

Zoltán Dörnyei's *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit with Implications Regarding Formational Theory and Practice*

Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care

2025, Vol. 18(1) 215–232

© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: [10.1177/19397909251329382](https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909251329382)

journals.sagepub.com/home/jsf

 Sage

Klaus D. Issler

Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

Abstract

In this academic-level and interdisciplinary study, Dörnyei claims that *the fruit of the Spirit* has an intended role as an important theological concept in Paul's theology as encompassing Christlikeness, the goal of the Christian spiritual formation journey. Specifically, Dörnyei proposes that the nine-set fruit is of a unified and comprehensive nature and that this particular collective unit portrays the ideal Christian character. The essay describes key highlights of the study, evaluates these distinctive proposals, and recommends minor modifications. Finally, some implications are presented as next steps if we wish to let Paul's concept of the fruit of the Spirit bear fruit both within our theoretical formational understanding and our practice as related to the catechism and systematic theology.

Keywords

fruit of the spirit, virtue, character, spiritual formation, sanctification, Galatians 5:22–23

Corresponding author:

Klaus D. Issler, Professor Emeritus, Educational Studies and Theology, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639, USA.

Email: klaus.issler@biola.edu

Introduction

According to Zoltán Dörnyei, *the fruit of the Spirit* (Gal 5:22–23) gets no critical respect, except perhaps at the practical level.¹ It is regarded as a peripheral theological concept that only brings to mind a random virtue list like others in the NT. Dörnyei's mission is to rescue the concept from neglect and help raise up this phrase, *the fruit of the Spirit*, for its intended role as an important theological concept. Consider that when we hear the secular label *Wall Street*, we think of the entire financial market or, for *Silicon Valley*, the whole tech industry. The biblical concept of the *Cross* can bring to mind the grand message of the good news of the kingdom. In like manner, Dörnyei desires that *the fruit of the Spirit* phrase trigger in our mind the larger idea of all that is *Christlike*, the goal of the Christian spiritual formation journey. Dörnyei makes a case for this distinctive phrase to become—as he argues that Paul intended—a unique biblical catchphrase within sanctification. Dörnyei understands that *the fruit of the Spirit* is presented within Galatians 5 as a unified theological concept that encapsulates “*the ideal outcome of a divinely orchestrated transformation process to produce a Christlike character in the believer*” (34)—that is, “until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19).²

This is an unusual book, written by an unusual scholar. As far as I could discover, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit* appears to be the first academically-oriented, book-length study of the fruit of the Spirit in English and offers important contributions with which those writing about sanctification and Christian spiritual formation will need to engage.³ A distinctive feature of the book is its interdisciplinary nature providing an integrative study of biblical and theological concepts with relevant social science empirical research. Dörnyei earned two doctorates, a PhD in psycholinguistics (1989) from his native Hungary and a PhD in theology (Durham University, 2007). Since 2000 he served on the faculty of the School of English at University of Nottingham, publishing numerous empirical studies and twelve books distributed by Cambridge, Oxford, and Routledge, including *Christian Faith and English Language Teaching and Learning* (2013). He trained many teachers and also mentored those within the Christian TESOL community. Sadly, Dörnyei passed away of cancer at the age of 62, five months before his book on the fruit of the Spirit was released. In his detailed foreword, Wheaton theologian Daniel Treier commends the integrative nature of Dörnyei's research, “The present book offers new insight into the fruit of the Spirit by integrating the theological interpretation of Scripture with modern psychology” (ix).

1. Zoltán Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit: The Biblical Portrayal of the Christlike Character and Its Development* (Zondervan, 2022).
2. Numbers within parentheses indicate page citations from the book. Scripture citations are from the NIV.
3. My own search yielded no results. Similarly, no academic book on the fruit of the Spirit was found among the eighty-seven references of the chapter bibliography published in 2017 by NT scholar Craig Keener, known for his extensive research (Dörnyei cites Keener's chapter as a rare academic study, p12 #30), “A Comparison of the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 with Ancient Thought on Ethics and Emotions,” in *The Language and Literature of the New Testament*, ed. Lois Fuller Dow, Craig Evans, and Andrew Pitts (Brill, 2017).

In the essay I discuss a few selected highlights in three parts with more details about chapters 3–7, their respective topics being treated with remarkable breadth and depth. Each of these chapters could be regarded as mini-books in themselves and worthy of their own book review. After this survey, I evaluate Dörnyei's project and propose two slight modifications. In the final section, I suggest some implications as a response to Dörnyei's recommendation to give more emphasis to the fruit of the Spirit in our formational theory and practice. I situate his project within the larger theoretical context of Christian spiritual formation. On the practical side, I raise questions about potential adjustments regarding two frequently used church and seminary resources that serve to instruct us about sanctification: the catechism and systematic theology.

Surveying Key Contributions

Dörnyei explains the rationale for his book in chapter 1, noting the lack of academic book-length treatments about the fruit of the Spirit and the particular need for an interdisciplinary approach. He supplies a general orientation to the concept of *the fruit of the Spirit* in chapter 2, summarizing it as “*the ideal outcome of a divinely orchestrated transformational process to produce a Christlike character in the believer*” (34).

In chapter 3, one of the two longest chapters (59pp) and the best example of the book's interdisciplinary nature, Dörnyei provides a substantive integrative study of each of the nine characteristics. First, there is an extensive biblical study of the Greek terms for each fruit (and related terms, such as *shalom* related to *peace*). Dörnyei supports his comments from various resources, including citations from twenty-two commentaries on Galatians. The biblical study is followed by a significant review of the social science literature for relevant characteristics within a similar semantic domain of each fruit. Citations are wide-ranging, totaling fifty-eight references to social science journal articles and handbook chapters. Unfortunately, for a few fruit (patience, goodness, and kindness), discussions were shorter since fewer relevant empirical studies were available.

In chapters 4 and 5 respectively, Dörnyei makes two distinctive proposals. His first proposal in chapter 4 has two components, that (a) the nine fruit is of a unified and comprehensive nature and that (b) this particular collective unit portrays the ideal Christian character. “Paul's list of virtues in Gal 5 outlines a *composite character* that can be seen as a representation of an ideal, Christlike personality for believers to aspire to and to approximate as much as possible” (2). Of course Dörnyei values the individual nine fruit as important (as noted above, an extensive study of each appeared in the previous chapter), yet he regards the cumulative vision of Paul's presentation as more important and not sufficiently recognized. That the fruit of the Spirit represents Christlike character is summarized in Table 1 (ch 2, p. 27) in which each fruit is linked with verses describing divine character, either of Jesus or of God the Father.

Regarding the first claim, Dörnyei indicates that he is building upon a consensus of previous scholarship regarding the unitary, composite nature of the fruit of the Spirit as the ideal character sketch of Christlikeness. Then he develops four additional points to validate the legitimacy of this unity proposal, three of which are biblically-based.

First, Dörnyei argues that Paul's purpose in Galatians 5 is to paint a larger picture of the ideal, in which the fleshly vice-ridden life is contrasted with the Spirit-led life. Then Paul identifies a varied but composite inventory of virtues—the longest list of virtues in Paul's writings—that presents “a rounded Christlike character” (98).

Next, Dörnyei proposes that the fruit of the Spirit list is *comprehensive* of this rounded Christlike character. In Table 2 (100–102) he presents the results of a detailed study of forty-six different virtues (and related Greek word groups) identified in the whole NT and their relation to the nine individual fruit. Dörnyei concludes that most of the NT virtues “are synonyms or closely associated,” supporting the comprehensive coverage thesis (102). The list of nine fruit “is representative in the sense that it covers the whole breadth of the virtues mentioned in the New Testament, without leaving out any prominent ones that have been highlighted by the Scripture themselves or by commentators over the centuries” (102). A third line of biblical support for the composite unity of the fruit is evident from the internal coherence of its members. Many of the nine virtues exhibit in the biblical literature overlapping interconnections and semantic links.

A fourth and final point of confirmation is that many ancient and modern philosophers affirm the unity of the virtues, a point that receives some biblical support in Colossians 3:14, “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” As a side note, Dörnyei acknowledges that, although the term *fruit* (*karpos*) is a singular word (commonly used this way in the NT such as Eph 5:9), it can also function in the plural (2 Tim 2:6), so the word itself cannot be used to support the unitary proposal (32–33, 95).

In chapter 5 Dörnyei presents his second distinctive proposal. After employing a social science method, he discovers a unique sub-grouping of the list of nine fruit that can be concentrated within a cluster of three themes. One purpose for his analysis is to offer educational and practical benefits. He notes that, when helping others to receive value from the list of nine fruit, the two conventional approaches in teaching about the fruit exhibit problems. In working with individual virtues it is hard to keep in mind all nine items. Furthermore, he observes that the tradition of arranging the individual fruit into sequential triplets is not informative or helpful since these do not really sit well together as cohesive sets. The arbitrary grouping of sequential threesomes from Galatians 5:22–23 offers no unified themes: *love-joy-peace*, *patience-kindness-goodness*, and *faithfulness-gentleness-self-control*.

Instead, Dörnyei tried a different approach. Factor analysis, a social science mathematical tool, can yield the fewest possible constructs that represent a larger data set of variables. In psychological studies, abstract concepts are operationalized or converted to measurable phenomenon in which such quantifiable data is usually collected through self-report questionnaires or surveys. Dörnyei analyzed the numerical data culled from various empirical studies, including those cited in chapter 3, for each of the nine virtues. Accordingly, he focused on the common qualities of the operationalized definitions of the nine virtues and was able to condense and subsume these into three broad dimensions or factors based on underlying dimensions of each characteristic:

Loving Compassion (love, kindness, goodness, and patience),

Spiritual Contentment (joy and peace), and

Steadfast Perseverance (self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, and patience).

Although these three clusters are sufficiently distinct yet they are not mutually exclusive in that each cluster also exhibits some overlapping and inter-related qualities with characteristics in the other two (e.g., *patience* is explicitly included within two clusters).

In chapter 6, Dörnyei sets the larger theological context of his study clarifying the importance for the fruit of the Spirit to be formed within each believer. A major challenge is that there is no consensus regarding a common developmental framework for Christian maturation. He notes, “there does not appear to exist a single robust outline of [Christian] spiritual formation that is universally accepted in the theological mainstream. . . . There has been no authoritative definition [of Christian spiritual formation] provided by an ecumenical council, and the contemporary theological landscape is rather fragmented” (137, 138). To pursue his goal, Dörnyei identifies from the theological literature three clusters of prominent biblical themes, concepts or metaphors from “a representative range of the most salient theological construals of spiritual transformation” for his analysis (138):

- (1) Sanctification, justification, and regeneration;
- (2) Deification/theosis; and
- (3) Being conformed to the divine image.

Dörnyei’s main proposal in this chapter is “that the fruit of the Spirit can be viewed as the most concrete and specific portrayal of the outcome of the spiritual transformation process described in the biblical corpus” (138). This forty-page survey is worth the price of the book alone.

The section on the first theme of sanctification includes a brief summary in which verses on sanctification were placed within two broad categories (155–56): an accomplished fact (Heb 10:10; *definitive sanctification*, justification, and regeneration) and an ongoing process (2 Pet 3:18, *progressive sanctification*). For the second concept of deification/theosis, rooted in the phrase from 2 Peter 1:14: “you may participate in the divine nature,” Dörnyei notes that this idea is often mentioned by various Church Fathers at that time (such as Clement, Augustine), yet without technical precision as a confirmed doctrine. Eventually it became the official view of the Eastern Orthodox church and has received more attention since the 1990s among Western theologians. Finally, “conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29; also 2 Cor 3:18) is another prominent theme with an emphasis on being formed into the likeness of the character of Jesus. The remaining part of chapter 6 draws on citations from biblical scholars and theologians who explicitly link the fruit of the Spirit with each of these three relevant themes. Dörnyei suggests that the lack of a unified Christian spiritual formation framework “has formed a barrier to the full recognition of the significance of the fruit of the Spirit, because there has been no obvious theological framework that could have naturally accommodated the fruit of the Spirit as the ultimate end-state of a transformation process” (175).

The topic of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is taken up in the final chapter 7. It is another long chapter (62pp) and one also exemplifying the integrative use of interdisciplinary citations. Table 3 lists NT verses that call for believers to cultivate each of the fruit of the Spirit (183). Then, based on the psychological literature, Dörnyei

recommends four particular pre-requisites for effective human character change to take place: (a) strong desire and motivation to change, (b) small action steps toward change, (c) persistent action over an extended period of time, and (d) the social network and community support needed during the change process. The remaining portion (45pp) surveys a wide range of details about practical aspects of character formation. These suggestions are grouped into five themes: (a) participation through learning by doing for skill development and habit formation, (b) virtuous role models, (c) practical wisdom, (d) motivational strategies and discernment to pursue character formation, and (e) exemplary life stories from biblical narratives.⁴

Evaluation, Engagement, and Slight Modifications of Dörnyei's Proposals

How well did Dörnyei accomplish his goals? It is an impressive study showing much careful and innovative thought with extensive work reviewing various fields of literature. When we consider that this book is the first of its kind on the fruit of the Spirit, a pioneering effort as a book-length academic study, it is very successful. Dörnyei presents two substantive proposals. He took the seed idea mentioned by various commentators of the unitary nature of the fruit (96–97) and developed an expanded argument with more extensive biblical support (ch 4): “The main message of the current book is that the fruit of the Spirit takes center stage in this moral/spiritual transformation process of ‘new humanity.’ It presents an elaborate portrayal of the Christlike character” (245). In particular, I am persuaded by Dörnyei that this virtue list in Galatians 5:22–23 is not just another random itemization of virtues, but makes an important contribution in Paul’s overall argument.

I think Dörnyei’s main proposal, that the nine fruit is a composite unit that portrays the ideal outcome of Christlike character (ch 4), could stand more firmly with a slight modification. The need for adjustment is raised when others make a similar claim about another biblical virtue list. For example, theologian Derek Tidball states, “These are characteristics that describe Jesus Christ perfectly.”⁵ But Tidball refers to the virtue list in Colossians 3:12–14 and not Galatians 5:22–23. I will suggest a slight modification on this matter that will appear at the end of this section. Before doing that, first, I address another matter on Dörnyei’s use of a social science method. Next, I present a background study of related passages before mentioning another modification regarding Paul’s emphasis on the Spirit in Galatians 5. Then, we will return the issue of the conceptual overlap between Galatians 5:22–23 and Colossians 3:12–14.

4. For further reading about these and other practical formation strategies see my book, *Living into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character* (IVP, 2012) and James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 2022).
5. Derek Tidball, “Holiness: Restoring God’s Image—Colossians 3:5-17,” in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic (IVP Academic, 2014), 28. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson makes a similar statement about Colossians 3:12, “Everything Paul mentions here is, in one way or another, a description of the character of the Lord Jesus himself.” *Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification* (Banner of Truth, 2016), 130–31.

Evaluation of Use of the Social Science Method

Dörnyei's second substantive proposal is to summarize the nine fruit into fewer dimensions based on a factor analysis of relevant empirical research (ch 5). As a caution we need to recognize there is no exact one-to-one correspondence or equivalence of meaning when comparing the abstract concepts of the nine fruit from the biblical text with the operationalized definitions of the more limited and focused measurable variables employed in the empirical studies cited. Yet, after my review of Dörnyei's discussion of these various studies (ch 3, ch 5), I thought there was sufficient overlap within the semantic range for each of the nine fruit with the studies cited to affirm the value and benefit of his interdisciplinary and integrative interpretation.

For example, Paul's inclusion of self-control (*enkratēia*) is unique, especially as the final virtue to this list. It is the only use of this noun in his writings (he employs the verbal form on two occasions, 1 Cor 7:9, 9:25). Regarding the relevant empirical studies to this virtue, Dörnyei notes that “‘self-regulation’ has been one of the grand themes in psychology over the past fifteen years, and self-control is an important aspect of this domain” (89). Specifically, self-control has been understood to behave like a muscle that can be improved with exercise. Yet, since our self-control is also a limited resource, through much use it can be depleted, resulting in mental fatigue, for which the term *ego depletion* was coined. Thus the need for times of renewal to replenish this resource. Dörnyei offers this implication for Christian living,

Given that, as we have seen above, self-control is a foundational virtue that acts as a ‘spiritual muscle’ for all the other facets of the ninefold fruit of the Spirit, ego depletion has a critical bearing on one’s capacity to be virtuous: according to the theory, the extent of exercising loving compassion and other aspects of community outreach will be dependent, at least partly, on one’s available mental strength (90).

I appreciate Dörnyei making me aware of this long-term research program on self-control conducted by Roy Baumeister and colleagues and its implications for daily life.⁶

Background Study of Galatians 5, Colossians 3, and Romans 8

Before I suggest my modifications, let me share some background information. As noted, Colossians 3:1–14 and another Pauline passage, Romans 8:1–17, exhibit an impressive overlap of content with Galatians 5:1–26. (1) Both Galatians 5 and Romans 8 emphasize the Spirit-led Christian life. As one indicator of the Spirit-focus in these passages, the dative form *pneumati* (“by, through, with the Spirit”) appears with concentrated uses only in Galatians 5 [5x], 1 Corinthians 12 on the gifts of the Spirit [5x], and Romans 8 [3x]. In addition, a phrase with a similar meaning “according to the

6. For a reader-friendly resource on helpful self-control strategies to develop good life habits, change bad habits, and avoid temptations, see Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (Penguin, 2011).

Spirit" (*kata pneuma*) occurs only four times in the NT and two of these appear in Romans 8:4–5, supporting the three uses of *pneumati* in Romans 8.

(2) Both Galatians 5 and Colossians 3 include longer lists of vices and Christian virtues with some shared virtues—for which commentators have declared that both virtue lists describe and portray the character of Jesus Christ.

(3) In all three passages Paul identifies a key contrast between two opposing lifestyles. Romans 8 and Galatians 5 describe the Spirit-flesh conflict, in which the fruit of the Spirit is opposed to the acts or “works” of the flesh (140–44).⁷ But in Colossians 3, the conflict is stated differently as between the “things above” and “earthly things” and between the “old self” and the “new self.” Another difference in Colossians 3:1–14 is that “Christ” occurs five times (*christos*, Messiah) whereas there is no mention of “Spirit” here. The Lordship of Christ is the emphasis in Colossians 3 (“Christ is all, and is in all,” Col 3:11).

Remarkably, only Galatians 5:1–26 exhibits all three connecting factors: (1) Spirit-led Christian formation and living, (2) longer virtue and vice list, and (3) an analysis of two opposing lifestyles, one ungodly and one godly.

Modification #1: The Fruit of the Spirit as Spirit-led Formation and Living

The unique label *the fruit of the Spirit* directs our attention to the divine agency of the Spirit (treated by Dörnyei in pages 179–87). The major focus of Dörnyei’s study is the fruit list itself, a project that yields many contributions as noted. Although he clearly affirms the fruit of the Spirit as the outcome of “a divinely orchestrated transformation process” (34), Dörnyei does not consistently mention this key aspect in later statements of his main proposal. Of course, the phrase *fruit of the Spirit* indicates the Holy Spirit’s role, yet the phrase itself may be too familiar to emphasize that point. What about adding the term *Spirit-led*? This simple modification serves two purposes, it rectifies the problem noted and could also connect this study more explicitly to the distinctive Spirit-led teaching in the whole chapter of Galatians 5, rather than just verses 22–23.

Only in Galatians 5 does Paul include concentrated teaching about the believer’s dynamic relationship with the Spirit. Four distinctive verbs highlight divine agency and the believers’ response (182): (a) “*walk* by the Spirit” (vs. 16, imperative; *peripateō*; also Rom 8:4), (b) “if you [all] are *led* by the Spirit” (vs. 18; also Rom 8:14), (c) “if/ since we *live* by the Spirit” (vs. 25), and (d) “*keep in step* with the Spirit” (vs. 25). NT scholar Gordon Fee acknowledges that Galatians 5–6 “is one of the most significant in the Pauline corpus for our understanding of Pauline ethics, as Spirit-empowered Christ-likeness, lived out in Christian community in loving servanthood.”⁸ Accordingly, the fruit of the Spirit, as the portrayal of the *Spirit-led* outcome of ideal Christlike character,

7. For a helpful clarification of the Spirit-flesh conflict in Galatians 5 and Romans 8 see Steven L. Porter, “The Gradual Nature of Sanctification: *Sarx* as Habituated, Relational Resistance to the Spirit,” *Themelios* 39 (2014): 470–83.

8. Gordon Fee, *Galatians* (Deo Publishing, 2007), 201.

is situated within Galatians 5:1–26, a unique passage and teaching in Pauline literature that emphasizes the ongoing role and work of the Spirit in our lives.

Consider another way of making the same point. Galatians is regarded as one of the earlier letters written by Paul, with Romans and Colossians being written later.⁹ It makes sense that, even though this distinctive Spirit-related content in Galatians 5 was Paul’s first concentrated treatment, this particular teaching was not superseded in later writings: the distinctive teaching of the Spirit-flesh contrast, the relational dynamic of the believer’s Spirit-led living, and this nine-member list of virtues as the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5 remains the core passage on these key topics, upon which further amplification appeared in Romans 8 and Colossians 3.

Modification #2: The Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and Colossians 3

Now let us address the conceptual overlap between Galatians 5 and Colossians 3. Dörnyei discounts the notion that the fruit list is *ad hoc* (ch 4). Rather he affirms that the nine member unit presented in Galatians 5:22–23 is the singular complete list encompassing Christlike character (“the broader Christian persona outlined in Gal 5 is sufficiently comprehensive to accommodate or represent all the outstanding virtues” 13). I think Dörnyei’s point is harder to sustain and another slight modification could be helpful if one wishes to retain the special place of *the fruit of the Spirit* as a distinct theological concept that Dörnyei seeks and which I affirm. Paul’s fruit list seems very purposeful. It begins with love and ends with self-control, a virtue mentioned in no other list. Also, we can infer that other virtues not among the nine could be implicitly included within the fruit of the Spirit. Paul states, “Against *such things* [these kinds of virtues] there is no law” (Gal 5:23). In light of the discussion above that highlights the tight relation between Colossians 3:1–14 and Galatians 5:1–26, why not include Colossians 3 material (written later than Galatians) as *amplifying* the core of the Galatians 5 virtue list? These two passages already share four virtues: kindness, gentleness, forbearance [*makrothymia*], and love, which is up front in the Galatians 5 list but placed last in the Colossians 3 list. Along with that final placement of love in Colossians 3, Paul adds a special comment, “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:14).

Dörnyei acknowledges that these Colossians 3:12–14 virtues “closely parallel the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5 (44). Three different virtues from Colossians 3:12–14 could then be added to the nine member fruit list: compassion, humility, and being forgiving/being gracious [*charizomai*] (if “bearing with” [*anechō*] is taken as similarly connected with *forbearance* [*makrothymia*; KJV, longsuffering]). By focusing on the virtues from these two closely parallel passages, the amplified fruit of the Spirit list of virtues (now 12 in number) could become a better, more sufficiently comprehensive, representation of the ideal character of Jesus Christ, with good biblical grounding.

9. Craig Keener provides an overview of dating and location, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2019), 73–5.

To sum up, both of Dörnyei's distinctive proposals—the composite unity of the nine fruit as the ideal Spirit-led outcome of Christlike character and the abridgment of the nine virtues into three meaningful and practical dimensions—seem well supported, with some modifications. Dörnyei presents a much-needed corrective, to give more attention to the biblical teaching on Christlike virtues and Spirit-led Christian spiritual formation.

Implications from Dörnyei's Proposals Regarding Formational Theory and Practice

In this final section we ask: What next steps could be taken if we gave more emphasis to Paul's concept of the *fruit of the Spirit* in our theory and practice of Christian spiritual formation? First, I situate Dörnyei's proposals in relation to our understanding of one key aspect of Christian spiritual formation within the theoretical framework of virtue ethics. Then, on the more practical side, I suggest some ways we might modify two particular resources that serve to instruct us about sanctification in church and seminary: the catechism and systematic theology.

Theory: Appreciating Both Biblical Commands and Christian Virtuous Character

Including Both Rule-Following Obedience and Virtue-Flowing Obedience. I was intrigued by a comment Dörnyei makes early in his book. He states that, despite the abundance of general reader books on the fruit of the Spirit, extended academic studies on this topic are rare (12). In addition to some challenges explaining why this is the case that Dörnyei mentions, I offer another reason why an academic study of the fruit of the Spirit, including a study of Christian virtue, may be regarded as less important.

Have you noticed that the prevailing Christian ethic underlying our understanding of the Christian life tends to focus mainly on obeying biblical commands and less on our character being formed with Christian virtues, that is, giving a higher priority to our *doing* than our *being*? NT scholar N. T. Wright notes that this is how others view our Christian ethic, “Rule-keeping . . . is the broad framework within which many people in today’s Western world have come to think of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ It may seem easy to understand how a rule-oriented ethic would be considered the main biblical ethical framework since commands and rules appear throughout Scripture, both in the Old Testament (e.g., Ten Commandments, Exod 20:1–17) and in the New Testament (Jesus’s summary of Torah with commands to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, Matt 22:37–40; and his new commandment to love one another as his disciples, John 13:34–35).

A rule-oriented ethic is about identifying and then doing one’s Christian duty. Technically it is referred to as a *deontological* ethic, the Greek term *deon* conveys duty, or what is fitting or necessary. Here we ask: What is the rule or command that

10. Nicholas Thomas Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (HarperCollins, 2010), 44.

applies in this case? Accordingly, as is commonly held, a Christian ethic is represented mainly by the Ten Commandments. If that's the case, then the fruit of the Spirit, in which virtues are the main ethical foundation, would have less value.

Yet consider how virtues have an important place in the OT. When Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments and the whole law, he directs his listeners to Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength." The virtue of the love described in this command is all-encompassing, involving one's whole being. Hebrew scholar Bill Arnold explains, "The whole-hearted love of God thus accomplishes a unity of the human self, combining one's mind, appetites, and life-strength into an integrated attachment and devotion to God."¹¹ One may observe a variety of rule-following actions that could indicate one's love of God (e.g., singing, praying, reciting Scripture), yet the ultimate expectation from this command is for soul-deep love, a love from the breadth and depth of one's character.

The tenth and final commandment is about steering clear of the vices of covetousness and greed (Exod 20:17). Sustained by God's grace we can learn to resist temptation by growing in the virtue of contentment (1 Tim 6:6). The most intriguing OT passage on this matter is how God reveals his glory to Moses by proclaiming his very own core virtues: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6). Thus, along with commands, the Old Testament also emphasizes character and virtues.

Generally speaking, an ethic emphasizing virtue and character focuses on the kind of persons we are becoming, with attention to factors helping or hindering formation of our character into Christlikeness, becoming more loving, more patient, and more kind. In the NT, Paul and other writers gave much space in their writings to virtue lists (Rom 12:9–13; 1 Cor 13:4–7; Gal 5:22–23; Eph 4:2–3, 32; Col 3:12–14; 2 Tim 2:22; Titus 3:1–2; Jas 3:17–18; 1 Pet 3:8–9; and 2 Peter 1:5–7). Clearly Scripture values both commandments and character.

In the NT, Jesus affirms both approaches with an interesting twist in his Sermon on the Mount. He performs a distinctive reading of some of the Ten Commandments, applying a formation-virtue-character interpretative framework. Consider his deeper analysis for two of the "do not" commands in which he highlights underlying vices. For the sixth command, "Do not murder" (Exod 20:13), Jesus teaches, "Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court" (Matt 5:22). Regularly living with the vices of hatred and fits of rage against another is a serious problem of malformation and can become an on-ramp to murder. For the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14), Jesus teaches, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:28). Regularly living with the vices of lust and impurity against another is a serious malformation problem of a disordered desire and can become an on-ramp to adultery. To avoid stumbling, Jesus teaches we must give earnest intentionality and radical sacrifice toward reforming our desires, metaphorically equivalent to gouging out our own eye or cutting off our own hand (Matt 5:29–30).

11. Bill Arnold, *The Book of Deuteronomy, Chapters 1–11, NICOT* (Eerdmans, 2022), 393.

Fulfillment is Jesus' understanding of the law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). NT scholar Jonathan Pennington explains, "Jesus is inaugurating a new era, the final time, a new covenant in which God's Torah revelation (and any traditions built on it) is superseded, not in terms of rejection but in fulfillment in a full mode of interiorization of the law, the law written on the heart, as the prophets foresaw (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek 11:19; 26:26)."¹² We can see in this sermon how Jesus accentuates the importance of deep heart formation, which fits well within a Christian virtue ethic, as Pennington notes,

Specifically, I will argue that that the virtue-ethics approach is . . . the core biblical and human ideal that organizes the others. . . . This approach makes sense of why this inner-person focus is such a consistent theme throughout Scripture. . . . I will seek to show that this virtue-ethics approach—framed and modified by these other biblical categories—is the key to understanding Jesus' teaching in the Sermon.¹³

Scripture clearly highlights the value of Christian virtues and godly character, yet God's commands are also important.¹⁴

Balancing Both Rule-Following Obedience and Virtue-Flowing Obedience. How can we balance and blend these two ethical approaches and value the importance of obeying God's commands (rule-based ethic) along with having our character formed into Christlikeness (virtue-based ethic)? One way to do this is to consider working with a developmental, formational framework, and placing these two approaches as the end points along this pathway. At the starting point is an emphasis on *rule-following obedience* whereas toward the other end of the pathway is the aspiring goal of *virtue-flowing obedience*.

What do I mean? When we are learning a new task or skill, we are beginners who follow the rules with much concentration. After more practice and after much time when our actions become more routine and habitual further along our formational journey, then tasks become easier to do and tend to flow from our character. Ultimately, we can do these tasks almost automatically as second nature. Thus, we can value both the importance of commands and also character in this suggested framework. Yet, to understand this aspect of Christian living taught in the Bible, we need to place a higher priority on character formation as the *pathway goal* toward which we are journeying.¹⁵

12. Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Baker, 2017), 177.
13. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 40.
14. Christian ethicist Joseph Kotva notes the value of virtue ethics for Christians, "In other words, [ethical] theories focused [solely] on deontological or consequentialist [ethical] thinking are ill-suited to express the wealth of Christian concerns and the vital role of such things as virtues, discernment, role models, and personal moral growth." (*The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, Georgetown, 1996), 156.
15. I suggested such a developmental framework in "Valuing Both Rule-Following Obedience and Character-Flowing Obedience in Christian Living." Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting for the Evangelical Theological Society, Denver, Colorado, November 15–17, 2022. Along similar lines, Dörnyei suggested using a developmental framework for the Spirit-flesh conflict, "growing spiritual maturity involves increasingly choosing the Spirit over the flesh" (176).

Dallas Willard affirmed this point as a key teaching theme, “[Jesus] knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the *kind of person* from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow.”¹⁶

What is the experiential difference between these two formational modes of Christian living? When the mode of living is mainly about *rule-following obedience* and we want to be kind to someone, we give *thought* and *initiative* and perform an action, such as giving a compliment or an encouraging word. Sometimes this may take a lot of deliberation, for example, when the recipient is a *10* on the unlikability scale. This mode requires a lot of initiative and intentionality.

Now consider the situation when living within the mode of *virtue-flowing obedience* in which kindness has been deeply formed. Developing a formed character of kindness will involve at least three aspects within us: Being more kind encompasses a formation that is *mind-deep* (with beliefs formed about *kindness truth*), that is *heart deep* (with *kindness desires and values* formed), and that is also *body-deep* (with *kindness practices* routinely performed). When we are regularly walking in step with the Spirit and kindness has been deeply formed in our character, then we can offer compliments somewhat easily and automatically, as second nature actions. Within this mode of living from a formed character, kind actions can flow without much thought or initiative, toward almost anyone. This illustrates the kind of lifestyle Jesus was teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

If we contextualize this idea to a particular parenting situation with young children, at a time where correction is needed, do we as parents also exhibit the virtue of kindness to our children? In light of the limits of self-control and ego depletion noted earlier in the essay, it is probably not a good idea to discipline a child with depleted self-control, evidenced in impatience, frustration, or hatred. Furthermore, our goal is not just about following the rules with a focus on external behaviors, since it sets such a low moral bar compared with what a character ethic involves. The Spirit invites us to embrace higher aspirations that bring about the deeper formation of our inner world and the child’s inner world that can yield a heart flow of good actions in the outer world.

Think of something you routinely do to get the idea of second nature activities. For example, when driving a car, we automatically press the brake with our foot when the traffic light turns red. Other common examples that illustrate what formed character looks like include playing a musical instrument with ease, speaking in a second language with fluency, performing a work or sport task routinely without much thought or initiative—it just flows from our formed character. Note that for these accomplishments, we first had to be on a learning journey to grow such competencies. If we imagine a long learning pathway, we might call the first half of our journey being in an *apprentice mode* on these skills in which we gave much intentionality to following and keeping in mind the rules. For the second half of this formational pathway, having gained more experience and competency, our actions now emerge from our character with greater ease and less intentionality. Our actions of playing music, speaking another language or doing a complex work skill have become more routine as a *second nature mode*.

16. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperCollins, 1998), 142–43.

If we adjust this analogy to our growth into Christlikeness, into the fruit of the Spirit, it is possible that we could be at different points along this pathway with each virtue. For Dörnyei's fruit cluster of *spiritual contentment* (peace and joy), we may be closer to the apprentice mode, still requiring some or much intentionality to arrive at an inner place of calm. For Dörnyei's fruit cluster of *steadfast perseverance* (self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, and patience/ forbearance), we may be closer to this *second nature mode*, exhibiting regular evidence of more resilience and grit.

Yet, as children of God, we are not left alone using our own human energy in mustering up Christian actions. The Holy Spirit uniquely empowers our character formation and Christian living with God's relational and transforming presence. We actually obey God's law as we cooperate and walk by the Holy Spirit, as Paul clarifies, "that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4). Or, as N.T. Wright describes the relation between rules and character,

The way this works out is that it produces, through the work of the Holy Spirit, a transformation of character. This transformation will mean that we do indeed 'keep the rules'—though not out of a sense of externally imposed 'duty,' but out of the character that has been formed within us. . . . The heart of it—the central thing that is supposed to happen 'after you believe'—is thus *the transformation of character*.¹⁷

Within a Christian perspective we value both biblical commands and virtuous character as did Jesus and Paul, who positively linked rule-following with virtue-flowing action from one's inner disposition as the ideal: "forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*" (Matt 18:35) and "doing the will of God *from your heart*" (Eph 6:6). In Galatians 5, Paul emphasized being loving in his virtue reading of the Torah commandments, "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14). At the core of this character-flowing mode of Christian living is God's Word and God's Spirit within us, as the prophets foretold describing God's new covenant ideal, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33; quoted in Heb 8:10, 10:16) and "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezek 36:27).

Practice: Suggestions to Improve Educational Resources on Sanctification

Where might we tend to overemphasize (a) rule-following obedience alongside the Ten Commandments and undervalue (b) virtuous character flowing obedience alongside the fruit of the Spirit in our teaching?

Modifying the Catechism. Let us consider one common church resource and its proportional focus on these two important themes. Within liturgical traditions the key church

17. Wright, *After You Believe*, 26. Wright's book offers a good orientation to character formation and sanctification.

manual for teaching new members is the catechism. Since the late middle ages, the question and answer format has been used regarding three main content sections: a theological creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments to guide Christian living (although the sequential order varied). To represent this literature, I will refer to the one used in my Anglican church for which theologian J. I. Packer (d. 2020) was an editor.¹⁸ Within 92 pages there are a total of 386 questions and short answers. The Apostle’s Creed is covered in 103 questions (27%); the Lord’s Prayer has 70 questions (18%), and the Ten Commandments has 101 questions (26%). Finally, a short section follows on “Justification and Sanctification” with twelve questions (3%) with no mention of the fruit of the Spirit.

These four sections encompass 74% of the content for this catechism (remaining questions address other matters such as baptism and holy communion, etc.). Within the creedal section, there are eight questions about the Holy Spirit, one of which quotes the fruit of the Spirit passage (Gal 5:22–23). During the exposition of the Ten Commandments, NT verses appear throughout. In light of our previous discussion, why not bring some balance into the teaching on the Christian life and divide this 26% section into two equal parts? Modifying this 500-year tradition with biblical warrant, *The Ten Commandments* could be reduced in half to 13% and the other 13% could be focused on *The Fruit of the Spirit*, which could emphasize NT verses with relevant questions on the relational dynamics of Spirit-led Christian formation and living based on Galatians 5:13–26—*walk by the Spirit, led by the Spirit, live by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit*—and a brief exposition of each of the nine fruit, perhaps including Dörnyei’s three fruit clusters of the nine fruit: Loving compassion, Spiritual contentment, and Steadfast perseverance.

Modifying the Sanctification Section in Systematic Theology. Similarly, this kind of extensive teaching on Spirit-led virtue formation related to the fruit of the Spirit could also be included in systematic theology reference works being used to train future pastors in seminary. In 2021 I conducted an informal survey of twenty-six evangelical systematic theologies. Many works identified God’s moral will as recorded in the OT and NT commandments, particularly the Ten Commandments, with most then stating or implying that the main ethic of the Christian life was obedience to God’s commands.¹⁹ In chapters focused on sanctification and Christian living, although most gave a brief nod to the fruit of the Spirit, there was no extended treatment of Christian virtue formation.²⁰ The exception was Thomas Oden (d. 2016), the only

18. *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism* (Crossway, 2020).

19. I focused my review on systematic theologies in English, published from 1990 to 2021 with over 600 pages, of which two were authored by European theologians translated into English.

20. Only one theologian explicitly acknowledged the value of virtue ethics in his systematic theology volume on Christian living: John Frame devoted a short chapter to a few Christian virtues, but his primary framework for Christian living was a *command ethic* with an extended exposition of the Ten Commandments (*The Doctrine of the Christian Life* [P&R, 2008], 326).

theologian who engaged with aspects of Christian spiritual formation in his chapter on “Union with Christ and Sanctification.”²¹ As part of his discussion, Oden relied appreciably on various citations from Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), the only theologian past or present with extensive theological engagement and integration of a virtue ethic within his treatments of Christian living and moral theology.

Oden quotes from or summarizes extensively from a variety of theologians throughout church history. Among these, here is a sample of references from Aquinas related to Christian spiritual formation. The first is a series of quotes with the next two in which Oden summarizes Aquinas’ thought.

‘By the Holy Spirit we are established as friends of God.’ That which is ‘specially proper to the friendship’ is ‘to take delight in a friend’s presence.’ For ‘one reveals his secrets to a friend by reason of their unity in affection, but the same unity requires that what he has, he has in common with the friend.’²²

Throughout scripture both sin and holiness are rooted in the heart as their center and source rather than primarily in external actions.²³

Grace has the effect of making the soul beautiful, as if a sculpture was being shaped by the divine artisan.²⁴

Among the sample of twenty-six systematic theology reference works I surveyed, although most cited Aquinas on various theological points on most of the other doctrines, no citations from Aquinas appeared in chapters on sanctification, except for Oden. This seems to be a sad omission. Yet I am encouraged that during the past twenty years, a growing list of specialized monographs in theological and biblical studies are being published that employ a virtue ethics framework as a guiding heuristic.²⁵

Systematic theologians could engage with Dörnyei’s important study of the fruit of the Spirit, along with theological and biblical studies just noted, to expand treatment of this important aspect of Christian formation in their chapters on sanctification. Note how Wright connects together the concepts of virtues and fruit of the Spirit, “As with the virtues, so with the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, the closer we get to understanding the two categories, the more we realize that they are two ways of saying the same thing.”²⁶

21. Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (HarperOne, 2009), 651–88 (Ch 6).

22. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 655 [from *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.21, written about 1259–65]. Friendship is a key topic within virtue ethics.

23. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 629 [from *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q2, written about 1265–73].

24. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 654 [from *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q145]. For an accessible one-volume version presented in the form of modern prose instead of the scholastic Q&A format, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Christian Classic, 1989).

25. For further reading see my essay, “An Emerging Consensus on Virtue Ethics in Christian Living and Sanctification,” *Faith & Flourishing: Journal of Karam Fellowship*, 1 (2022): 69–79, <https://www.klausissler.com/>.

26. Wright, *After You Believe*, 206.

One additional practical suggestion comes from Graham Tomlin, a British theologian often cited by Dörnyei, regarding how the local church could uniquely address the “crisis of character” by offering training in virtue for those within the church, but also for those in society.

If churches were to become places where ordinary people knew they could go to learn some of the basic skills [virtues] they need to negotiate life well, think what a difference that might make. . . . And what if such people began to learn these qualities in such volume that it began to impact our ways of relating with each other in all kinds of interpersonal relations, changing the social fabric itself?²⁷

For believers, this formation opportunity would be Spirit-led formation and living into the fruit of the Spirit. For others, it would be an invitation to further their own *human* spiritual formation. That there can be both *human* or *natural* spiritual formation and *Christian* or *supernatural* spiritual formation fits within a framework developed by Aquinas. Aquinas taught that believers have two main goals toward happiness or flourishing in this life, one natural and one supernatural. All humans—whether Christian or not—can aspire to experience an “imperfect” *natural* happiness or flourishing that can be obtained to some degree using their native human powers in acquiring relevant virtues. Yet for Christians, there is also a *supernatural* goal toward ultimate flourishing, of union and friendship with God, and potentially more complete Christian spiritual formation that is only possible with God’s Spirit-led grace.²⁸

Conclusion

Let us, then, take Dörnyei’s proposal more seriously and give greater emphasis to the fruit of the Spirit in our thinking and in our practice. May this distinctive Pauline phrase, *the fruit of the Spirit*, become for believers that memorable catchphrase for all that is Spirit-led Christlikeness, the goal of our Christian spiritual formation journey. I close with a summary statement by Dörnyei,

The fruit of the Spirit is more than merely a useful vehicle for Christian character building; it is also a cornerstone of the general biblical portrayal of moral/spiritual formation and a central component of the human transformation process whereby believers are being ‘conformed to the image of his Son’ (Rom 8:29; see also 2 Cor 3:18).²⁹

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Gal 5:22-23).³⁰

27. Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness: Christian Character in a Consumer Culture* (Continuum), 71.
28. For an evangelical orientation to Aquinas’s teaching on virtues, see Rebecca K. DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christian Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics* (University of Notre Dame, 2009), chapter 7, 129–51.
29. Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit*, 245.
30. I appreciated helpful feedback from various colleagues on an earlier draft and on-going conversations with Jim Wilhoit when we read the book together throughout 2023.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.