What led you into your investigation of spiritual formation?
The conviction that Jesus is the center of all things and that what He is doing is good. I became convicted that I did not know enough about the human soul to be a preacher.

At the time, the people who talked more about [the human soul] were philosophers. I was ministering to people who were in a tremendous amount of trouble, and did not know what to do about it. These were people who were already saved and, from their theological perspective, there wasn’t really anything else for them to do about their condition. It became clear to me that I just wasn’t saying much that was really helpful to people. I was becoming uneasy about a lot of the theology of salvation and, especially, it was becoming clearer to me that what was being presented as the essence of the matter in salvation just wasn’t congruent with what the New Testament (or, for that matter, the Old Testament) teaches.

What I would like to do for people is to present the life in Christ as something that is accessible and as something that works. So that all of the wonderful phraseology (like you find in Ephesians 4, Galatians 5, Colossians 3, 1 Corinthians 13, or Matthew 5) doesn’t just sit over there like a Platonic Form, out of reach, where you’re just able to see enough of it to feel guilty. It doesn’t just have to do with forgiveness, but more than anything it has to do with a relationship to real life.

When I began to study Philosophy, I saw from the very beginning that Plato’s Republic is essentially a book on spiritual formation. Its real question was, "How can you get leaders who can be trusted?" which is a lively topic today. We have the same problem with both ministers and elected officials. That problem … has come all the way down through history and remains unsolved from the secular point of view. What really grips me is the realization that there is really no solution to that problem apart from the life in the kingdom of God lived as discipleship, where questions like: How am I going to get ahead? How am I going to secure myself? How am I going to get what I want? – Where these questions are adequately dealt with in a framework of real life. I’ve just been responding to what I’ve seen to be the needs of the person who has good sense and is devoted to Christ, and I’ve been trying to minister what is found in the Bible and in the history of God’s people. How do you make that available? How do you claim it for yourself, first of all, and how do you give it to others? My intention in studying philosophy was to become less harmful in the pulpit. I really just wanted to not make [the present situation] worse.
To live and minister in light of these truths [of the gospel] you really do have to have a lot of peace in your heart. That comes from the realization that you don’t have to make it happen. You just be truthful, follow your studies, stay with your fellowship with the few who are close to you, and just keep going. Because, truthfully, what we need is a revolution, but revolution is always very dangerous. And human revolutions always devour their children. And so what we need is a revolution that is actually conducted by Christ. And that means that we have to be content not to make things happen.

On spiritual formation and the gospel:
We need to have vision, intention and means in order to achieve spiritual formation. That’s the basic issue regarding the teaching of Jesus. There isn’t a single thing that Jesus taught that a person cannot by engaging His grace come to do. Not a single thing. But you have to want to. And you have to decide to. And that’s what is lacking. Why? It goes back to the gospel that is preached.

The gospel that is preached doesn’t touch on [formation in Christ]. The gospel that is preached is only about forgiveness. Why should I bother to do what Jesus taught? That’s what you teach! That the gospel is all about forgiveness! It turns out that what you really think about Jesus is revealed by what you do after you find out that you don’t have to do anything. That’s what really tells what you think about Jesus. If you think that Jesus is working in the world then you’re going to want to be part of it. But if you think that all Jesus did was to die for us, paid for our sins, and that’s it then there’s no reason to try to do what He said. There’s no justification for it based on the gospel that is being preached.

How can we keep spiritual formation from becoming merely a fad?
The important thing is to tie Spiritual Formation to obedience to Christ. Spiritual formation is pointless in itself. It is obedience to Christ that is everything. This is especially possible for a biblically oriented group. Our problem is that we’re so biblical that we defend it against the Bible. We’re so used to reading it without putting it into practice, and yet we have such high views of it. This is a real problem because it creates a culture in which we are close to God with our lips, but our hearts are far from Him. We think that we’re right just because we’ve heard the words. That’s the hardest part to break through.

Suppose you’re going to actually do it…you’re going to begin putting it into practice in the church. That’s where the block comes in, because our churches are set up to say, "no we don’t really need to do that…that’s inessential." As long as [spiritual formation] is inessential, spiritual formation will never be more than a fad. As long as it is not conceptually connected with the gospel that is preached then we will cycle one fad after another one, and spiritual formation will just be one among many. So we cannot approach spiritual formation without the appropriate understanding of the gospel, the appropriate ontology of the universe and the human self. So unless we get back to the theology that deals with it, then, at most, some people will see the point of it, and the rest will not and move on to the next thing. Now what is preached as the gospel by most
evangelicals is one theory of the atonement — that’s presented as the gospel. But the gospel is not just about forgiveness. The gospel is about life!

**On the Kingdom of God**

The kingdom of God is what God is doing. Both Testaments use the word "reign" in this respect. The reign of God is the kingdom of God. So what is the kingdom of God? You need to know that or else you cannot "seek first the kingdom of God," can you? So how do you seek first the kingdom of God? Well you would try to find out what God is doing and get involved with it. You can’t find out what God is doing without identifying His righteousness. You need to have a vision of God. Everything that exists outside of the human realm automatically expresses the kingdom of God. And some things within the human realm, if they are surrendered to God, also express the kingdom of God (e.g., the teachings of Jesus, the ten commandments, etc.). So if you wanted to seek the kingdom of God, the first thing you need to do is to step into those teachings. Now if you try to do that by [merely following] the teachings, you’ll become a legalist. We have to become not someone who [merely] does the law but the kind of person who naturally does what the law says. That is the process of spiritual growth.

We want to seek to be this kind of person in all areas of our life. That means we have to be prepared. So you need various kinds of disciplines to help you. I can’t simply resist anger in the moment when I’m confronted with a frustrating incident. I must be prepared for it. If we want to exhibit the fundamental aspects of the soul (e.g., peace, love and joy) on various occasions, we have to be prepared. We are either peaceful, joyful and loving or not. We have to attend to these deep conditions of the soul. That is where spiritual formation comes in. And if you don’t have that you’ll just become a guilt-ridden legalist, and you’ll find yourself trying to act in a way that you’re not really.

**What role does desire play in American culture; how is it activated, and how can we avoid being mastered by it?**

You know, I’ve been thinking much more about that since I wrote [*Renovation of the Heart*]. We live in a sensualist culture, and that’s where the problems come from. And the church has bought into that, has accepted that. Everything from the degradation of sports, to obesity, to the horrible things that are done to little children, to the CEO scandals - all of this fundamentally derives from people pursuing feelings. Desire itself (and among religions, this is truly distinctive to Christianity) is not bad. But desire is not meant to master our lives, and that is what we’re seeing. Take addiction for example. The reason why drugs are [such a problem] in the western world is because the western world is a sensuous world. Addiction only exists where people have conceded to feeling.

And it isn’t really that feelings are overwhelming, but they are overwhelming if you concede to them. What you see in an addict, whether its coffee or nicotine or marijuana or whatever, is a person who has said, "If I don’t get what I want, something is wrong. I am justified in having whatever I want." And it’s that mentality that is the tripwire for the addict – that inner concession. No matter how tough your addiction is, you can stop the addictive behavior if you have decided that is what you want to do. You can do that. There are ways you can do that. We have conceded the right of desire. Now that is
what the teaching of the cross is directed at. Jesus takes the image of the cross before anyone believes he is going to die because he understands the power of it, and what the cross means is the ultimate frustration of desire. And if you don't have that settled, then desire will veto you until it gets its way.

Whenever you hear of a minister of whom we say, "he has fallen," – no, no. He had fallen long before that. It wasn't that he was some fine person sailing along and then one day something just hit him. What often comes out is that desire had been eating on him for a time. Perhaps he's been behaving rightly for a long time because he has believed that would get him what he wanted. However, at a certain point, he came to realize that he's not going to get what he wanted. Or, maybe, he does get what he wanted. It’s fascinating to see how many people fall apart when they succeed. What has actually been holding their life together has been their commitment to succeed. Well, it’s a long story to what actually does it. If you don’t know Pitirim Sorokin’s book, *The Crisis of our Age*, I would plead with you to read it. Sorokin analyzes the ruling forces that entered the modern age. He very rightly sees that it’s what people en masse take to be real and valuable that determines the quality of an age. It’s good to read that book in tandem with Ortega Y Gasset’s book, *The Revolt of the Masses*. What people have, en masse, taken to be reality in our culture is that our desires should be met.

One of the fundamental problems today is that Christian spokespeople have, by and large, accepted this—that they do not question it. And so, for example, Christian ministers try to get people to do things by making them feel things. We first approach people on the basis of feeling and try to get them to profess faith, and then we spend the rest of the time trying to get them to do things. We just need to get out of the business of trying to get people to do things, and get into the business of actually changing their beliefs. It is a great moment in one’s life when he comes to the realization that people always live up to their beliefs. Now we have the illusion that they don’t, that they have all of these wonderful beliefs that they just don’t live up to. The problem is not that people have these beliefs that they can’t live up to; it’s that they actually don’t believe that, but they believe a bunch of other stuff. This is not a conscious thing. Most of it is buried in our bodies. Take this as a test case: when Peter denied Christ, he lived up to his beliefs. And that’s our problem. Now if you have a society that is devoted to desire and the liberation of desire, which is what we have, then—and this can get you into trouble if you say these kinds of things in many settings—but, for example, the church will never deal with the issue of homosexuality in many settings. So now, of course, you have to say something and do something, but you also have to recognize what the issues are in homosexuality and sexuality, how they mix with other desires, disappointments, anger, etc. So, the way of the cross says: "You didn’t get what you wanted? That’s fine. That’s okay." Now, are there issues of right and wrong involved here? Well, we have to learn to stand for what is right. But now we’ve made it a matter of what we want. That’s how it’s done today.

**That’s why Political Correctness dominates.** There isn’t any other kind of correctness left. Political Correctness is a matter of desire. So if you don’t want certain things that other people do, then they’ll attack you, because for them the only problem is a conflict
of desire. Churches and ministers should focus on changing people's beliefs rather than focusing on their feelings.

On giving intellectual assent to the gospel?
We need to break up the social context of the body. And that is why solitude and silence are so important. Because we have to put ourselves in a position where we can come to grips with what we're really doing, what we're acting on. That's what these kinds of contexts can allow us to do. We need to get away from the things that actually control us and govern our lives, and then we can see what really does [control and govern our lives]. One result of this process is that you'll find that you don’t really believe a lot of the things you say you believe. And often that is related to the fact that you don’t even really understand it. It’s just that it's been taught in a social context, you accepted it and learned how to interact linguistically. If we never take time aside like this and discover what we really believe, we continue to go through life experiencing this incongruity between what we say we believe and what we’re actually doing. And the only way to get hold of that is to back out of the situation. Often a person just needs rest. But they need enough inner space to begin to track what's going on there, and to be honest with what's really moving them.

What role can the church play?
It’s surprising how little talk there is about God that makes sense in our religious circles. What people need to believe above all is that God is the ultimate reality. So talk about it. Explain it. What is God like? How does He relate to people? And now in a scientific age, there is a lot of good work to be done. How does the fact that in Christ all things hold together relate to Chemistry? Now there’s a topic that'll hold you for a while. Or to all of the areas of human life? How does it relate to business? There really isn’t a lot of talk about God. There’s a lot of talk about God's word, and about what God says, and all these sorts of things, but what we really need to do is to make sense of God. And in an age in which the predominant theory of knowledge and reality is empiricist, you have to address that issue. Could things be real if they aren’t sense-perceptible? That’s one of the standing questions of practical religious life. Where is God? So also the problem of evil, for example. This is not just a problem for philosophers, for the real point of the problem is for people who are suffering in this world: and where is God when that happens? What kind of a world is this in which prayer can be answered? What kind of a God would set up a system of prayer? You know, when you think about it, it’s kind of strange. So, we need to answer real questions about God and about life and about the Bible. And the real questions are the ones that often people are afraid to ask. So you have to figure out what they are and raise them yourself. Then you have to address them.