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SPIRITUAL  
FORMATION  
*for the*  
GLOBAL CHURCH

A MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL,  
MULTI-ETHNIC APPROACH

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## CHAPTER ONE

# NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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CHURCHES AND STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE—whether lay, clergy, or academics—in the West have often manifested certain perspectives with respect to the relationship between Scripture and spirituality. These include the following:<sup>1</sup>

### Group 1

1. understanding both Bible reading and spirituality in individualistic and self-centered ways;
2. understanding spirituality in “otherworldly” ways;
3. creating a disjunction between spirituality, on the one hand, and mission and ethics, on the other;

### Group 2

1. regarding academic biblical studies as superior to, and in conflict with, spirituality;
2. regarding serious study of the theology (or theologies) in the New Testament to be an appropriate academic discipline (sometimes called “New Testament theology”) but regarding study of that theology with a faith commitment, for theological and spiritual purposes (sometimes

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<sup>1</sup>I present these in two groups for reasons that will become apparent below.

called “theological interpretation” and “spiritual reading”), to be inherently nonacademic and even nonintellectual;

3. regarding spirituality as superior to, and in conflict with, academic biblical studies, including the study of New Testament theology—either because academics is thought to be dangerous to one’s spiritual health or because Christianity is said to be about knowing a Person, not doctrine.

Space does not permit an elaboration of these various perspectives except to note that what they have in common is bifurcation: inappropriately separating that which (we might say) God has joined together. Each of them, I contend, misunderstands both Scripture and spirituality/spiritual formation. In my view, these sorts of bifurcated perspectives are misguided and, indeed, dangerous, both intellectually and spiritually.

The fundamental claim of this chapter is that New Testament theology is *formational* theology. The chapter will be devoted to looking at selected passages from the New Testament that demonstrate two things. First, we will briefly consider how the New Testament takes a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” approach to certain key topics hinted at in the list above. Second, and at greater length, we will see how the New Testament itself joins theology and spiritual formation. These two topics are, I believe, significant for spiritual formation both in churches of the West and in the global church.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it may be necessary for the global church both to avoid the bifurcations noted above (often inherited from the West) and to assist churches in the West in recovering from these misunderstandings.

### UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT’S “BOTH-AND” DYNAMIC

We can divide the six sorts of bifurcated approaches to reading Scripture noted above into two major categories: the vertical versus the horizontal (group 1: bifurcations 1–3),<sup>3</sup> and the spiritual versus the intellectual (group 2: bifurcations 4–6). We may respond to each of these two major categories with two simple phrases: “God and neighbor” and “heart and mind.”

<sup>2</sup>My own denominational affiliation is United Methodist, a global church with its roots in England and the United States.

<sup>3</sup>I am using spatial language to distinguish between our relationship with God (“vertical”) and our relationships with others (“horizontal”).

**God and neighbor.** We begin with the vertical versus horizontal bifurcations (1–3). The terms *spirituality* and *spiritual formation* are sometimes misunderstood to refer to a private experience of God that has no relationship to life in the real world and no necessary relationship to how we engage with others. What we find throughout the New Testament, however, is that our relationship with God is inseparable from our relationship with our neighbor. We find this inseparable connection expressed in various ways. A few samples will have to suffice.

- ◆ Like many ancient Jews, Jesus summarized the requirements of the Law and the Prophets as love of God and love of neighbor: “The first [commandment of all] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29-31; cf. Mt 22:37-40; Lk 10:27-28).<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ “But when you thus sin against members of your family [lit. “your brothers”], and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.” (1 Cor 8:12)
- ◆ “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor 11:20-22)
- ◆ “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.” (Eph 2:14, 18)
- ◆ “Religion [or “devotion”; CEB] that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (Jas 1:27)

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<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotations are taken from the NRSV.

- ◆ “But no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” (Jas 3:8-10)
- ◆ “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 Jn 3:16-17)
- ◆ “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. . . . Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 Jn 4:12, 20)

All of these texts demonstrate that theology has consequences for how we treat our neighbor; that spirituality is about a relationship with both God and neighbor—simultaneously and inextricably. New Testament spirituality is personal, but it is not private.

What is fascinating about this brief selection of texts is how it shows the God-neighbor link in connection with various spiritual topics: love of God, relationship with Christ, experience of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, peace with God, devotion to God, blessing of God, experiencing love from God, and having God within. Many people would refer to these topics as in some sense “mystical.” Yet they are all also concerned about other people. There is no New Testament mysticism, or spirituality, without a connection to others; no vertical without the horizontal.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the goal of loving God and neighbor together, inseparably, leads us next to consider another inseparability in spiritual formation according to the New Testament: loving God with our minds as well as our hearts.

***Heart and mind (and more).*** We turn next to bifurcations 4–6. It is sometimes thought that Christians do not need theology or rigorous, academic

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<sup>5</sup>See further my essay “The This-Worldliness of the New Testament’s Other-Worldly Spirituality,” in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln, J. Gordon McConville, and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 151-70.

study of the Bible, since all that matters for spiritual growth in Bible reading is having a prayerful attitude, an openness to the Spirit. However, while prayerfulness and openness are always *necessary* for spiritual growth through Scripture study, they are not always *sufficient*.

A creative and helpful way to think about this matter was offered by N. T. Wright at the Synod of Roman Catholic bishops on the Word of God, which occurred in Rome in October 2008. Wright was, at the time, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and an invited special guest at the Synod. Titled “The Fourfold *Amor Dei* [Love of God] and the Word of God,” Wright’s brief message drew on the words of Jesus (quoting the Shema; Deut 6:5) that we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:29-30).<sup>6</sup> Wright suggested that we think of engaging Scripture as employing—and balancing—these four aspects of our humanity.

We read with the *heart*, meaning meditatively and prayerfully, as in the medieval practice of *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”) that has enjoyed a transdenominational comeback in recent years.<sup>7</sup> We read also with the *soul*, meaning in communion with the life and teaching of the church. We read as well with the *mind*, meaning through rigorous historical and intellectual work. And finally, said Wright, we read with our *strength*, meaning that we put our study into action through the church’s mission in service to the kingdom of God.

Wright’s words remind us that we cannot love God with only part of our being, which means that if we are reading Scripture to better know and love God, it will require the use of our minds. And that further means doing the hard work of rigorous study of the Scriptures. This does not imply that every Christian needs to be a trained New Testament scholar. But it does imply that carefully engaging New Testament theology to the best of our ability is an obligation—and a privilege!—given to all Christians. Loving God with our minds is one aspect of spiritual formation, and one way in which we are able to grow to maturity in Christ. Paul speaks of the need to

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<sup>6</sup>The brief text of what was actually presented is available at <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/04/25/the-fourfold-amor-dei-and-the-word-of-god/>. Wright sent me a copy of the full text, which elaborated on the oral presentation.

<sup>7</sup>Wright draws special attention to “reading in the Eucharist” (Lord’s Supper).



“bring every thought into captivity and obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5 NJB). This is doing theology, and when we read the New Testament with this approach (meaning with heart, soul, mind, and strength), we are both studying and doing New Testament theology. New Testament theology is inherently formational.

This last sentence contains a claim that requires a bit more unpacking.

One way of understanding the term *theology* is this: talk about God and all things in relation to God. Such a definition allows the possibility of a purely analytical approach to “doing theology,” including studying the theology we find in the New Testament. But the phrase “all things in relation to God” clearly invites us to do more than hold the contents of the New Testament at arms’ length. Another, ancient way of understanding theology is as “faith seeking understanding,” a phrase that comes from the great theologian Anselm (1033–1109). I would suggest, however, that Anselm’s definition needs expanding in light of Scripture’s own testimony about what it means to seek to understand God and all things in relation to God: “faith seeking understanding seeking discipleship.” That is, theology involves mind and heart and soul and body.

Theologians and other scholars often distinguish the study of New Testament theology from “theological interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> The former is allegedly an academic pursuit that does not require a faith commitment, even if it permits one. The latter, on the other hand, exists only when such a commitment is present. My proposed reworking of Anselm’s definition of theology challenges this distinction. The New Testament is itself theology, a collection of early Christian theological writings whose focus is Christology and discipleship—and these two dimensions are inseparable. That is, the New Testament writings are meant to proclaim Christ and to form Christians, or what Martin Luther described as “Christ to one another” and C. S. Lewis called “little Christs.”<sup>9</sup> The New Testament is *theology seeking*

<sup>8</sup>For a recent discussion, see Robert Morgan, “Two Types of Critical Theological Interpretation,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (2018): 204–22.

<sup>9</sup>Harold J. Grimm, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 367–68 (part of Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian”); C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 199, 226; cf. 178, 193, 194. Lewis sees the mission of God and of the church as making little Christs who share in the character of Christ the Son of God; this is a major theme of the book’s fourth part, “Beyond Personality: Or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity.”



*faith*, so to speak; theology seeking spiritual formation in its hearers and readers. And because Christian spirituality must keep the vertical and the horizontal together, this spiritual formation will include formation in Christian ethics and mission.

Since spiritual formation is their purpose, the New Testament writings are best engaged—one might even say only rightly engaged—for that purpose. The “model reader” of the New Testament is an individual or community who pursues this purpose.<sup>10</sup> It will help us to understand the relationship between the New Testament and the goal of spiritual formation by looking at how certain New Testament texts themselves both contain theological claims and have formational purposes.

#### **FORMATIONAL THEOLOGY: THE NEW TESTAMENT’S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Since the New Testament is a collection of writings, there is of course no single approach to theology and spiritual formation in the New Testament. There is, nevertheless, a coherence within the various approaches—a pattern, so to speak. This pattern is as follows: theological claims lead to formational claims in such a way that it becomes clear that the formational claims are inherent in the theological claims. This is what I mean by describing the New Testament writings as “formational theology.”

***Formational theology in the Gospels and 1 John.*** A simple illustration of this formational theology occurs in the well-known words of Jesus about his heavenly Father:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be *children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Mt 5:43-48, emphases added)

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<sup>10</sup>“Model reader” is a term from Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), esp. 7-11.

In this text from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes a properly theological claim about God’s providential, loving care for the enemies of God, the evil and unrighteous.<sup>11</sup> This is what Jesus, according to Matthew, means in calling his—and the disciples’—heavenly Father “perfect.” Jesus’ theological claim is not made simply to say something about God, though it clearly does that. But its primary purpose in Matthew’s sermon is to assist in the formation of Godlike disciples of Jesus who also love their enemies, not just their friends. As such, they will be disciples of Jesus (because they receive and obey his teaching about God and, it is implied, follow Jesus in loving enemies) and children of their heavenly Father—they will possess the divine DNA, so to speak. In other words, theological teaching about God leads to imitation of God in order to be like God and be Jesus’ disciples. That is, theology is inherently formational.

Luke’s Gospel makes a very similar point, in slightly different language, in his Sermon on the Plain:

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, *pray for* those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, *offer* the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat *do not withhold* even your shirt. *Give* to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, *do not ask* for them again. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But *love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.* Your reward will be great, and you will be *children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* (Lk 6:27-36, emphases added)

Luke’s account of Jesus’ teaching differs from Matthew’s in two main ways. First, it has the divine quality to be imitated as *mercy* rather than *perfection*. On the surface, Luke’s requirement of mercy seems narrower

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<sup>11</sup>By “properly theological” I mean a claim about God the Father, Creator, and sustainer.

than Matthew's demand for perfection—until we note the other difference. Second, then, Luke provides more concrete examples of imitating the Father's merciful character. Such imitation includes blessing abusers; responding without retaliation to physical mistreatment; sacrificing material possessions, either permanently or as a loan; and performing unspecified, imaginative acts of doing good (esp. vv. 31, 35). In other words, the disciples' merciful lifestyle is radical, concrete, and open-ended; there is always some new way to be kind, which means that God's kindness is similarly radical, concrete, and open-ended.

This theological claim about God's character, which is communicated with the adjectives "merciful" (Luke) or "perfect" (Matthew), is fundamentally another way of making the theological claim, with a noun, that we find in 1 John: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16). As with the claims in Matthew and Luke, this basic theological affirmation about the divine character (as noted briefly earlier) carries with it a moral imperative and thus a formational agenda:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love*. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God *lives* in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we *abide* in him and he in us, because he has given us of his *Spirit*. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God *abides* in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they *abide* in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. *God is love*, and those who *abide* in love *abide* in God, and God *abides* in them. (1 Jn 4:7-16, emphases added)

A major theological and spiritual image in this passage, as in the texts from Matthew and Luke, is that of being children of God. We have already introduced the contemporary image of DNA above. That seems to be the point here too: those who share in the divine DNA by being born again/ anew/from above (see Jn 3) will manifest the divine trait of love. A related

point, stated in the negative, is made in 1 John 3:9, where the NRSV has, “Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed (Gk. *sperma*) abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.” The CEB, interestingly, renders this verse with the image of DNA: “Those born from God don’t practice sin because God’s DNA (Gk. *sperma*) remains in them. They can’t sin because they are born from God.”

The text of 1 John 4:7-16 also makes an important link between theology and spiritual formation that appears frequently elsewhere in the New Testament, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly: the formational expectation associated with a theological affirmation is not just a matter of coming to a logical conclusion and then implementing it. This would mean that Christian formation is simply a matter of imitation, or of obedience to a set of external norms, even if those norms are derived from theological truths. Rather, spiritual formation into Godlikeness, or Christlikeness, is itself the work of God, specifically the work of the Spirit. Spiritual formation is Spirit-ed formation, a divine work from within, as the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah especially knew and promised (Ezek 18:31; 36:26-27; 37:1-14; 39:29; Jer 31:31-34). Spiritual formation is a matter of the person or community abiding in God, and vice versa; we see the word *abide* used in our 1 John passage six times (vv. 13-16), plus the synonym *live* (v. 12).

We hear Jesus making a similar connection between theology (specifically, Christology) and spiritual formation in John’s Gospel, when he tells the disciples that he is the vine, and they are the branches (Jn 15). In that passage, the verb *abide* occurs eleven times in ten verses (Jn 15:1-10). As in 1 John 4:16, the abiding is mutual: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you [bear fruit] unless you abide in me” (Jn 15:4). The meaning of bearing fruit has been much discussed, but it is probably best to understand it rather broadly, openly, as signifying both Christlike virtues (like Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” in Gal 5) and Christlike missional practices. The latter is implied in the reference to “doing” in John 15:5: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” It is made more explicit in the commissioning of the disciples near the end of the “I

am the vine” discourse: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name” (Jn 15:16). The formational fruit of mutual abiding is both going out (v. 16) and staying put (v. 17: “love one another”).<sup>12</sup>

Mutual abiding in Christ/the Spirit is also prominent in the theology and spirituality of Paul, as we will see below. But before considering that aspect of Paul, we turn first to how he, like the Gospels and 1 John, moves seamlessly from theological affirmations to formational implications.

**Formational theology in the letters of Paul.** To consider the nature of formational theology in Paul’s letters, we will look briefly at two dense christological narratives: 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 and Philippians 2:6-11. These texts are universally recognized as central to Paul’s theological agenda, even though the 1 Corinthians text was *definitely* pre-Pauline in origin (see 1 Cor 15:3), and the Philippians text may have been pre-Pauline.

The text of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 has the appearance of a mini-creed in narrative form that Paul was given and then passed on. This mini-creed has four principal phrases, each beginning with the word “that” (Gk. *hoti*). They are set out here to show that structure, with the four main affirmations italicized:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:  
 that *Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures, and  
 that *he was buried*, and  
 that *he was raised on the third day* in accordance with the scriptures, and  
 that *he appeared* to Cephas, then to the twelve.<sup>13</sup>

This dramatic story in four brief acts narrates two main saving events, each of which is said to be “in accordance with the scriptures”: (1) that Christ died for our sins and (2) that he was raised (i.e., by the “glory” of God the Father [Rom 6:4]<sup>14</sup>) on the third day. Throughout his letters, Paul focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ as the means of salvation. Supporting

<sup>12</sup>See further Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

<sup>13</sup>The following two verses, detailing more appearances, may have been part of the original “creed,” or (more likely) may have been supplied by Paul as additions to the fourth phrase (“appeared”).

<sup>14</sup>Perhaps indicating the Spirit.

these two main events in this text are two events that establish the reality of the death and the resurrection: that he was buried (verifying his death) and that he appeared (verifying his resurrection).

This mini-creed makes some critical theological claims, offered in narrative form as a truthful account of what Christ has done, and God the Father has done, for our salvation. But although it may not be immediately apparent when one reads this text, these are theological affirmations with inherent formational consequences. In the context of 1 Corinthians 15, the most obvious consequences have to do with the “doctrine” of Christ’s resurrection. Not only is this the basis of Christian hope, as much of chapter 15 attests, but it is also the basis for Christian praxis and mission in the present. Negatively, Paul puts it this way:

and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. . . . If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (1 Cor 15:14, 17-19, 32)

Positively, he says this: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

There is still more to this story, however. Paul is not done with this traditional creed-with-consequences. When he writes to the Romans a few years later, he will instruct them about the significance of their baptism (as he may have also done with the Corinthians orally) by returning to the dramatic story of salvation. Paul tells the Romans that in baptism they have been narrated into this story, immersed into its reality. Table 1.1 shows the parallels between the main theological affirmations in the creed and their formational implications for the baptized.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>This table combines and abridges tables in Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 81, 310, 489-91.

**Table 1.1.** Creedal affirmations and implications

<b>Narrative Reality</b>	Christ, according to the Creed (1 Cor 15)	Believers in their baptism (Rom 6)
<b>Death</b>	Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3)	We . . . died to sin . . . were baptized into his death (Rom 6:2-3)  We have been united with him in a death like his (Rom 6:5)  Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin (Rom 6:6-7)  We have died with Christ (Rom 6:8)  Dead to sin (Rom 6:11) <sup>16</sup>
<b>Burial</b>	He was buried (1 Cor 15:4)	We have been buried with him by baptism into death (Rom 6:4)
<b>Resurrection</b>	He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:4)	<i>Present:</i>  So that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4)  Alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:11; cf. Rom 6:13)  <i>Future:</i> <sup>17</sup>  We will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom 6:5)  If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him (Rom 6:8)
<b>Appearance</b>	He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Cor 15:5)	Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (Rom 6:13) <sup>18</sup>

Paul's use of the creed in the context of explaining the significance of baptism is clearly formational; Paul wants the Roman believers to recognize the reality of their co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ and to "walk" appropriately in the new, resurrected life. To be sure, this resurrection is not the bodily resurrection of 1 Corinthians 15; that resurrection is

<sup>16</sup>With many other interpreters I have altered the NRSV by spelling "sin" as "Sin" (uppercase "s") because Paul is portraying Sin as an apocalyptic power from which people need to be liberated and are liberated in Christ.

<sup>17</sup>These two texts are most probably only about the future resurrection, although the logic of crucifixion leading to resurrection applies as well to the present reality of newness of life.

<sup>18</sup>Paul does not use the verb "appear" in Romans 6, but the overall narrative parallels are such that it is all but certain that Paul sees a parallel between Christ's appearances and the post-baptismal, postresurrection "presentation" of the self to God. On this self-presentation, see also Romans 6:16, 19; 12:1.



reserved for the future. Nonetheless, there is already a real resurrection: “newness of life” (Rom 6:4); it is a resurrection *in* the body that involves the bodily members (see Rom 6:12-23) and anticipates the future resurrection of the body.

This way of interpreting the creed is not supplemental or optional. The significance of the creed’s theological claims is only fully understood and realized when they become the framework of people’s lives—when the baptized are immersed in the narrative. This is how Paul’s formational theology “works.”

We see a similar pattern of theology-to-formation in another Pauline creedal text, Philippians 2:6-11. This passage has often been understood to be a pre-Pauline text—perhaps a hymn, a poem, or another creed of sorts—that Paul adapts and presents to the Philippians. Recent scholarship, however, has suggested that Paul’s use of the poem (as I would classify it) both in Philippians and throughout his correspondence indicates that it is quite possible that Paul wrote it. Whether he received it from others or composed it himself, Paul clearly found it to express some of his core beliefs about Christ—and about the life of those who are in Christ and in whom Christ lives by the Spirit. I would go so far as to call Philippians 2:6-11 Paul’s *master story*.

Here is that story, with its introduction (v. 5), set out to show (once again) the principal phrases and main verbs:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who,  
*though he was in the form of God,*  
*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*  
 but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human  
 likeness. And being found in human form,  
 he *humbled himself* and became obedient [lit. “becoming obedient”] to the  
 point of death—even death on a cross.  
 Therefore *God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above*  
*every name,*  
 so that at the name of Jesus *every knee should bend*, in heaven and on earth  
 and under the earth, and *every tongue should confess* that Jesus Christ  
 is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (emphases added)

Once again we have a narrative, a succinct epic drama. The basic sequence is one of humiliation followed by exaltation. Verses 6-8 narrate

Christ's downward mobility from the height of divinity—which he chose not to exploit for selfish advantage (by remaining in that state)—not merely to the depths of humanity (self-enslavement = incarnation) but also to the deepest depths of human existence in crucifixion (self-humiliation = obedience to the point of death on a cross).<sup>19</sup> Verses 9-11 narrate God's reversal of that humiliation and the gifting of the obedient slave with the divine name "Lord" (see Is 45:23).

It is clear from the introduction (v. 5) that Paul intends this poem to speak to the Philippians, to form them in Christ.<sup>20</sup> Like Christ in his incarnation and death, they are to exemplify humility and concern for others, rather than self, in their life together:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil 2:1-4)

Elsewhere I have demonstrated in detail the parallels between Philippians 2:6-11 and 2:1-4, the rest of Philippians, and other places in Paul's letters in which the apostle speaks of his own ministry in Christ or his expectations of particular communities in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Space permits us only to note a few briefly, focusing on echoes of verses 6-8 elsewhere in Philippians, where Paul describes others in terms of the Christ-poem, and in 1 Corinthians, where he describes himself in those terms; I have included the transliteration of key Greek words so that the echoes are presented as clearly as possible.

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<sup>19</sup>I refer to this narrative as a pattern of "although [x] not [y] but [z]," meaning "although [status] not [selfish exploitation] but [self-giving/sacrifice]." See, e.g., Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>20</sup>In my view, Philippians 2:5 is best translated in a way that reinforces the motif of participation begun in 2:1: "Cultivate this mindset—this way of thinking, feeling, and acting—in your community, which is in fact a community in the Messiah Jesus." See Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 77-95.

<sup>21</sup>For summary tables with more detail, see Gorman, *Apostle*, 81, 310, 489-91.

**Table 1.2.** Parallels in Philippians and 1 Corinthians

Philippians 2:6-8	The Philippians in Philippians	Paul in 1 Corinthians
Though he was in the form [ <i>morphē</i> ] of God (Phil 2:6); form [ <i>morphēn</i> ] of a slave (Phil 2:7)	Becoming like him in his death [ <i>symmorphizomenos</i> ; lit. “being conformed to his death”] (Phil 3:10)  That it [the body of our humiliation] may be conformed [ <i>symmorphon</i> ] to the body of his glory (Phil 3:21) <sup>22</sup>	For though I [Paul] am free with respect to all . . . though I myself am not under the law (1 Cor 9:19, 20)
Did not regard [ <i>hēgēsato</i> ] equality with God as something to be exploited (Phil 2:6)	Regard [ <i>hēgoumenoi</i> ] others as better than yourselves (Phil 2:3)  Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard [ <i>hēgēmai</i> ] as loss because of Christ. I regard [ <i>hēgoumai</i> ] everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard [ <i>hēgoumai</i> ] them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Phil 3:7-8)	Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right. . . . But I have made no use of any of these rights . . . so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel (1 Cor 9:12, 15, 18) <sup>23</sup>
Emptied himself [ <i>heauton ekenōsen</i> ], taking the form of a slave [ <i>doulou</i> ] . . . humbled himself [ <i>etapeinōsen heauton</i> ] (Phil 2:7-8)	Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit [ <i>kenodoxian</i> ; lit. “empty/vain glory”] (Phil 2:3)  Regard others as better than yourselves [ <i>heautōn</i> ]. Let each of you look not to your own interests [ <i>ta heautōn</i> ], but to the interests of others (Phil 2:3-4)  All of them are seeking their own interests [ <i>ta heautōn</i> ] (Phil 2:21)  In humility [ <i>tapeinophrosynē</i> ] regard others as better than yourselves (Phil 2:3)	I have made myself a slave [ <i>emauton edoulōsa</i> ; lit. “enslaved myself”] to all, so that I might win more of them (1 Cor 9:19)
To the point of [ <i>mechri</i> ] death [ <i>thanatou</i> ] (Phil 2:8)	[Ephroditus] came close to death [ <i>mechri thanatou</i> ] for the work of Christ (Phil 2:30)	I die [ <i>apothnēskō</i> ] every day! (1 Cor 15:31)

As with 1 Corinthians 15 in conversation with Romans 6, it is clear from table 1.2 that Paul’s theological affirmations in Philippians 2 are inherently

<sup>22</sup>This verse reminds us that it is not just Christ’s humiliation that is paradigmatic for Christians but also his resurrection and exaltation, which is the subject of Philippians 2:9-11. Our focus here, however, is on 2:6-8.

<sup>23</sup>Paul is referring the apostolic rights to receiving financial support and bringing a spouse along on the mission.

formational—in this case, both for general Christian living and for Christian ministry.<sup>24</sup> The story of Christ is inherently formational; his story has become, and must continue to become, our story.

Furthermore, we should stress that, as with the Gospel of John and 1 John, this formational theology/spirituality in Paul's writings is not merely about imitation, but participation—*koinōnia* in the Spirit and living in Christ (Phil 2:1), which also means having Christ and the Spirit within.<sup>25</sup> To be in Christ and to have Christ within is like our relationship with the air: it both surrounds and infuses us, enabling us to live, to grow, and to be active in the world.

### THE BENEFIT OF THE TRADITION FOR OTHER GLOBAL EVANGELICALS

The argument I have been making in this chapter comes from my context in the West. It is primarily here that I have seen the bifurcations described early in the chapter: the vertical versus the horizontal and the spiritual versus the intellectual. Yet I know that these bifurcations can and do exist elsewhere, especially the spiritual-versus-intellectual types.

The church in the West is at least partly responsible for exporting its spiritual deficiencies around the world. At the same time, as the global church eyes the churches in the West (which can be perceived as being full of intellectually sophisticated people who have often abandoned, or at least watered down, their biblical faith and the spirituality that goes along with it), it is probably wise not to discard the goal of serious study out of fear for one's spiritual existence. As a New Testament scholar, in fact, I have been impressed time and time again by the way in which even doctoral dissertations by scholars from Africa, Asia, and Latin/South America unite the most rigorous intellectual work with equally impressive spiritual reflection.<sup>26</sup> And such spiritual reflection almost always displays the unity of vertical and horizontal that the West has too often broken apart by favoring one or the other.

The global church, in other words, has something to teach the churches of the West even as all Christians, whatever their context, must struggle

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<sup>24</sup>For passages similar to 1 Corinthians 9, see 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13.

<sup>25</sup>On mutual indwelling according to Paul, see especially Romans 8:1-11.

<sup>26</sup>I am thinking of the work of the Langham Scholars, among others. See <https://langham.org/what-we-do/langham-scholars/>.

to balance the spiritual and the intellectual as well as the vertical and the horizontal.<sup>27</sup> The New Testament is theology, and it is formational theology. If we fail to engage the New Testament as such, our individual and communal formation will be much weaker than it ought to be. And that does not contribute to a healthy, vital church, wherever that church happens to be.

## CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by looking at two kinds of bifurcations, the vertical versus the horizontal and the spiritual versus the intellectual. We saw how the New Testament undermines such bifurcations, offering us the both/and approach of God and neighbor, and of heart and mind. We then looked at two dense christological passages, from 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 2, and saw how New Testament theology is inherently formational; theological claims lead inevitably to formational goals. In other words, the theological affirmations, or “doctrines,” found in the New Testament (“New Testament theology”) cannot be properly engaged at a distance, for they are also theological claims about us; indeed, they are theological claims *on* us. That is the very nature of New Testament theology.

The New Testament’s theological claims and their spiritual implications require us to use our minds as well as our hearts; careful study is necessary even to discern, and much more, to fully understand them. Such study may require learning the original languages, reading the master interpreters past and present, and engaging in serious discussion with other students of the Word. It is especially important to hear the voices of readers from cultures and perspectives that are different from our own. The results of such study, when undertaken prayerfully, will be to grow in love of God but also in love of neighbor, both within the Christian community and outside of it. Such is the nature of the New Testament’s formational theology.

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<sup>27</sup>My research assistant, Michelle Rader, notes the following from her own experience in the majority world: “We learn so much from, and are encouraged by, the spiritual depth and discernment and prayer life of our fellow believers. But our partners also ask for teaching about how to read Scripture, as a lot of them do not have access to training, especially for women” (personal communication, February 25, 2019).

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. In your own context, where have you seen evidence of the sorts of bifurcation that are noted in this chapter (vertical versus horizontal and spiritual versus intellectual)? Where have you seen evidence of their opposite, the sorts of “both-and” approaches advocated in this chapter?
2. How might recognizing and correcting false bifurcations in our churches, ministries, and personal lives help to encourage and develop spiritual life in your own context? Be as specific and tangible as possible.
3. How might N. T. Wright’s fourfold approach to reading Scripture speak to your context? Which of the four approaches do you overlook? Which do you overemphasize?
4. Why is it important to think of spiritual formation as participation and not merely imitation or obedience?
5. What insights have you gained from considering the texts 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 2 as examples of the New Testament’s formational theology?
6. Can you think of other important New Testament texts that are highly theological in character and yet have inherently formational implications?

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