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# Paul and Spiritual Formation

James W. Thompson

After centuries in which the term “spiritual formation” was used almost exclusively for the formation of priests, it has become one of the most popular topics in contemporary religious literature, seminary curricula, and programs of the church. It is no longer a Roman Catholic topic, but is the common concern of Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals, and mainline Protestants. While these traditions have different understandings of spiritual formation, they are united in their focus on the concept. They are also united in their focus on individual spiritual disciplines, including prayer, individual Bible study, fasting, and contemplation.

Although Paul never used the term “spiritual formation,” he is the ultimate source of this phrase. “Spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) is the term that Paul applies to believers (Gal 6:2; cf. 1 Cor 2:13–15), who have received the Spirit. Formation is a uniquely Pauline word. The apostle looks forward to the last day when Christ will “transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed (*symmorphon*) to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21). God’s ultimate purpose is that believers be “conformed (*symmorphous*) to the image of the Son” (Rom 8:29) at the end. This ultimate formation requires a continuing process among believers, who begin their Christian experience in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), but with temptations from their previous existence that they must put away.

In response to the problems in Galatia, Paul describes himself as the expectant mother in the midst of birth pangs “until Christ is formed”

(*morphōthē*) in the readers (Gal 4:19). He speaks twice of the “metamorphosis” among believers, both assuring them that “we are being transformed” (*metamorphoumetha*, 2 Cor 3:18) and urging them not to “be conformed to this world,” but to be “transformed (*metamorphousthe*, Rom 12:2) by the renewing of their minds. Thus as Paul’s frequent use of *morph-* suggests, spiritual formation was a major goal of his ministry.

Despite the popularity of spiritual formation in current literature, the term remains elusive, for the phrase is now used in a variety of ways. In some instances, it is used synonymously with “spirituality,” a term that is understood in many different ways. In most instances it is used for the practice of individual spiritual disciplines. Since Paul is the ultimate source of the language of spiritual formation, my purpose in this article is to examine his understanding of this concept. I am pleased to write in honor of Allan McNicol, who has devoted his teaching ministry to the formation of others.

### **Spiritual Formation as the Work of the Spirit**

For Paul, formation was undoubtedly “spiritual” insofar as it was the work of the Spirit. Believers are empowered by God’s Spirit (*pneuma*, cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 5:22) and exist because they were “written by the Spirit of the living God” (2 Cor 3:3). The Spirit that raised Christ from the dead now dwells among believers (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 3:16), assisting them in prayer (Rom 8:16) and empowering each person for service (1 Cor 12:12–28). Paul scarcely distinguishes the Spirit’s activity from God’s work, for he assures the Philippians that “it is God who works in you both to will and to do his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Thus while “spiritual” is often used today in an undefined way, Paul used the term for the divine activity among believers.

The fact that Paul only uses forms of *morph-* in the passive voice (Rom 8:29; 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19) indicates that spiritual formation is God’s work. Thus he encourages his readers to place themselves at the disposal of God’s power (cf. Rom 8:1–11) and to “walk by the Spirit” (5:16), knowing that they choose between competing powers (cf. 6:12–23). Spiritual for-

mation occurs among believers when they place themselves at the disposal of the Spirit.

### **Spiritual Formation as a Corporate Journey**

A common theme in current literature is the importance of time with others as a dimension of spiritual formation. Paul would agree on the importance of corporate worship and interaction with a community, but he does not envision spiritual formation as a private experience augmented by the presence of others, but as a fundamentally corporate venture. He not only converts individuals and initiates them on the path of spiritual formation, but he plants churches and anticipates their spiritual growth. Because English does not distinguish the singular from the plural “you,” readers commonly privatize Paul’s letters, which use the singular “you” only rarely. He writes to house churches, assuming that someone will read the letters to the gathered assembly (1 Thess 5:27). Thus his “you” is plural. One may translate his words to the Galatians, “My little children with whom I am in the pangs of childbirth, until Christ is formed *among you*” (Gal 4:19). That is, he envisions the whole congregation as the fetus that is being formed. Similarly, an appropriate translation of his assurance to the Philippians is “It is God who is at work *among you*” (Phil 2:13). The entire community is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 3:16). He expresses the relationship between the community and the individual in 1 Corinthians, declaring that “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (12:27). Individuals, therefore, find their identity within the body of Christ. The community that gathers for worship regularly is not only the aggregate of individuals who need the support of others, for it has a corporate identity. Thus spiritual formation for Paul is the reshaping of communities.

*Synonyms for Spiritual Formation.* The corporate nature of spiritual formation is evident in instances where Paul does not use the term, but declares that the communities are involved in a corporate narrative that has a past, present, and future. Indeed, he writes letters in the middle of the narrative, assuring readers that God will complete what he began. Paul describes the

beginning as the occasion when he “planted” (1 Cor 3:6), laid a foundation (1 Cor 3:10), became the father (1 Cor 4:15) of his communities, and betrothed them to Christ, the bridegroom (2 Cor 11:3), when they first received his gospel (cf. 2 Cor 3:1–3; Gal 3:1–5; 1 Thess 1:1–10). At this point they were “washed, justified, and sanctified” (1 Cor 6:11). All of these images suggest that the establishment of the church was only the beginning of their formation. He envisions the maturation of infants (1 Cor 3:1–3), the growth of what he planted (1 Cor 3:6), the future construction of the foundation (1 Cor 3:10–17), and the ultimate wedding of the people whom he has betrothed to Christ (2 Cor 11:3).

These images indicate the various synonyms for spiritual formation. In the first place, spiritual formation involves growth from infancy to adulthood. Paul is frustrated with the Corinthians in that they have not proceeded from the childish behavior of self-seeking and competition (1 Cor 3:1–3), and he offers himself as an example of one who has “put away childish things” (1 Cor 13:11–13). In the second place, the church is a vineyard (1 Cor 3:10) in need of watering before God gives the growth. He says nothing about the growth in numbers, but expects his converts to be watered and cultivated and to grow up. In the third place, the church is a betrothed virgin anticipating the wedding. In the fourth place, it is a building under construction.

Paul develops the metaphor of the building at some length, indicating that others build on to the foundation with a variety of materials (1 Cor 3:10–17). At the end, the quality of the building materials will be tested. The entire community is engaged in the process of construction, as Paul suggests in his ethical instructions. He encourages the readers to make their decisions, not for self-seeking reasons, but for the sake of edification (1 Cor 8:1; Rom 14:19; 15:2). The singular criterion for the appropriateness of behavior in the assembly is edification (1 Cor 14:1–5, 26). Indeed, Paul defines his ministry in terms of its effectiveness for their edification (2 Cor 10:8; 12:19). Thus just as the church is being formed, it is also being constructed and will be

constructed until the end. Edification is not a private matter, but the task of building the entire community.

Paul also develops the language of sanctification to describe the formation of the readers, who have not only *been* sanctified (1 Cor 1:22; 6:11), but also are in the process of *being* sanctified in anticipation of the time when they will be wholly sanctified in Christ (1 Thess 5:23). The imagery recalls the experience of Israel and God’s demand that Israel be “holy as God is holy” (Lev 19:2). The passive voice (cf. 1 Cor 1:22; 6:11) indicates that God is active in sanctifying the community in a process that will not be complete until the end.

*Paul’s Prayers and Spiritual Formation.* Paul writes in the middle of the narrative to ensure that his communities will reach the ultimate transformation at the end. His understanding of spiritual formation becomes most evident in his prayers for the churches. In the opening prayer in Philippians (1:1–11), for example, he refers to the complete narrative of the community’s existence, first giving thanks for their fellowship “from the first day until now” (1:5), referring to the journey that they have already made together. The consistent references to the plural “you” (1:5, 6, 9–11) and the repeated phrase “all of you” (1:4, 7 [twice]) indicates their corporate identity. He elaborates on the corporate journey, “Being persuaded of this, that the one who began a good work will bring it to completion at the day of Christ” (1:6). The prayer describes both the past and the future of the corporate formation of the community. Paul uses the language “begin . . . bring to completion” (*enarchomai . . . epiteleō*) elsewhere with humans as the subject, demonstrating that the completion of a task among humans is no certainty (2 Cor 8:10,11; Gal 3:2; cf. 1 Sam 3:12). Here we note the parallel between 1:5 and 1:6:

Phil 1:5	first day	until	now
Phil 1:6	first day	until	day of Christ

At the beginning of the letter, Paul establishes the narrative framework once-now-then.<sup>1</sup> The church participates in God's cosmic narrative that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. At the beginning is the work of God: the one who "began a good work" at the foundation of the church (cf. "work" in 1:22; 2:30). The focus on God as the one who called the church into being is consistent with Paul's affirmations elsewhere that the church came into being by the power of God. The message came "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess 1:5). Paul first came to the Corinthians "with a demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that [their] faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4).<sup>2</sup>

As the prayer indicates, the congregation is a work in progress, for it is not yet conformed to the image of the Son (cf. Phil 3:21). Consequently, Paul assures the readers that God will complete the work and then prays for their ultimate spiritual formation. He prays that "[their] love might abound more and more in full knowledge and full insight" and that they "might approve of the better things" and be "sincere and blameless at the day of Christ" (1:9–11). In the thanksgiving at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, he expresses the confidence that the readers will be "blameless" at the day of Christ (1 Cor 1:8). Similarly, he prays that God would make the Thessalonians "increase and abound in love for one another and for all" so that they may be "blameless before God our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 3:12,13).

These prayers offer an indication of Paul's understanding of spiritual formation. The ultimate transformation involves being "blameless" at the coming of Christ. The petitions indicate that the readers remain a work in progress. Paul's prayers also indicate that spiritual formation consists of ethical maturation in which the converts learn to love each other. Having established communities bound together by neither ethnicity nor social class,

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<sup>1</sup> See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 86.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 39.



Paul instructs communities to assume the role of the family, recognizing that many converts have alienated themselves from their own families. Spiritual formation involves not only a life with others, but a life with those whom God has chosen.

*Paul's Pastoral Goal and Spiritual Formation.* Paul's work was not complete with the planting of churches. On numerous occasions he describes the goal that determines his work. Indeed, he has "anxiety for the churches" (2 Cor 11:28), fearing that they will not reach the goal. Thus a constant thread in Paul's letters is the reminder of his goal for the churches and his comment that, without their formation, he will have failed at the end. One may observe the frequency of Paul's indication that his churches will be his "boast" at the end.

Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. *In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God* (Rom 15:15–17).

Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God—and all the more toward you. For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end—as you have already understood us in part—that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast (2 Cor 1:12–14).

Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain (Gal 2:2; cf. 4:11).

*It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.* But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—

and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me (Phil 2:15,16).

*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy! (1 Thess 2:19,20)*

In every instance in which Paul declares his pastoral ambition, he indicates that the success or failure of his work will be determined only at the end, when he will either “boast” of his work or realize that his work has been in vain.<sup>3</sup> The eschatological horizon is a central feature of Paul’s pastoral ambition. Using language taken from Israel’s story, he refers consistently to the “day” (1 Cor 3:13; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 2:16) that will reveal the quality of his work. He will “boast” of work that has been accomplished (Rom 15:17; 2 Cor 1:4; Phil 2:16; 1 Thess 2:19). A church that is “blameless” (Phil 2:15,16) at the coming of Christ is the goal of his work.<sup>4</sup>

### **Spiritual Formation as Corporate Moral Transformation**

Paul takes the idea of a “blameless” people from the Old Testament and Jewish literature, which described those who were faithful in keeping the law and maintained practices that distinguished themselves from others (Ps 15:1,2; cf. Wis 10:5). He envisions a cohesive moral community that shines “like lights in the world” (Phil 2:15) because of its distinct practices. Consequently, every Pauline letter contains moral advice describing the shared morality of the members of the community.

Paul does not give an exhaustive code of conduct, but consistently focuses on the primary aspects of spiritual formation. Indeed, his exhortation to be “transformed by the renewing of [the] mind” (Rom 12:2) and his description of himself as the expectant mother awaiting the time when “Christ is formed” (Gal 4:19) serve as headings for moral advice describing the nature

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<sup>3</sup> See C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2.301. Paul normally uses the term *kauchēma* (“boast”) in a positive sense for what he is proud of, i.e., work that has been accomplished.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, 20–21.

of formation. We may observe both the negative and the positive sides of spiritual formation in Paul's moral advice.

*The Negative Side.* Paul focuses on the major characteristics of the practices that transformed people put away as he encourages readers to abandon the practices of the surrounding world and of their former existence. After he has spoken of his desire that Christ be "formed" among the Galatians (4:19), he warns the readers against yielding to the desire of the flesh (Gal 5:16; cf. 5:13). The desire of the flesh has two dimensions that are the focal points of all of Paul's moral exhortations. In the first place, he heads the list of "works of the flesh" (Gal 5:19) with sexual immorality (*porneia*), uncleanness (*akatharsia*), and debauchery (*aselgeia*). The triad *porneia*, *akatharsia*, and *aselgeia* appear in two instances (2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19), while two of the terms appear together elsewhere (*porneia* and *akatharsia* in 1 Thess 4:3, 8; Col 3:5; Eph 5:3, 5; *aselgeia* with the related word *koitai* in Rom 13:13). The terms also appear separately on numerous occasions. *Porneia* is the most frequently listed among the vices mentioned by Paul<sup>5</sup> and commonly appears first (cf. 1 Cor 5:10,11; 6:9; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3, 5; Col 3:5). That *akatharsia* (literally "uncleanness" or "impurity") has a sexual dimension is evident in the paraenesis (Rom 1:24; 6:19; Eph 4:19; 1 Thess 4:3, 8). Similarly, *aselgeia* (Rom 13:13; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 4:19), which was used in classical sources to describe wanton or outrageous behavior,<sup>6</sup> has a specific sexual connotation in Paul.

The transformed existence in Romans 12:1–2 also includes the control of sexual passions, for the larger section on moral instruction (12:1–15:13 is the alternative to the sexual debauchery described in 1:18–32 and the enslave-

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<sup>5</sup> According to Raymond Collins, "of the 110 vices in the New Testament catalogues, *porneia* is the only one mentioned in a majority of texts. It is cited in twelve of the twenty-two lists: Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21; 1 Cor 5:10,11; 6:9; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3, 5; Col 3:5; 1 Tim 1:10; Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15." *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2000), 80. Cf. also Heb 12:16; 13:4.

<sup>6</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, eds. *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 255.

ment to the passions in 6:12–20). Paul envisions a community that no longer lives “in the passion of lust, like the Gentiles” (1 Thess 4:5). Spiritual formation involves submitting themselves to the power of the Spirit, which enables converts to live by a new standard.

Enslavement to the flesh is not limited to sexual vices, as the list of works of the flesh indicates (Gal 5:19–21). Strife (*eris*, cf. Rom 1:29; 13:13; 2 Cor 12:20; Phil 1:15), jealousy (*zēlos*, cf. Rom 13:13; 2 Cor 12:20), drunkenness (*methē*, cf. Rom 13:13), anger (*thumos*, cf. 2 Cor 12:20), envy (*phthonos*, Rom 1:29) and selfish ambition (*eritheia*, cf. 2 Cor 12:20; Phil 1:17; 2:3), in addition to other anti-communal vices, appear not only in Galatians, but throughout Paul’s letters. Indeed, Paul’s indictment of the Corinthians’ immaturity includes their strife (*eris*, 1 Cor 1:11; 3:3) and jealousy (*zēlos*, 1 Cor 3:3). The vices listed by Paul involve the self-indulgence, selfish ambition, and self-centeredness that destroy corporate formation.

*The Positive Side.* These vices provide the sharp contrast to the positive dimensions of spiritual formation. In Galatians, Christ is “formed” (4:19) among the believers as they exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (5:22), the alternative to the “works of the flesh” (5:19). At the head of the list is love (*agapē*), which develops the earlier exhortation to “be slaves to one another through love” (5:14). *Agapē* provides the orientation for understanding the other attributes, which elaborate on the meaning of love toward others within the community.

As Paul’s prayers for the formation indicate (see above), the central aspect of spiritual formation is love (cf. Phil 1:9–11; 1 Thess 3:11–13). Indeed, the most frequent moral attribute in his descriptions of spiritual formation is love. The prayers also indicate that love is not a static concept, for Paul can both express gratitude for a community’s “labor of love” (1 Thess 1:3) and pray that they “increase and abound in love” (1 Thess 3:2). His prayer for the Philippians suggests that believers learn to love “with full knowledge and discernment” (Phil 1:9). The absence of a reference to the objects of love

suggests that formation involves developing a sensitivity and insight on the nature of love (*aisthēsis*).

Paul never speaks in generic terms of love for humankind (*philanthrōpia*), but maintains the focus on love within the new family. The neighbor in the Levitical command “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) is the sibling in the house church (cf. Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14). Believers express love when they take on the roles of family members to protect and provide the social safety net that ancient families provided. This familial role becomes evident in the extended ethical exhortation in Rom 12:1–15:13. After Paul indicates that spiritual formation (Rom 12:2) involves participation in the body (12:3–8), he describes the believers’ relationship to insiders (12:9–16; 13:8–13; 14:1–15:13) and outsiders (12:17–13:7). Love involves providing affection (12:9), social welfare (12:13), a sharing of joy and sorrow (12:15), and a unity of purpose (12:16). Believers also assume the role of family members in which the strong ensure that the weak do not fall (14:1–15:13). This concern is an expression of love (14:15).

At the heart of Paul’s understanding of love is that believers abandon self-seeking and place the needs of others above their own. “No one lives to himself and no one dies to himself” (Rom 14:7; 2 Cor 5:15). Believers do not please themselves, but bear the burdens of others (Rom 15:1,2; Gal 6:1,2). As in Galatians, Paul contrasts the self-seeking that destroys community life (Phil 2:3) with the humility involved in “counting others better than [ourselves],” as we look to the needs of others (Phil 2:4).

Spiritual formation, therefore, is a continuing process in which we learn to abandon self-absorption and to seek the good of others. Paul assumes that the pursuit of self-interest is the natural human condition and that those who are involved in jealousy and strife (cf. 1 Cor 3:1–3) have not made progress toward spiritual maturation. He envisions communities where the construction of the whole community takes precedence over the desires of individual members (1 Cor 14:1–5). He also envisions communities in which the good

of the whole community is more important than the individual rights of the members (1 Cor 8:1–11:1).

### **Models of Spiritual Formation**

When Paul urges the Philippians to count others better than themselves (2:4), he adds, “Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (2:5) before narrating the story of the incarnation and exaltation of Jesus (Phil 2:6–11) in what scholars call the “Philippian hymn.” This story is the ultimate account of formation, for it begins with the one who was “in the form (*morphē*) of God” at the beginning before emptying himself, “taking on the form (*morphē*) of a slave” (2:6,7) and humbling himself at the cross (2:8). As a result, God “highly exalted” him (2:9–11).

Paul appeals to his converts to identify with the story, indicating that their ultimate formation into his image follows (cf. Phil 3:20) the path of self-denial. Elsewhere he indicates that believers share the cross, not only at baptism (Rom 6:4), but also in their whole existence. Paul declares to the Corinthians, “One died for all. Therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14). When he encourages the Romans not to please themselves, he adds, “For Christ did not please himself” (Rom 15:3).

Paul frequently presents himself as the model of spiritual formation. He not only encourages the Philippians to follow the model of Christ, but also presents himself as an example. Like Jesus Christ, Paul gave up privileges (Phil 3:2–6) and shared in the sufferings of Christ, “being conformed (*summorphizomenos*) to his death.” Like the readers, he has not reached the goal (3:12), but he continues the path of spiritual formation, calling on the converts to imitate his example (Phil 3:17). Similarly, when the Corinthians engage in self-serving behavior (1 Cor 8:1–13), Paul presents himself as the model of the sacrifice of his rights (1 Cor 9), concluding, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

### **Conclusion**

As the one who gave us the terminology of spiritual formation, Paul also provides clarity on the meaning of the concept. He envisions the transformation of communities from self-serving behavior to loving conduct that is shaped by the cross. The self-denying love demonstrated by Jesus at the cross is the foundation of the believers' moral life and communal existence. Believers who will ultimately be "conformed to the image" of the victorious Son (Rom 8:29) are now being conformed to the one who emptied himself. Only by radical love can communities grow together into his image.

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