

Metamorphosis and Identity in Christ

A Springboard for discussion

Assignment #1

Paper presented to
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Spiritual formation has been a focus of my interest for many years. Mel Lawrenz in his book *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* strikes a necessary balance between ‘form’ and ‘growth.’ The Church’s role is to encourage and create opportunities for this growth while understanding that the *choice* to grow and be formed is individual and the *power* to grow and be formed into the likeness of Christ is divine. There is much to be appreciated about Lawrenz’s balanced approach to the dissimilar learning / formation styles of different Christians. Anyone who has been in ministry for any period of time will realize that the causes and instruments of growth are multiple and varied. From crises to community, from preaching to prayer, from reading to reaching out,¹ from service to worship, growth and formation come by varying means. Ultimately, spiritual formation is a dying to self and a rising in Christ, a metamorphosis that is the divine act in the human heart. Spiritual formation is God’s work, and we as leaders are partners with him in this task.²

I was drawn to the tenth chapter of the book *Metamorphosis: The Final Goal* because it encouraged me to reflect in a deeper way on my own sanctification as a son being transformed into the image of the living God. There is no doubt that a significant portion of my own Christian formation has come in the crucible of crisis. At times of crisis, I have wondered how much of value there will be left in me after the dross has been consumed. For me, crises have been times when dying was not a choice, and coming alive in Christ my only hope. As Isaiah points to the withering work of God’s Spirit,³ even the dying aspect of metamorphosis is God’s work. Without a doubt, it is also the Holy Spirit at work through the Word of the Lord that brings life to what is dead. Yet the Spirit also works outside of the

¹ I found it interesting that the greatest source of my early Christian formation was witnessing to non Christians – yet I did not find this one among the themes Lawrenz suggests.

² In Ephesians 4 Paul writes: “¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God’s people ... attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” NIV

³ Isaiah 40:6b-8 “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, because *the breath of the LORD blows on them.* (*italics mine*)

Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” NIV

context of crisis.⁴ How does God accomplish this dying to self and arising in Christ in the streams and process of Christian consciousness? This paper will suggest a model of understanding the Spirit's 'morphing' work that would shape how we do ministry within the church.

This model of understanding the Spirit's work is based on the work of a variety of different authors, especially Ray L. Hart and his book *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*⁵ and Hans Mol in his book *Identity and the Sacred*.⁶ Both of these books have deeply influenced how I understand the Spirit's work within.

At the heart of this model is that behaviour and character arise on the foundation of *identity*. *Identity* is a constellation of mnemonic data (memories, stories, meta-narratives, formative life experiences, information, emotions) that form the substance of identity. This constellation can be re-constellated based on new mnemonic data or a refocusing on data thus modifying identity and changing who we are. The Holy Spirit works with a person's imagination to constellate the mnemonic data to incarnate Christ and the redemptive story into the Christian's identity.

Recognizing that the previous statements are exceptionally abstract, I will try to make this model a little more practical.

Identity lies at the root of Christian faith and behavior. This is very clear in Paul's writing when he says⁷

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

⁴ Lawrenz, Mel. 2000. *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. p. 31

⁵ Hart, Ray L. 1968. *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and Rhetoric of Revelation*, New York: Herder and Herder.

⁶ Mol, Hans. *Identity and the Sacred*. ????????????

⁷ Galatians 2:20, 21

Paul is discussing the role of the law in life by which behavioural righteousness might be attained. Can the law make us good? Paul's persuasive answer is "No!" Something on the inside has to change. Paul talks about a metamorphosis of identity. The "I" in Paul is no longer Paul, for Paul died, and from the chrysalis now Christ emerging⁸ lives through him! Identity, being 'in Christ' and Christ 'in us,' becomes the foundational premise for the Christian's interaction with the Triune God (justification or imputed righteousness) and with the world (sanctification or imparted righteousness). With a focus on identity, we avoid any problematic dichotomy between justification and sanctification.

But what really is this constellation of mnemonic data that we call identity? "Who are you?" asks the question of identity. To give definition to identity is to tell a story of relationships, experiences, self realizations, hopes and dreams. But as any pastoral counsellor has discovered, we each are interpreters of our own stories. The word "constellating" is carefully chosen since it reflects an experience we are all well acquainted with. When we look at the stars in a dark night sky, we see thousands of points of light, some brighter, some dimmer. As we look at them, we 'constellate' them to form pictures with meaning, (ie. The bear, Orion, Centaurus, Big and Little Dippers etc.). Each of these constellations is no more than our imagination at work giving meaning to a random organization of stars. Every person has a profoundly complex collection of mnemonic data (like the stars) that vary in importance. They interpret these data points in a certain way thus creating their story which forms the substance of their identity. The imagination performs this constellating, interpretive and synthesizing and integrating function, making sense of the myriad of possible interpretations. This becomes convincingly apparent in grief counselling. Nine children may have experienced the same parents, the same family life, the same history in terms of moves, schools, parenting patterns etc. But each of the nine will have a different story to tell about their youth. They constellate their similar mnemonic data differently and so each has a distinct identity formed from these effectively similar data sets. Identity is

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18

this constellation, an imaginative interpretation of experiences and memories that create the dynamic story that answers the question “Who are you?” Thus identity is never static. It remains a dynamic of changing mnemonic data and imaginative interpretation. As Hart suggests in the title of his book *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*, the identity of a person is always in process of being formed. Formation is an ongoing work that involves growth and form.

Because identity involves imaginative interpretation, *story is always the framework of identity*. Just as constellating the stars is more than an imaginative graphic image since each image has its own story, so our mnemonic constellations are storied. It is precisely on this interface that the Holy Spirit works with our imaginations to form our identity in Christ. The truth of God comes to us in the form of story – the story of redemption. And the Spirit makes the story of redemption our story as we become part of the story of redemption. The biblical narrative in-forms our mnemonic data set with new information, the Holy Spirit works with our imagination to reinterpret the mnemonic data, and this new interpretation forms our identity in Christ.

To make this practical, let me tell my story. For the first seventeen years of my life, I grew up in a Christian home with faithful Christian parents, one child out of nine. These years were filled with Christian activities – worship services, catechism, Christian day school education, daily devotions, prayers, songs. Of course these years were also filled with other relationships, conflicts, difficulties, painful memories from imperfect parents, sibling rivalries, interests and abilities. At the age of 18, my story was that I was destined to live my life as an electronics engineer in a day to day existence that was hungry for deeper meaning. Though there were many data points that reflected my Christian upbringing, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, they were being ignored. To the degree that they were part of my story, they were meaningless. They were like stars in the sky, maybe numbered but not part of any storied constellations. At the age of nineteen, through a more than coincidental vacation

experience, I realized that God was real. Simple logic followed. If God was real, then the faith of my parents was real. Suddenly experiences, stories, lessons that I had learned in life that once were meaningless started taking on new meaning. Pictures of God's grace became the storied images of my mind. The Spirit enabled me to 'see' with new eyes pictures of what was there but could not see before.⁹ As I grew as a Christian, new experiences added new data which resulted in new possibilities for constellating mnemonic contents, in turn progressively shaping my new identity in Christ, so much so that this person once hoping to be an engineer eventually became a pastor. As these constellations occurred, within a space of a year after my conversion (the term conversion itself implies a dramatic shift in story) people could see even physical changes in my character, personality and identity.

With this model for spiritual formation, I find 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 especially helpful. Paul writes

16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Identity is a progressive formation, a "being toward"¹⁰ that results from an imaginative seeing of the possibilities and potentials of 'Christ in us.' Our eschatological reality breaks into the present because, with the veil removed, we look toward Christ who is our humanity in perfection. God's purpose for us - our identity in Christ is progressively realized by the ongoing work of the Spirit within us.¹¹

This model of spiritual formation, this theology of the Spirit's 'morphing' work is not the kind of stuff that I would make a sermon out of. But it certainly is the stuff that shapes how we might minister in this post modern world. In conclusion, I would like to suggest some of the ways this might shape the varied strategies listed in Lawrenz's book.

⁹ Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as an aspect of 'seeing.'

¹⁰ Hart's terminology

¹¹ Romans 8:29

Clearly, spiritual formation must take on the image of Christ. Thus this model includes growth and form in balance. This model insists on the dynamic of rebirth without which we will remain blind to the truth even though it is presented to us.¹² One of the images of scripture regarding our state apart from grace is that of spiritual blindness.¹³ Without the Spirit with our imagination constellating our mnemonic contents, we are blind to the realities of God and our identity is outside of Christ. The sinful mind is a blind mind, unable to do what pleases God.¹⁴ If however a person has the Spirit, the disciplines of formation can have a powerful effect on their progress toward Christ-likeness. Formative **reading** not only adds data to the mnemonic contents thus creating new possibilities for imaginative Spirit led constellations, it also brings the story of scripture to our story, and when the story is in us, and we are in the story – the story of scripture becomes its own interpretive event shaping who we are, thus shaping our identity in Christ.¹⁵ Encouraging people to read the stories of scripture is a simple effective way to encourage spiritual formation. **Prayer** will also have formative influence. Prayer is authentic dialogue with God.¹⁶ Dialogue involves relationship. Every relationship involves storied interaction. We cannot define relationship apart from story and narrative. Prayer in-forms our mnemonic data set with experiences of the presence of God and is an especially active imaginative process where the Spirit enables new ways of seeing our lives. Thus, the Spirit often ‘reveals’ in prayer truths that otherwise would not be apparent to us. **Worship** as *latreuo* embeds us in the story of redemption as we participate in bowing, confession, assurance, baptism and communion. But being actively embedded in a story necessarily makes the story part of us. Thus just as communion is to act out the significance of remembering Christ’s death, at the same time, through the work of the Spirit, his death becomes part of us through the eating and drinking. Our identity is formed by the storied act. **Fellowship** or *koinonia*

¹² John 3:3

¹³ Psalm 69:23, Romans 1:21, 11:10, Ephesians 4:18, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:14

¹⁴ Romans 8:4-10

¹⁵ Jesus said “My words and Spirit and they are life.” John 6:63

¹⁶ Lawrenz. p. 70.

also has a profound forming influence on identity. When fellowship includes shared story, when transparency, bearing each other's burdens and prayer are the flavour of community, this fellowship will form the stories that form each of our identities. Fellowship must be shared story. Not just an intellectual or task driven activity, fellowship is walking the journey together as equals under Christ. For fellowship to have a true formative effect, we must encourage the telling of stories, and as a group, we must encourage interpretations that see the Divine author at work.¹⁷ Just as the story of scripture has been interpreted by the testing of the body of the church through history, and thus we have the formation of doctrines, each of us needs the help of others to help us interpret rightly our own stories in Christ. In fellowship, story telling and story interpretation are communal activities. **Preaching** that speaks to the heart is preaching that impacts the data and / or the constellation of that data by refocusing it for the listener. Once again, there is a lot of data that is common to all people, for we all struggle with the same enemy, we all have the same basic needs, we all yearn for the same eternal home. Though metanarratives may strongly shape our interpretation of that data, the data remains similar. Spirit anointed preaching is the Spirit speaking new possibilities into old data and fossilized constellations. **Witness** is an important formative strategy because witness is the telling of story, telling others who we are in Christ, because of Christ. As such, telling the story of our identity cements our identity in our thoughts, emotions and volition. Stories shared with others are not quickly lost. The story through telling becomes us. **Service** is living out our story in community and as such is like mortar that builds up who we are in Christ, strong and steadfast.¹⁸ Acts of service like witness are identity hardening events that form the background of our unfinished identity in Christ. On these hardened foundations, new potentials of becoming are possible as we continue to look toward Christ, our humanity in its

¹⁷ Here the approach of John Clinton in *The Making of a Leader* is very helpful

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:12

perfection. As we work on these strategies for spiritual formation, we must remember that the process will not be completed until that day when he returns, and as John writes:¹⁹

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

Though I fear I may have overstepped the boundaries of this assignment, I hope we can banter this model about. It seems to me to have significant potential in understanding the Spirit’s work in our lives, in our healing and in our formation. I also feel it may produce helpful reflections within the post modern context that uses the concepts of story, interpretation and metanarrative as foundational to its understanding of truth. After all, this model does not focus on the modern “truth out there,” rather it focuses on the formation of truth “within us” and “among us.” Interpreting the story (truth) is a community activity.

¹⁹ 1 John 3:2,3