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Modeling Spiritual Formation From a Distance: Paul's Formation Transactions with the Roman Christians

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MODELING SPIRITUAL FORMATION FROM A DISTANCE: PAUL'S FORMATION TRANSACTIONS WITH THE ROMAN CHRISTIANS

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Abstract: This article proposes that Paul's letter to the church in Rome can identify processes involved in offering a spiritually formative education from a distance. When Paul wrote the letter to Rome, he wrote to a church he had never visited. We argue that his relationship with the recipients is analogically similar to the relationship between professor and student in an online, educational paradigm. Paul modeled how to offer this spiritually formative relationship by emphasizing the gospel message, grounding his scriptural authority, personalizing his message, anticipating questions, enlisting the community, encouraging the recipients, praying for needs, and explaining the marks of true Christianity.

Keywords: spiritual formation, distance learning, online education, education, Paul, Romans

The purpose of this article is to examine how the Apostle Paul offered a spiritually formative education to the church(es) at Rome. Paul's spiritual formation of the Roman Christians offers Christian educators insight into how this process can be approached even from a distance. The application of this insight is particularly valuable for the increasing number of professors who are seeking processes, practices, and models to offer a spiritually formative education to students from a distance. Although this concept has been addressed in recent research (Gresham, 2006; M. Lowe, 2010; S. Lowe, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2010; Maddox & Estep, 2010; White, 2006), the literature, we propose, has room to expand its foundation in two important ways: first, a continued exploration into the biblical basis for spiritual formation from a distance, and second, an examination of a biblical model (as opposed to an ecological model as suggested by Lowe & Lowe, 2010).

Porter (2002) recognized the challenges of creating a framework for types of theological conversations. He said, "Confusion reigns when there is no meta-theory which deals appropriately with divergent theoretical voices" (p. 420). What is presented here will likely fall short of reaching the goal of creating a meta-theory. However, the strategies modeled by the Apostle Paul in his formation of the Romans can be appropriated and then applied to a broad range of spiritually formative relationships fashioned from a distance, thus continuing the conversation in hopes for a convergence of the theoretical voices. The intent of this article, then, is to provide a modest contribution to both a biblical rationale and a biblical modeling of spiritual formation from a distance by referring to the strategies of formation that Paul employs in his letter to the Romans—a church at a distance.

Explanation of Terms and Our Stake in this Enterprise

Spiritual formation, we contend, is the process of coming to grips with our finite humanness and developing an understanding that our sufficiency lies in the person of Christ. This definition represents the "transformed mind" that Paul describes in Romans 12. The result of this type of transformation is an understanding that our position and sufficiency are wholly and completely dependent upon Christ and what he has completed for us in his death and resurrection (Lamport & Yoder, 2006; Stedman, 1996).

For the purpose of this article, spiritual formation will be discussed from a student-faculty perspective. Thus, the focus here is the exploration of how professors might spiritually influence their students, rather than the formation students can provide for themselves via the historic spiritual disciplines (Foster, 1998; Whitney, 1991; Willard, 1991). Finally, the authors have not only a theoretical and theological interest in this critical topic, but each is heavily invested as an online professor and a mentor of other online professors. Along with our professional academic curiosity regarding spiritual formation, we have a personal stake in the notion of nurturing spiritual formation of students. This is our passion and, along with Paul, our calling.

A Preliminary Review of the Literature

In reviewing the literature on spiritual formation from a distance, it is important to recognize the strengths and weaknesses that exist within the current research. Theories and models associated with online education provide those interested in spiritual formation from a distance with foundational research that can be applied to Christian education. The challenge is that

Christian education is more than just content; it is spiritual transformation (Rom 12:1–2). The models presented below (Gresham, 2006; Lowe & Lowe, 2010; Maddox & Estep, 2010; White, 2006) will begin to elucidate the possibilities and the challenges of creating a spiritually formative education in online courses.

Student-Faculty Engagement in Online Education

One of the seminal theories associated with online education is that of transactional distance (Moore, 1993). Moore and Kearsley (2012) have expanded upon this early foundation proposing that teachers and students are and will always be separate from one another. The transactional distance between a student and teacher is a continuous variable connoting more or less distance rather than distant or not distant. The distance they are describing "is not simply a matter of geographic distance, but [it] is a pedagogical phenomenon" (p. 209). Harlow (2007) recommends that to address this gap the teaching/learning process in online classrooms must change in three specific ways: "Learners must learn differently, teachers must teach differently, and institutions must relate to distance students differently" (p. 17). Groeling and Ruth (2007) recognize three complementary, yet subtly different, challenges in online course design: "the amount of time required for a wholesale reworking of a course, the change in content delivery, and the changes in moving from a face-to-face to an online communication medium" (p. 59). What these authors have affirmed is online education cannot merely digitize current methodologies (Maddix & Estep, 2010); instead teachers have to create new methodologies for teaching because the medium itself is new.

The Challenge of Spiritual Formation from a Distance

The objection of spiritual formation being offered through an electronic medium is reflected by a pastor, who commented,

> My fear is that it [technology] changes the relationship that people enjoy with other people and I believe that the world will only have peace, will get along together, racially, socio-economically, when you are people, and if you are in a computer you aren't a person (Wyche, Hayes, Harvel, & Grinter, 2006, p. 206).

As Moore and Kearsley (2012) noted, the transactional gap between people is not necessarily geographic. It can be a pedagogical gap as Gresham (2006) explained or a technological gap as this pastor observed. The distance that exists between people can be increased or decreased by technology (Lamport & Bartolo, 2012; Wyche et al., 2006).

If technology can increase or decrease the transactional distance between faculty and students, then what is needed is a meta-theory (Porter, 2002) that can explain spiritual formation from a distance. Lowe and Lowe (2010) observed this need:

> If student formation empowered by the Holy Spirit takes place in a variety of settings and contexts, some of which involve physical proximity, some of which involve virtual community, and some of which involve individual encounters with texts, images, sounds, and their own mental constructs, then we need an explanatory model that enables us to consider all of these as potentially beneficial to student spiritual development. (p. 100)

Theological accreditation agencies, such as the Association of Theological Education (ATS) and the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), are also asking this same question: "Is Christian nurture and spiritual formation possible in an online course or program?" (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p. 424). Thus, educators involved with theological education from a distance must answer the question, "How do [professors] try to support and enhance the spiritual formation of their [classrooms] while avoiding the potential distancing problems of technology?" (Wyche et al., 2006, p. 201). That is our concern as well.

Current Models of Spiritual Formation in Online Education

In their observations on nurturing spirituality in online higher education communities, Maddix and Estep (2010) noted that online spiritual formation "cannot simply be approached as digitizing current methodologies or simply providing information about spirituality online" (p. 428). Instead, they advocate that "a more substantial level of engagement would be required to genuinely foster spiritual formation that is Christian" (p. 428). Although they note the challenges and the desired results of spiritual formation in online education, they do not, at least in this article, provide processes that are adaptable to various online paradigms for maturing believers from one side of the continuum to the other.

White (2006) presented a biblical rationale of spiritual formation from a distance using Zuck's (1998) analysis of Paul's pedagogy.

- For though *I am absent in body* [emphasis added], yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ (Col 2:5, ESV).
- For *though absent in body* [emphasis added], I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing (1 Cor 5:3).

- But since *we were torn away* [emphasis added] from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face (1 Thess 2:17).

This biblical precedent for distance formation, deduced from the above passages, relies on the "personalizing strategies [Paul] used to connect emotionally and relationally with his readers" (White, 2006, p. 308).

In another attempt to create a model for spiritual formation from a distance, Gresham (2006) provides a theological model he calls the Divine Pedagogy. He defined this as "the manner in which God teaches the human race" (p. 24). In his explanation of the Divine Pedagogy as a model for spiritual formation he reasoned,

> Just as the divine adaptation involved accommodation on God's part, requiring the translation of the transcendent divine truths into the humble language of the human audience, so online adaptation calls upon theological educators to accommodate traditional practices to a new virtual environment. (p. 25)

Gresham proposed that the relationship between humans and God is not a proximal relationship, but an incarnational relationship. Thus, spiritually formative relationships do not necessarily need to emphasize physical proximity, but an "incarnation of divine truth in the life of the instructor" (p. 26). In his argument for the incarnational relationship between faculty and students, Gresham explained that face-to-face classrooms are not inherently incarnational when professors detached and impersonal in their teaching style (p. 26). Groeling and Ruth (2007) provocatively challenged the assumption that "face-to-face communication is, in fact, the ideal means of communication" (p. 61). Their dissent sufficiently supports the idea of the Divine Pedagogy because God's continued communication to the world is through the written Word, rather than through the proximal relationship experienced between Christ and his disciples.

In yet another attempt to create a model for understanding and explaining spiritual formation from a distance, Lowe and Lowe (2010) proposed an ecosystems model of spiritual formation. They define an ecosystem as a "series of interconnected parts, none of which can exist without the other" (p. 87). The application of the ecosystem model in this context is that the spiritual formation of online students comes from Paul's description of the "body of Christ" (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12–27; Eph 5:23; Col 1:24). Thus, in an online course, students make up a unique compilation of the body of Christ. This body has parts that are physically located all over the world, but they interact online to create their own semblance of a biblical ecosystem.

Rationale for Spiritual Formation from a Distance

Flexibility is a key factor that motivates students to choose online education (Bozkurt, 2012). Not every individual called to ministry has the ability to relocate or frequently commute to a college campus (Esselman, 2004; Gresham, 2006). Ministers being trained through an online classroom are physically removed from the personal accountability available within the confines of a traditional Bible college or seminary. However, these students are often much more connected to meaningful and immediate ministry (Esselman, 2004). Is it justifiable to abandon their current ministry and relocate their family when they have the option to remain engaged in the harvest *and* sharpen their theological and ministerial skills?

The biblical basis for offering a spiritually formative education from a distance is the same basis for offering this education in person. Paul said, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and *teachers, to equip the saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12, emphasis added). Paul's encouragement to the Ephesians fails to distinguish the location of the believer in relation to the teacher, but calls *teachers* to equip the saints until *all* "attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13). As Paul wrote this to the church in Ephesus, he could not have anticipated the technological advances that would come before Christ's return. Yet his message provides us with the foundational affirmation that *all* are to be included in the process of being equipped through teaching and spiritual formation.

Paul modeled spiritually formative practices in the letter he wrote to the church at Rome. The remainder of this article will examine the processes involved in the spiritual formation that took place between Paul and the Romans in spite of the physical distance between them.

Situating the Issue in the Letter to Rome

Paul was an apostle, theologian, pastor, and church planter. His strategy, derived from Acts, was that he would plant a church and then move on to another city to plant another. Yet Paul continued to feel responsible for the spiritual well-being of those he left behind (2 Cor 11:28). His ongoing pastoral responsibility was made manifest in three ways: (a) by his follow-up visits (Phil 1:27; 2:24); (b) by means of appointed emissaries, for example, Timothy (1 Cor 4:16; 16:10–11) and Titus (2 Cor 7:6–16); and (c) by means of his exhortatory letters themselves. Thus, his letters and emissaries seem to function as proxies for his own presence. However, in the Epistle to the Romans, unlike any other situation, Paul writes neither to a church he visited, nor one he

planted. In the first chapter he says, "For God is my witness . . . that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you" (1:9). This is a unique situation for Paul. Paul is explicit in his desire not to build on another's foundation (Rom 15:20), but in this case he makes an exception. Thus, the situation of Romans is that Paul, through letter, is offering a spiritually formative education to his pupils from a distance.

Modeling from a Distance: Eight Implications for Spiritual Formation

The Pauline model of spiritual formation from a distance is not wrought with theological complexity. Paul's methods are innately practical. However, applying these in online education requires intentionality, and because the onus for implementation requires such purpose, many may find them difficult to implement. From our analysis of Paul we suggest the following eight practices for offering spiritual formation from a distance.

1. The Ground of the Spiritual Formation is the Gospel.

Spiritual formation takes place differently based on the audience and the setting. The content of his message in this letter is different than the content of his message to Philemon, Timothy, or the church at Corinth because the recipients of this letter have a distinctly different relationship with the author. In Romans 1:16, Paul presented the thesis of his letter saying, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of salvation to all who believe." This thesis forms Paul's basis for his message of spiritual formation to the Romans. Paul did not know all of the contexts or situations facing those that would sit under the teaching of this letter (as compared to the contexts of his other letters). Thus, Paul contextualized his message in a broad manner by focusing upon the transcendent message of the gospel. This is further evidenced as Moo (1996) pointed out that the four main sections of the book of Romans are the *heart* of the gospel, the *assurance* provided by the gospel, the *defense* of the gospel, and the transforming *power* of the gospel. Moo's outline reveals that the content emphasized in this letter is a theological treatise of timeless truths that were not contextually specific; rather, "these issues are ultimately those of the church—and the world—of all ages" (p. 22).

2. The Authority of Spiritual Formation is Scripture.

It is important to note that throughout the letter to the Romans, Paul referred to Old Testament passages to support his message and to justify his authority (Rom 3:10–18; 8:36; 9:25–26, 29, 33; 10:18–21; 11:8–10, 26–27; 14:11;

15:9–12). Scripture must provide the content and the basis of our authority for spiritual formation.

3. The Impetus of Spiritual Formation is Transparency.

In Romans 7, Paul explains to his readers his own spirit/flesh struggle: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . .So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (vv. 14–16). Paul's personalization of the message is vulnerably transparent. In chapter 7 he admits that he has not yet obtained the type of Christian life that he desires. Personalizing the content of our message is a requisite ingredient for spiritual formation. Teachers cannot offer a spiritually formative education devoid of personal experiences.

4. The Means of Spiritual Formation is Dialogue.

It is hard to miss how many times Paul asked and answered questions throughout the letter to the Romans. At least 10 times throughout the book he asks a question and immediately responds, "By no means!" (Rom 3:4, 3:6, 3:31, 6:2, 6:15, 7:7, 7:13, 9:14, 11:1, 11:11). This is a clarifying point that Paul uses in his instruction and formation of the Romans. He anticipates objections, problems, and question from his "pupils" and immediately clarifies his main point. Communication at a distance is without non-verbal cues; thus, the communicator must anticipate points in his or her message that could detract from the intended purposes. In addressing this concept from a distance education standpoint, Stein, Wanstreet, and Calvin (2009) said,

> Transactional distance theory holds that the physical separation of the learner and instructor can lead to psychological and communication gaps that create misunderstandings and feelings of isolation . . . . [It] is a space crossed by learners and instructors to reduce miscommunication and psychological distance. (p. 306)

The three constructs of transactional distance are dialogue, structure, and autonomy (Stein et al., 2009). Regarding the relationship between the teacher and the student, Stein et al. conclude, "Dialogue reduces the transactional distance" (p. 306). Therefore, what Paul has modeled in Romans (i.e., rhetorical questions and clarifying comments) has been confirmed in current theories describing distance education (Moore & Kearsey, 2012).

5. The Location of Spiritual Formation is Community.

Community plays a role in all spiritually formative relationships (Wilhoit, 2008); this is also true of spiritual formation from a distance. Romans

15:1–2 says, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Lowe and Lowe (2010) proposed the ecosystems model of spiritual formation at a distance. Their proposal echoes the community aspect of spiritual formation, including spiritual formation from a distance.

The distance between neighbors in an online classroom is often significant when measured logistically, but when measured technologically, the distance is removed, or at least reduced. Peers in the online environment have an important role to play in the spiritual formation of those "sitting" beside them. The implication of what Paul modeled to the Romans is that the online professor must cultivate the type of interaction between peers that can breed a close, intimate community of believers.

6. The Motivation for Spiritual Formation is Encouragement.

Paul encouraged the Romans in the immediacy of their needs (Moo, 1996), but he did not settle for letting them stay in their current setting. He said, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. . . . For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (Rom 1:8, 11). The encouragement that Paul offered is two-fold: first, he encouraged by praising them for what they have done (their faith being known throughout the world), and second, he encouraged them to continue in their faith (so that their witness continues to expand and grow). Encouragement as a process of formation must also use this two-fold method: to encourage the listeners where they are in life and to encourage them toward maturity beyond their present circumstances.

7. The Basis for Spiritual Formation is Prayer.

Romans 1:9–10 says, "Without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers." In this statement, it is evident that Paul specifically prayed for the Roman church. Praying for students and student situations by name (as they are learned) is an important part of the spiritual formation of online students. It is of great consequence for faculty not only to pray these prayers during their own time with God, but they should also include the student in on these prayers.

8. The Impetus of Spiritual Formation is Accountability.

Romans 12–13 provide a template by which the recipients of the letter can assess their own spiritual growth and maturity. Paul began this section by

describing the marks of an authentic Christian: a transformed mind (12:2), an application of their spiritual gifts (12:7–8), love for others (12:10), fervency in spirit (12:11), consistency in prayer (12:12), and faithful hospitable (12:13). In education, behavioral objectives offer students an "epitome" of what students should pursue. In Paul's letter to the Romans he described a normal Christian life. This normalcy in the Christian life should be pursued, but also expected for Christians who are living their life submitted to the spirit.

The Real-World/Classroom Application of What Paul Modeled

Christ's desire for abundance in the Christian life (John 10:10) was not a vague allusion to a mystic hope for the future; rather it was a description of what should be expected in the Christian life. The author of Hebrews says, "It is for discipline that you have to endure . . . . He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Heb 12:7). Spiritual formation requires discipline in everyday living. Wilhoit, Setran, Ratcliff, Haase, & Rosema (2009) commented, "The most effective means of securing future spiritual depth is through engaging purposefully in spiritually formative activities in the midst of present experiences" (p. 161). Because students need the instillation of spiritual formation and discipline now before they have taken their first pastorate or responded to their first "audible" call to the ministry, faculty must know how to appropriate a spiritually conducive atmosphere within the confines of the online classroom. The following suggestions are real-world/classroom applications of the lessons from Paul's modeling applied in online classrooms.

Personalization through Course Devotionals

I (Ben) have found that many of the professors I mentor in an online seminary program have pastoral backgrounds. These faculty members have often taken their Sunday sermon synopsis and made it available to students in the form of a weekly devotional, which can be sent out in a text, audio, or visual format. All of these media types provide students with a connecting point to their professor, thus lessening the transactional distance in the relationship.

Empathetic Nurturing though Prayer

The life challenges that adult learners face are varied. It is quite common for me (Mark) in the brevity of an 8-week time period to encounter students

who have faced the death of loved ones, loss of jobs, significant spiritual is-
sues, devastating circumstances in the communities of faith, deteriorating
health, divorce, the early arrival of a new baby, and an assortment of other life
distractions. Often, the most spiritually formative practice for the faculty
member is to model what they teach. Praying for students by themselves, over
the phone, or through text may seem impersonal at first, but to the receiving
student, it means a great deal.

Deepening Relationships through Course Log/Journal

A good practice for faculty members is to keep a course logbook or jour-
nal. This resource tracks student needs, prayer requests, milestones, and sto-
ries. One of the valuable experiences for many in a residential education is
the lasting relationships with professors. This can be challenging in the on-
line world when the names on the screen change so often. As a visual learner,
I (Ben) find that I remember faces better than names. However, there are cer-
tain students I want to remember to pray for. Thus, in order to make sure I
remember their names, I write them down in a place I will see often. Profes-
sors should keep track of prayer requests and a way to contact each student
to check for updates regarding these requests. This is part of the spiritual for-
mation process that is simple in theory, but takes discipline and intentional-
ity.

Creating Community through Discussion Board Forum Interactions

Again, purposefulness is vital for creating community online. Lowe and
Lowe (2010) recognized that "given the appropriate tools and skills, collabo-
ration can occur in an online classroom just as it can in the traditional class-
room. The key to making this happen in either setting is the intentional ef-
forts of the course facilitator" (pp. 98–99). In these forums, professors have
the opportunity to create community and give near-immediate critique
and/or feedback. Professors also have the opportunity (and responsibility) to
create an atmosphere that encourages "iron sharpening iron" (Prov 27:17),
which in turn engenders spiritually formative relationships.

Clarify Expectations through Weekly Announcements

A weekly announcement can be an important teaching opportunity for
online faculty. Because online faculty members do not instruct in the tradi-
tional sense through lecture methods, the weekly announcement may pro-
vide a faithfully sequenced relationship; it can purposefully connect course

content to spiritual formation. Both authors have been told by students how encouraged they were by the personal narratives, challenges, and clarifications that we included in our weekly announcements.

Personalize Connections through Skype and Social Media

Skype and social media can be useful tools for connecting with students. Using technology to interact with students can erase the transactional distance innate within online education. Harlow (2007) suggested that using technology to lessen the gap between faculty and students is an excellent way to improve one's online pedagogy.

Capitalizing on Geographical Connections

One online professor we know resides in a southern metropolitan area. When he first started teaching online he thought it might be likely to have few students in close geographical proximity. Each term he emails his students and, if they live within driving distance and they are willing, he schedules time to meet for coffee. This can create a significantly closer relationship between students and faculty, and students and peers. His desire to meet with students has aided the personal connection, theological instruction, and the spiritual formation of those in his classroom. This geographical connection is reminiscent of Romans 15 when Paul tells his readers that while he is on his way to Spain he hopes to see them in passing. In this sense, Paul is using geographical connections to encourage one church on his way to the next.

Clarifying Remarks

We wish to clarify that in advocating spiritual formation from a distance we do not wish to communicate this medium of formation should replace the relational connection that has historically been a part of spiritual formation. The introduction of Paul's letter to the Romans emphasizes his desire to come to Rome that he might "share some spiritual gift" (Ch. v. 11); "have a harvest" (v. 13); and "preach the gospel" (v. 15). Moo (1996) noted that the gift Paul wanted to give "cannot be specified until he sees what their needs may be" (p. 60). It can be inferred from this passage that Paul's gift cannot be given at a distance. Therefore, spiritual formation should not be relegated only to this technological medium; just as spiritual formation should not be reduced to the ethereal realm, it also should not be made into a practice that can only take place in physical proximity. As we have seen throughout the book of Ro-

mans, Paul's letter offered a spiritually formative relationship from a distance. Paul modeled this type of relationship, and it is up to individual faculty members to find ways that technology can be used to implement what he modeled in our own online classrooms.

Conclusion

Creating an atmosphere for spiritual formation within the online classroom is a sacred act that requires intentionality. Many professors pour themselves into creating a valuable mentoring relationship with online students. Other professors allow the challenges of distance to overwhelm their creative abilities and define their classroom interaction. Lowe and Lowe (2010) insist, "If Paul could facilitate spiritual transformation in his readers through the socially constructed mechanism of written letters, should we not expect similar results when using the socially constructed mechanism of electronically mediated communication?" (p. 96).

Creating this type of socially constructed, spiritually transformative education requires effort and dedication (Ascough, 2002). It is vital that professors see more than the names of their students on a screen. Instead, professors must see students as ministers and ministries located throughout the country and the world. This revolutionized perspective must encourage online professors to recognize their role in fulfilling the Great Commission mandate each time they sit down at their desk to interact with these names on a page: behind the name is an individual with a specific calling and ministry. It is with purposeful intent that the online professor must view his or her role in the educational action of spiritual formation. Being resolute in the process of pursuing a spiritually formative education will foster the spiritual maturation of online students. The practices Paul modeled in his formation of the Romans can be applied in online classes through the socially (and technologically) constructed mechanisms available for this generation to teach and (trans)form from a distance.

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