationship with God cannot be accomplished without them. Relationship, therefore, stands as a holistic glue in the theory as a whole, tying together goal, theology, and activity within the paradigm of a walk with God. The holism of the theory therefore primarily rests upon its relationality.

4. A Critique of Stevens' Theory of Spiritual Formation

In analysing Stevens' writings, there are four general problems which emerge: the lack of definitions of his terminology, the missing detail in his presentation of certain exegetical work, the general avoidance of addressing opposing viewpoints, and the lack of systematization. These weaknesses are the foundational issues behind the subjects deserving of the critique in his theory.

The first major area of critique regards Stevens' trichotomist anthropology. Stevens' theory maintains that a relationship with God must be undertaken in a spiritual manner—that is, by the

human spirit. Stevens often emphasizes the difference between soul and spirit, stating that the human spirit is the faculty by which transformational communing with God is possible.

It seems the dichotomist position is more in favour within contemporary scholarship, so the Scriptural support of trichotomy must be examined in order to critically address Stevens' anthropological enumeration. An analysis of Scripture regarding the various terms for 'soul' and 'spirit' reveals a broad overlap between the usages of soul and spirit. However, they cannot be said to be exactly interchangeable. A proper scriptural anthropology should recognize both the similarities and the differences in these concepts. A holistic view of anthropology may supply the necessary nuance with which to do so. Similarly to the organs of the body, perhaps the non-corporeal aspects of the human mentioned in Scripture—including soul, spirit, heart, self, and inner man—may be seen as describing various functionalities of the human being. In this critique of Stevens' anthropology, it is suggested that his trichotomist position should be abandoned as it does not accurately reflect the biblical usages of spirit and soul. Further, the holistic view of anthropology would be a better fit for his theory which is already strongly holistic in nature.

Another aspect of major critique is Stevens' lack of theological philosophical foundations regarding subjectivity, relationship, ontology, and ethics. Kierkegaard's existentialist approach to these four topics helps to establish missing theological-philosophical foundations required in Stevens' theory. Stevens' concept of a walk with God is based primarily upon a seemingly subjective generator of change—that is, the believer's relationship with God. Kierkegaard embraces subjectivity in the process of becoming, maintaining that truth must be apprehended personally and internally for it to cause genuine change. If Christ is ontologically the truth (John 14:16), then the fruit of a relationship with him will necessarily be objectively true. Further, Kierkegaard's distinction between the subjective and the abstract is beneficial in adding nuance to Stevens' emphasis on the internalized Word of God. An abstract knowledge of God is not transformative, but a relationship in which God's truth is internalized is transformative. This leads to the identification of ontology as another necessary foundation left unaddressed by Stevens.

While Stevens' nearly absent discussion of the ethical is a weakness of his theory, Kierkegaard provides a possible clarification of the problem in that he states that a focus on ethical behaviour does not lead to change. The transformational

relationship with God is a prerequisite to the genuinely ethical life, for the human being must be fundamentally changed, if he or she is to behave ethically.

A further element of Stevens' theory which deserves critique is his pneumatology, which is ever-present but never sufficiently detailed. The Holy Spirit and his role are discussed often by Stevens, but he does not provide a proper accounting of pneumatology as a whole. A deeper analysis clarifies Stevens' views, concluding that he sees the Holy Spirit as a person available in a distinct relationship to the believer among the Members of the Trinity, that the engagement with the Holy Spirit is the prerequisite for being spiritual, and that the Spirit is a purveyor of God's Word toward Christlikeness.

The final area of critique is Stevens' concept of impartation. The concept of impartation was clarified by Kierkegaard's concept of indirect communication, by which he proposes that existential matters are best communicated indirectly. This is a relational view of teaching and is applicable in a theory of spiritual formation which sees the relationship with God as the means by which ontological transformation occurs. Impartation is a spiritual bestowal of a characteristic of God, often by the Holy Spirit, which causes permanent change or addition to the believer. Impartation is therefore a spiritual mechanism of relational formation.

John Robert Stevens' theory of spiritual formation certainly has its weaknesses, gaps, and unarticulated foundations. However, none of these problems are ultimately deleterious to the theory as a whole. Stevens' views are largely compatible with the spiritual formation literature and with Kierkegaard's existentialist concepts. Therefore, necessary theological supplementation is achievable.

5. Summary Propositions

The following are the summary propositions for the goal, paradigmatic concept, theo-philosophical foundations, and activities of spiritual formation, as well as of spiritual formation itself. These reflect Stevens' theory as well as the critique and supplementation of his theory:

The goal of spiritual formation is an internalized Christlikeness on both an individual and corporate level which emerges from a maintained ontological state of relationship with Christ, by the Holy Spirit, toward the establishment of God's Kingdom on the earth.

The paradigm of a walk with God encapsulates spiritual formation in the context of an active, authentic, covenantal relationship with God, centred on the Lordship of Jesus Christ, expressed in love, hunger, dedication, and submission, and enacted directionally, on both an individual and communal level.

The theological basis of spiritual formation reflects the complete salvific power of Christ manifested in a relational pursuit of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit engaged through a holistic anthropology, which results in the removal of the change-resistant sin nature and imparts Christlikeness through a process of spiritual transference.

Activities which promote spiritual formation are foundationally relational, including attitudes such as authenticity, spiritual hunger, and awareness, include the believer's proper response of accepting God's formative dealings, as well as devotional actions of spiritual connectivity such as engagement with the Word of God, repentance, and waiting on the Lord.

Christian spiritual formation is a relational endeavour in which ontological maturity toward Christlikeness is realized via an interactive, obedient, and holistic relationship with three persons of the Trinity in an ongoing walk with God, who is the only source of true spiritual transformation.

6. Conclusion

It was proposed that John Robert Stevens utilizes the Scriptural concept of a walk with God as a paradigmatic concept of a holistic theory of spiritual formation. This general hypothesis was proven to be true through the processes of identification, exegetical analyses, synthesis, and systematization of Stevens' writings. It was further hypothesized that Kierkegaard's views on identity and growth were relevant and potentially helpful in clarifying Stevens' views on spiritual formation. This was also found to be true through the comparison, contrast, and reconciliation between the two authors. However, the points of comparison between the two also highlighted a major critique of Stevens.

While Stevens' concept of a walk with God is existential in nature, he does not provide a strong theo-philosophical foundation for the required underlying existential concepts, such as authenticity, subjectivism, relationship, and ontology. It was also further suggested that Stevens' theory of spiritual formation was unique in two ways. Firstly, it is holistic in that all parts of the theory

relate to all other parts, and that it only works as a complete whole. Secondly, the theory is centred on a relationship with God.

These two points proved to be true in the course of this project, although Stevens' relationality is not as unique as initially hypothesized. Stevens' concept of a walk with God cannot be understood except as a holistic view of the Christian life which leads to the growth of the believer.

It is holistic in two ways: as a self-consistent whole along the four axes of spiritual formation in which all aspects function cohesively together, and in its holistic view of spiritual formation as an endeavour found throughout the Christian life. A walk with God inculcates the pursuit of spiritual growth into an obedient relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. Its greatest strength is in its integration of the relationship with God as both the goal and the means of spiritual formation.

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