

Spiritual (Mal)Formation: Toward an Analytic Account of Christian Formation

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Abstract: The Christian life is not static, but marks an expected, if often unspecified, trajectory of growth into maturity. The study of these practices that encourage growth is often called “Spiritual Formation,” and yet a survey of recent literature in the field reveals no real consensus regarding the definition for this process or its objectives. This essay will attempt to bring clarity to the practice of Christian formation through an analysis of the concept of formation, three key scriptural warrants, the role of the Church in its execution, and especially to the *telos* of formation. While typical accounts of Christian formation point to a vision for “Christlikeness” as the *telos* of its practices, in this essay I will argue that a more fundamental grounding—based on the nature of worship—should be located in the Triune *Imago Dei*. A given doctrine of God tacitly forms the ecclesiological environment in which a given Christian is being formed—or mal-formed.

Keywords: Spiritual Formation, Christianity, Individualism, Trinitarian Personhood, Worship, Ecclesiology

Introduction

Unambiguously, a series of New Testament Scriptures attest that the Christian life is no static thing. To the church in Galatia Paul, expressing his frustration with that church’s loss of focus, and specifically with a group of opponents who have deceived the Galatian believers, writes, “My children, with whom I am again in labor *until Christ is formed in you*” (Gal. 4:19).¹ He is eager, in other words, for them to return to the proper track of Christian formation. To the Romans, Paul writes, “*do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed* by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Here, not frustrated but encouraging, Paul is eager for the church in Rome to be aware of their tacit formation by the world, and to set

¹ All scripture, unless otherwise noted, is taken from the NASB.

against it their transformation by the Spirit into new life. To the church at Colossae Paul offers a further picture of this formative goal: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and *in Him you have been made complete*” (Col. 2:9–10). The deity is present in Christ, and in Christ (somehow) Christians are being—and to be made—complete. The Christian life involves, if these texts are paradigmatic, a movement into something, a formation of the person into some marked alteration.

That, in its most basic sense, is the purview of a subset of Christian theology called “Spiritual Formation,” and yet within that discipline there is no real agreement on the nature, scope, means, and ends of such formation.² What is the nature of formation? Is it bodily? Of the soul? Of the spirit? What is the scope of this formation? Is it targeted to the sin nature, to the ‘spiritual life,’ to the feelings, or to the community? What are the means of this formation? Is it through spiritual disciplines, the Church, or supernatural encounter? And what is the end of this formation? How is a given Christian supposed to look and behave once he or she has been ‘formed’? Is ‘Christlikeness’ a sufficient catch—all for the broad purview of spiritual formation?

This essay will attempt to venture some steps toward constructing an analytic account of Christian formation.³ The subject matter is, of course, quite broad, but the use of an analytic lens is intended to narrow the focus by clarifying the terms and parameters of spiritual formation, in order to engage in the process of “spelling out hidden assumptions” (McCall 2015, 18–20). As an additional narrowing, we will focus attention on two primary sources: Scripture, and the literature of Christian Formation.⁴ This will lead us to examine the nature of the person, models of formation in the Bible, the relationship of these models to the Church, and, most importantly, an account of the *telos* of formation. In the end, I will argue that the *telos* of formation is rooted in a given doctrine of God, one that impacts every aspect of formation, and that under the influence of this doctrine persons are formed or malformed accordingly.

We will build this definition in the following ways. First, we will survey common definitions of spiritual formation, and, from that starting point, attempt

² “Spiritual Formation” and the literature of Spiritual Formation are relatively recent formal disciplines in theology. James Houston, Professor Emeritus at Regent College, traces the origins of the modern-day movement to Vatican II and its emphasis on spiritually forming priests. Subsequently, figures like Richard Foster and Dallas Willard developed these insights within Protestantism. See “The History of Spiritual Formation,” an interview with James Houston and Bruce Hindmarsh.

³ To my knowledge, no such analytic definition of spiritual formation exists. Porter and Rickabaugh come closest in their argument for the role of the Spirit in formation, but they do not attempt to disambiguate or define the formative task. (Porter and Rickabaugh 2018)

⁴ Given the relatively recent nature of spiritual formation as an academic discipline, the literature is, in fact, quite narrow.

to clarify the grammar of formation as it impacts the person, the formative act, and the *telos* of formation. Second, we will examine some of the distinctives of the person being formed. Third, we will identify three explicit agencies of personal formation found in Scripture, observing how these agencies are especially operative in the Church. Fourth, we will attempt to make explicit the *telos* of Christian formation in light of the *imago dei Trinitatis*. Together, these features will help us to articulate a robust definition of Christian formation.

1. Disambiguating “Christian (Spiritual) Formation”

Major thinkers in the literature of Christian Spiritual Formation offer diverse definitions of the process. Dallas Willard, in many ways patriarch of the modern movement, provides a helpful baseline: “The fact is that spiritual formation of one kind or another happens to everyone. It is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite ‘form’ or character.” (Willard and Cavill 2002, 2) All persons—in his language, ‘spirits’—are being formed. The process is inevitable, and, by extension, somewhat neutral. Since all humans are being formed, it follows that some are being properly formed, while others are being malformed. Willard identifies the chief locus of this formation as the ‘spirit.’ He writes, “The human heart, will or spirit is the executive centre of human life.” (Willard and Cavill 2002, 36) The central part of the person, therefore, is this ‘spirit,’ which is coterminous with the will or the heart, and which is the target of all activities in formation. Expanding on this definition, M. Robert Mulholland Jr. notes that “Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” (Mulholland 1993, 12) In this account, to an innate process of formation is added the concepts of ‘spiritual’ (as a modifier for the formation), ‘conformity’ (as a clarification of the *telos*), the ‘image of Christ’ as an explication of the *telos*, and a further object modifying the formation: ‘for the sake of others.’ Mulholland’s modelling draws heavily on the Myers–Briggs personality indicator, and from this the knowledge of one’s MBPI type is both revealed by others and assists others better to know themselves. Paul Pettit, with a different take on the role that community plays in formation, writes that “the change or transformation that occurs in the believers’ life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented toward God and others.” (Pettit 2008, 19) In this respect, a vision for community plays an even more significant role in the formation of persons. However, the nature of this community effect appears to centre on a certain concept of fruit. Pettit writes, “The change we seek is not solely for self-improvement. Christians are to be *in process* and undergoing renovation so that the individual believer is able to influence and interact with *others* in a more Christlike manner.” (Pettit 2008, 19)

Community, in other words, is the ‘field’ where Christians display, and enact, their newfound Christlikeness.⁵

While each definition serves the purposes of its author’s project (and offers degrees of helpful guidance for Christians seeking spiritual formation), they are by no means unified, nor do any of them deal with their terms and assumptions in a sustained way. We can draw out three areas that represent fundamentally unresolved questions: what is the nature of the person? what is meant by ‘formation’? and into what is a given person being formed? Neglect of these defining characteristics has led to some confusion—not only in the disparate nature of definitions, but also with respect to the means, objectives, and practices of formation. For the next moments, I want to attempt to clarify this basic terminology.

Let us begin by noting that there are three key terms and that together they can be viewed through the lens of grammar. The three terms which require definition are *person*, *formation*, and the *telos* of formation; the grammar of their relationship is that of subject, verb, and indirect object. The person is the subject of formation. He or she (or *we*) is the raw material which is being formed. Formation is the verb, the action that is taking place. It is crucial to note that formation is here a passive, intransitive verb—it is a verb without an object, and where the action chiefly impacts the subject. Despite the grammatical passive, however, formation is not merely something that is done to the person, but rather an action in which the person must actively participate. In this respect, it resembles the Greek Middle tense (actions performed by the subject which have reciprocating action upon the subject).⁶ Theologically speaking, both kinds of action are present in this verb—I both form myself through certain actions and am formed by means of certain actions. Lastly, this process of formation takes an indirect object—I am formed *into something*. Due to the intransitive nature of the verb, a given Christian in formation does not affect any change on the *telos* of formation (I, in being formed, do not change Christ/God). When I have achieved full formation, it is I who will approximate that something, however it is so defined.

From this basic grammar, we can articulate the initial building blocks for our definition of formation. The starting point might look something like this:

⁵ Evan Howard defines Christian spiritual formation as “a Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God.” What this definition possess in expansiveness may come at the expense of its clarity in terminology. (Howard 2018, 18)

⁶ A good example is the verb ‘to wash’—if ‘I wash’ it means I wash myself. In this case I am both the subject and the object of the washing. Greek has the capacity to communicate both these meanings at the same time through its ‘middle’ tense.

→ Formation occurs when a person is formed or is being formed into something.

If Willard is correct that formation is an inevitable property of being a person in the world, then it follows that all persons are subject to formation. It also follows that this formation will not necessarily depend on an articulated *telos*. The basic understanding of *formation* is that it is a process impacting the person toward some articulated or unarticulated end.

To this inevitable but ambiguous process can be added a direction for formation. Given that all persons are being formed, humans can facilitate, and participate, in explicit processes of formation. I can be formed to become a doctor, a store clerk, a revolutionary, a criminal, or a good citizen. In each case the *telos* of the formation will dictate the parameters of the formative process. For example:

→ Medical formation occurs when a person is formed and being formed (according to the standards of medical practice) into a medical *telos* (as defined by that practice).

This intermediate step clarifies how it is that formation can be directed and how it is that formation is determined by the *telos* of a given discipline. When that discipline is religious (for our purposes, 'religious' here can mean supernaturally anchored beliefs that determine the meaning and purpose of human life), it is religious reference points that frame the understanding of formation. Consequently, to such religious formative tasks is added a more explicit theological anthropology. In other words, while it is only in an indirect way that medical formation might depend upon a theological anthropology, Confucian, Christian, or Muslim formation depend explicitly on their theological anthropologies. The definition can be modified as follows:

→ Religious formation occurs when a Religious person (so defined by a given theology) is formed or is being formed (according to Religious agencies) into a Religious *telos* (so defined by a given theological anthropology).

Here we are one step closer to Christian formation, but it is crucial to note the progression. In the most basic sense, formation is to be understood as an innate property of being human in the world. In the next sense, we understand that formation is a process that can be manipulated. In the subsequent sense, we understand that formation can be directed by a body of religious belief and

doctrine which contains a theological anthropology. In the Christian sense, therefore, formation might look like this:

→ Christian formation occurs when a Christian person (so defined by theology) is formed or is being formed (according to Christian agencies) into a Christian *telos* (so defined by theological anthropology).

In Christian formation, therefore, Christian doctrine and belief interacts with the innate formation of human persons to guide that formation toward a specific end. Further explicating the particulars of these processes will be the subject of the following sections, where we examine the Christian person, Christian agencies of formation, and the Christian *telos*.

2. The Person and Formation

The subject of formation is the person, and we must therefore attempt to bring some definition to the concept of person. We must also, however, limit this process of definition quite specifically. A vast wealth of information on the person is available from science, philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines. Additionally, within the discipline of formation the concepts of person and *telos* are intimately related to one another — how we define the indirect object of formation will have a significant structural impact on how we formulate a given theological anthropology. Since covering such a vast literature is impossible, and since dealing with the *telos* of formation is premature in the structure of this study, in this section we will offer only a provisional understanding of the person. To achieve this, we will limit our core sources for information on the person to Christian Scripture. Within this limitation we will seek chiefly to identify the complexity and irreducibility of the person, then locate the person within a community structure.

Persons are Complex and Irreducible

The literature of spiritual formation offers no unifying vision as to the nature of the person; consequently, there is uncertainty with regard to what it is, precisely, that is being formed. Dallas Willard, we noted before, identified the central part of the human being formed as the spirit, or will. In his estimation this was the innermost part of the person receiving formation. Evan Howard identifies the spirit as “the core of our own human personality,” and proceeds to use the term interchangeably with ‘soul.’ (Howard 2018, 12) A wide range of terms is utilized to describe the components of the human person, and we are left to wonder what the precise target of formation is. Is it the spirit? the soul? the will? the mind?

And what, in all of these conceptualizations, is the role of the body? What, even more, is the role of the community?

Christian Scripture—as well as reason, introspection, and intuition—documents in the human person a complex composite of parts. The clearest and simplest divisions are between body and spirit, such as the Genesis account where the human is a combination of matter and ‘spirit’ (the words for spirit and breath are the same).⁷ The author of Hebrews further disambiguates the person when he claims that “...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). In this anthropology, the human has soul, spirit, body, and—whether as a discrete part of a combination of the whole—heart. Other scripture identifies the human ‘mind’ as a component of the person, and suggests, mysteriously, that in the Church they have access to the ‘mind’ of Christ.⁸ When key figures in Church history have attempted to detail further the interior life of the person, they have identified quite a list of components—spirit, mind, rational nature, will, emotion, memory, understanding, and, running parallel to all of these, the body itself.⁹ Which part is the real person? Which is the target of spiritual formation?

For our purposes, attempts to disentangle the complexity of the ‘parts’ of the human person can be divided into two broad camps: physicalists and substance dualists. For physicalists, “[t]he idea that we are thinking, immaterial substances interacting with non-thinking, material bodies is widely thought to be incoherent.” (Inwagen and Zimmerman 2007, 13) “If we exist at all,” van Inwagen, writes, “we’re substances.” (Inwagen and Zimmerman 2007, 203) As substances, in his thinking, we are “composed entirely of elementary particles.” (Inwagen and Zimmerman 2007, 209) To speak of the soul and body as discrete parts is nonsense, on this model, and such an anthropology will naturally bear impact on the formative task. What is to be formed is the personal entity entire, and indexing the anthropological contents of the person becomes a dubious if not

⁷ Ray Anderson in *On Being Human* addresses the complexity of aligning *nephesh* (spirit) from Genesis 2:7 with human uniqueness, since *nephesh* is also utilized for the life-breath of all animals more generally. (Anderson 1991, 20–21) His account is mitigated, in part, by Ancient Near Eastern practices such as the ‘opening of the mouth’ ceremony, whereby an image of the deity is enlivened by the breath of the deity. (Dick 1999) Awareness of these cultural practices significantly informs the reading of Genesis 2, reinforcing the importance of *nephesh* in human composition.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:16

⁹ Augustine in *De Trinitate* identifies in the human person a mirror to the triune personhood of God, a trinity of mind, composed of memory, understanding, and will. Book XV.3.5, *passim*. For a more recent, yet still consonant account of the composition of the interior life, see Evelyn Underhill’s *The House of the Soul*. (Underhill 1947)

unhelpful enterprise rooted in bad philosophical categories. The physicalist account of the person may simplify the anthropological question, but it does not particularly assist us to understand the scope of New Testament instructions regarding the formation of the person.¹⁰

The majority of the Christian tradition inherits some form of substance dualism. Describing this tradition, Josef Pieper observes that it has “steadily maintained there is one being which is in a precise sense both mind and nature simultaneously.” (Pieper 1998, 22) Describing this position anthropologically, Swinburne writes, “A person has a body if there is a chunk of matter through which he makes a difference to the material world, and through which he acquires true beliefs about that world.” (Swinburne 1997, 146) In other words there is an essential anthropological divide between soul and body.¹¹ Within this tradition, many of the modern accounts which focus on expressly ‘spiritual’ formation appear to struggle to identify which part is formed. They therefore struggle to articulate how it is that a given formation interacts with the other ‘parts.’ Willard’s conflation of spirit, mind, and will is dissatisfying, and Mulholland’s formation by Myers–Brigg’s type feels, in retrospect, contrived. The adjective ‘spiritual’ appended to a given model of formation may, in this respect, be unhelpful. It reinforces the concept of formation targeted to certain (not always) specified parts within the human person. Additionally, the language of ‘spiritual’ also establishes a false dichotomy with the concept of ‘physical.’ Charles Williams has identified in the Christian tradition “the vague suggestion that the body has somehow fallen farther than the soul.” (Williams 1956, 56) This latent concept has driven a wedge between formation of the body and formation of the spirit—the spirit is implicitly more pure, more valuable, and a more suitable target for the efforts in formation. The body, consequently, is often given secondary status, an occasionally necessary but lesser component in the process of Christian formation.¹²

It is not my intention here to argue for a specific taxonomy of the human person against other taxonomies. The purpose in highlighting the differences between physicalists and substance dualists is to note how it is that both appear to be reductive. One fails to account for the complexity of the person, the other in accounting for complexity neglects key components of the person or fails to address the whole. Either reductionism negatively impacts formation. If

¹⁰ Admitting of the difficulties interpreting the passage, we might also note that Samuel in one place appears in Scripture *as a disembodied ghost* (1 Sam. 28).

¹¹ For a recent and robust account of Cartesian Dualism, see Farris’s *The Soul of Theological Anthropology* (Farris 2017).

¹² See Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* for a fascinating discussion of formation within ancient philosophy, with special reference to the role that *physics* plays in that formation. (Hadot 1995, 81–144)

formation affects persons *qua* persons, we should expect it to affect whole persons, encompassing the whole range of components—soul, spirit, mind, emotion, understanding, will, memory, and the physical body as well. This is what I mean when I claim that the person is both complex and irreducible.

Persons are Communal

A further consideration in the nature of the person pertains to its communal nature. This is an often overlooked aspect of the human person, and, regrettably, much of the literature in Spiritual Formation is tacitly individualistic.¹³ In a fascinating passage in Dallas Willard's *Renovation of the Heart* he describes the circumstances surrounding a single church which cycled in a six-year period through four consecutive ministers. The first committed adultery, the second left through burnout, the third committed a financial indiscretion, and the fourth also committed adultery and damaged the church. The story itself is sadly unremarkable. What is fascinating is Willard's interpretation of events—he suggests that the primary problem is unacknowledged sin in each individual pastor. That is to say, a failure of personal spiritual formation from within the pastoral office was the chief cause of these four consecutive failures. (Willard and Cavill 2002, 21–23) This account fits Willard's anthropology and thesis—that formation targets the will/spirit, and moreover that formation deals in an explicit way with addressing the sin nature. But this also grossly overlooks the nature of community—and that of systems—in forming the person.

In contrast to this, recent thinking in a discipline called Family Systems Theory identifies a far more central role for the family unit in defining the person. Systems theorist Daniel Papero writes: "The challenge of systems is to understand on an emotional level one's connectedness to family, society, nature, and the earth and to guide oneself responsibly within that awareness." (Papero 1990, 18) Systems theory was born from the research of Murray Bowen, who shifted the attention in various neuroses from the individual to the group. Vincent Foley summarizes that research: "Instead of focusing on the individual as the 'problem,' they [Bowen and other early theorists] shifted the focus to the family unit as the problem. The shift was not simply another way of looking at the family, but represented a new model or paradigm through which the family is viewed." (Papero 1990, v) Building on this research, Edwin Friedman—a Rabbi and student of Bowen's—perceived that the family system mirrored interpersonal operations in religious communities as well. (Friedman 1985) In his research, Friedman shows how it is that the 'symptom bearer'—that is, the person

¹³ For a survey of this, see my article "Bonhoeffer and Bowen Theory: A Theological Anthropology of the Collective Person and its Implications for Spiritual Formation," *The Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* (April 2020).

acting out in a given sin—is more often than not responding to forces within the system. Stresses and anxieties, both present and historic, bear impact on the individual who, when lacking differentiation from the system, expresses the system’s sicknesses in personal bad behaviour.

Systems Theory—viewing the person as fundamentally more collective—provides a compelling alternative analysis to the situation of the church with four ministers in six years. Instead of looking to the individual sin of the minister, or his underdeveloped personal spiritual formation, Systems Theory demands that we take stock of the network of relationships. The minister, then, appears to be a symptom bearer within an unhealthy system of relationships. Systems thinking demands that we look at the church–community itself. It takes as its starting point a belief that persons are fundamentally more collective.

An overemphasis on the individual has a deleterious effect on formation, and yet the Western disposition is largely individualistic. Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self* argues compellingly that a crucial departure point for Western self–perception is found in Kant’s concept of autonomy. (Taylor 2012, 12, 363, 383.) I, as a sovereign individual, debase my own dignity if I submit to heteronomous sources of authority. This, together with the enclosed, Cartesian ‘I,’ provides a driving force for the modern concept of identity, one that manifests itself in a drive to seek for meaning and identity from within the self alone. (Taylor 2012, 183) As a contrast to this, various non–Western anthropologies (which, perhaps ironically, include the anthropology of the biblical world) hold to a more collective identity for the person. Confucian scholar Tu Wei–Ming observes that “Self, in the classical Confucian sense, referred to a center of relationships, a communal quality which was never conceived of as an isolated or isolable entity.” (Tu 1985, 53) On Tu’s account, individualism is a distortion of the person—loss of collective relationships diminishes human identity and capacity.

A further consequence of an overreliance on individualism is a fixation with technique. Taylor notes this connection and sources it in the effects of Enlightenment rationalism and the process of disenchantment. (Taylor 2012, 507) Loss of organic connectedness appears to result in more machine–like approaches to human relationships, in which collective problems (a church with systemic issues) can be misdiagnosed as a singular problem in leadership (plug–and–play clergy). Paul David Lawson, an advocate of Systems Theory, perceptively writes about these forces: “Placing responsibility for the solving of problems of a community on the shoulders of one individual is a core belief of Western Culture.” (Lawson 2001, 2) In other words, an underdetermined anthropology (individualism) distorts Christian practice (formation in communities).

A key objection to more collective accounts of the person is that they risk the loss of the individual. Max Scheler helps us to clarify the role of individual within collectives:

It is therefore *in* the person that the mutually related *individual person* and *collective person* become differentiated. The idea of one is not the 'foundation' of the other. The collective or group person is not composed of individual persons in the sense that it derives its existence from such a composition; nor is the collective person a result of the merely reciprocal agency of individual persons or (subjectively and in cognition) a result of a synthesis of arbitrary additions. It is an experienced *reality*, and not a construction, although it is a starting point for constructions of all types. (Scheler 1985, 522)

In Scheler's thinking, several streams intersect. Notably, his concept is set in contrast to Kantian autonomy—he finds it reductive and dissatisfying. However, he utilizes as a starting point neither the individual person nor the collective person. Both exist at the same time. Collective persons do not come into existence when a critical mass of individuals is reached but pre-exist those masses of individuals. They simply exist, and overlap, in the understanding and expression of groups such as family, nation, or religious subset. They remain two distinctives, and yet they constantly overlap one with another. In Scheler's anthropology, the human maintains individuality, but exists in a constant (and changing) network of collective persons.

For this essay, neither a complete account of collective personhood nor a complete account of Systems Theory is necessary. What is important is to note that that the person being formed is never formed as an individual in isolation from a given group. If collective persons and systems are accurate anthropological accounts of the human, then individualism is an *a priori* distortion of human nature. This is a point that appears to be ratified by the Genesis account of the creation of humankind—"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female He created them*" (Gen. 1:27). If this text is paradigmatic for the human person, then it follows that the essential nature of the human is *group*, man and woman *together*; the *Imago Dei* revealed somehow in relationships with others. Ray Anderson, reflecting on this verse, articulates it succinctly: "the actual form of humanity in its original form is co-humanity, from which all of our knowledge of the human is derived." (Anderson 1991, 45)

In the above section we have argued that the person is complex, that it cannot be reduced to a single part without distortion, and that the person is somehow collective and cannot be treated in a purely individualistic manner. Taken together, these factors can further flesh out our definition of Christian formation, since formation targets a complex person, targets the whole of the complex

person, and targets the person as a centre of relationships. We can modify our general definition accordingly:

→ Christian formation occurs when a Christian person (*complex, irreducible, communal*) is formed or is being formed (according to Christian agencies) into a Christian *telos* (so defined by theological anthropology).

We now turn to verb of our grammar: formation.

3. The Agency of Formation

We have argued thus far that formation is an inevitable component of being human in the world: to live is to be formed. We have further argued for a vision of the complexity, irreducibility, and collectivity of the person. In this section, we will focus on the guided formation of the Christian religious context, and through an examination of Christian Scripture we will highlight three agencies of formation that operate in a Christian theological anthropology. The first, and Scripturally broadest category of formation, is *environment*. The second and best Scripturally documented agency is *ritual*. The third and most explicit Scriptural agency of formation is *worship*.¹⁴ When we have outlined these three agencies we will note how it is that the Church, as a gathered community of Christian persons, provides a unique activation of all three. Indeed, we will argue that the *ecclesia* is inseparable from any account of Christian formation.

Environment

The first agency of formation to consider is the role of environment. The impact of environment on the formation of persons saturates the Scriptural account, but it does so in a largely indirect way. We will highlight just a few passages. Psalm 12:8 records that “The wicked strut about on every side when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.” An environment of wickedness encourages the expression of wickedness, as when the rule of law deteriorates to such a degree that bribery becomes a common, even necessary practice for functioning in a society. In 1 Corinthians 15:33, Paul remarks (quoting an aphorism), “Do not be deceived, ‘bad company corrupts good morals.’” Companionship, including

¹⁴ It should become clearer, as we spin out these agencies, how it is that ritual and worship are to be differentiated from one another. Worship (as I will argue) entails attention that leads to sacrifice; ritual covers all prescribed community practices that facilitate meaning-making. Clearly, these will overlap on occasion; at the same time, the scriptures we highlight for each agency will align with one more than the other.

various metrics in social psychology, impacts the agency of the personal will according to the character of the companionship. The Psalmist laments in Psalm 120:6–7, “Too long has my soul had its dwelling with those who hate peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.” Here, voices that advocate for a change in circumstance—i.e., the lessening of violence—are silenced by their surroundings; the environment curtails the message. Most evocatively of all, perhaps, is Jesus’s great parable of the soils (Mark 4:3–9). In this parable, offered as an interpretive paradigm for the whole ministry of Jesus, receptiveness to the word of God is framed according to the environment of its reception. Whether one is a hard path, stony ground, surrounded by thorns, or good soil, the surrounding environment brings a critical element to the formation of a given Christian person.

Into such native environments, Scripture explicitly advises its readers to change their behaviour relative to those overarching environments. This frames our understanding of a passage like Leviticus 18:1–4,

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. ³You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God.

The Israelites, having left Egypt behind, are commanded also to leave behind the practices and habits of the Egyptians. They had been formed, in other words, by their environment, and the exodus precipitated a new formative environment. But the Israelites were to find themselves in a difficult situation—not only were they commanded to leave behind Egyptian modes of thinking, they were to avoid Canaanite modes of thinking as well. The environment into which they were headed was also to be rejected.¹⁵

In the previous section I drew attention to Family Systems Theory as a way to view the person not as an individual but as a network of relationships. We should note that Systems Theory and Environment, so conceived by Scripture, here overlap significantly. The individualist anthropology which views the human as an isolated unit within his or her environment is liable to neglect the shaping power of one’s family environment. The concept of environment in formation must capture not only the external environment, but also the innate and pervading environment of one’s family relations, religious relations, and civic

¹⁵ This passage is echoed in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, where Paul offers a similar list of behaviours to the Leviticus text, and advises the church at Corinth to leave these practices behind.

relations. Without this awareness, we are liable to misunderstand, misdiagnose, and misapply the potentially distorting power of family relations, religious relations, and even civic relations.¹⁶ Environment is a powerful if quiet agency of formation in any model of formation.

Ritual

A second agency of formation documented in Scripture, much more explicitly than environment, is *ritual*. A significant example of this may be found in the instructions from Exodus 12, on keeping the Passover feast:

¹⁴ Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ On the first day you shall have a holy assembly, and another holy assembly on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them, except what must be eaten by every person, that alone may be prepared by you. ¹⁷ You shall also observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt; therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance. (Ex. 12:14–17)

The nation of Israel was charged to keep regular feasts, as memorials of God's activity, which ritually reminded them of their history with God. The rituals in this case are the consumption of unleavened bread, the killing of a lamb or goat, the spreading of its blood on the doorframe of your house, and the quick consumption of the animal while dressed for travel. In all of these elements, ritual is the conscious performance of activities which embody meaning-making for the community.¹⁷ In the case of the Exodus, performance of this ritual is part of the constitution of Israel as a nation. The rituals form the people into God's people.

¹⁶ Naturally, not all of these features are negative, and the same forces can be structured/manipulated for the positive development of the person. As a positive example of environmental formation, the Grant Study observed 268 Harvard graduates over 75 years and determined that the single most determinative factor in success and stability later in life was warm family relationships in childhood. Environment, in other words, determined the positive ('successful') formation of the person. (Vaillant 2015)

¹⁷ James K. A. Smith ties ritual to desire, writing that "habits are inscribed in our heart through bodily practices and rituals that train the heart, as it were, to desire certain ends." (Smith 2009, 42)

Scriptural rituals also effect epistemology.¹⁸ A clear example of this can be found in Exodus 31:13, “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.’” Faithful performance of Sabbath rituals, in other words, is designed to effect a transformation in knowledge (“*that you may know*”).¹⁹ Of special interest for our purposes is the irreducible role of the physical body in ritual formation. Each year, or each week, a certain practice is to be bodily observed—practices that affect diet, sleep, preparation, and time, and practices that are often tied to harvest seasons. Embodied ritual bridges body, mind, heart, and soul, powerfully joining persons together into meaningful communities.²⁰

We must note that a change is effected between the Old and New Covenants. Critically, Christians believe themselves to be released from the strictures of Old Covenant practices. But that does not mean Christians have been released from the formative power of rituals. Christians continue the practice of ritual gathering (and, indeed, are explicitly discouraged from neglecting it in Hebrews 10:23–25). Christians throughout history have engaged in a ritual meal, modelled on the Passover meal (1 Cor 11). Christians continue to engage in ritual bathing (Acts 10:44–48). In addition, Christians keep several ritualistic feasts (Christmas, Easter), and depending on tradition may add a variety of additional ritual practices to this core group (confession, penance, ordination, marriage, burial, etc.). Rituals infuse Christianity, continuing to provide the meaning-making structures for an embodied Christian life. Importantly, New Testament rituals maintain with their Old Testament counterparts a key feature: they are embodied actions performed in communities, by communities, and for the sake of communities. Ritual actions, commanded by Scripture, are universally community-based.

Worship

The most explicit descriptions of personal formation found in the bible pertain to our final agency of formation, worship. Consider Psalm 115:2–9, which contrasts the worship of Yahweh with the worship of the idols of the nations:

¹⁸ See Cuneo for an account of how “knowing how to engage in ritualized activity is, when all goes well, a way in which we know God.” (Cuneo 2016, 148)

¹⁹ See Dru Johnson’s work for a more in depth account of this ritual epistemology. (Johnson 2016)

²⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes of the ritual habits of surgeons who eat the same meal and wear the same undergarments before each surgery: “They do so not because they are superstitious, but because they sense that this habitual behavior makes it easier for them to devote their undivided attention to the challenge ahead.” (Csikszentmihalyi 2002, 157) In the same way, religious ritual frees the mind for its proper activity.

Why should the nations say,
“Where, now, is their God?”
³But our God is in the heavens;
He does whatever He pleases.
⁴Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of man’s hands.
⁵They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
They have eyes, but they cannot see;
⁶They have ears, but they cannot hear;
They have noses, but they cannot smell;
⁷They have hands, but they cannot feel;
They have feet, but they cannot walk;
They cannot make a sound with their throat.
⁸Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them.
⁹O Israel, trust in the LORD;
He is their help and their shield.

The psalmist answers a challenge—where is your invisible God, O Israelites? His answer is to describe something of the ontology of worship. Idols, made by human hands, have eyes, ears, mouths, and noses, but are only dead matter. They are incapable of touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell. They are dead, and, as verse 8 makes clear, “Those who make them will become like them.” To this conclusion is appended a suggestive tag, namely, that Israel in their worship of the one true God, *will become like Him*. The logic is reasonably clear: worship of dead matter renders the worshipper dead; worship of the living God renders the worshipper *alive*. You will be formed into the image of what you worship.

This logic is repeated in numerous places in the Bible. It becomes part of Isaiah’s call to ministry (Isaiah 6:10ff), framed as a discomfiting curse on Israelite ears. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel pick up on the same language, speaking to the idolatry of Israel.²¹ Jesus adopts this language in his sermon about the Kingdom of God in Matthew, and Luke records these words as Paul’s final, warning sermon in Acts.²² The image is a pervasive, compelling argument documented by the diverse minds of the Scriptural authors, used to describe the state of those who worship idols as well as suggest the state of those who worship the Living God. You become—are formed into—what you worship.

Worship can helpfully be divided into two components—attention and sacrifice—both present in Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:1–2.

²¹ Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2

²² Matthew 13:15, Acts 28:27.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The first part of Paul's appeal is to "the mercies of God." This, in the structure of Romans, refers to the previous eleven chapters of content, where Paul outlines the mission of God and the place of humans within that mission. This is an exhortation to *attend* to the character and content of God's actions known in the past; to attend, in brief, to the person of God. That attention ought to lead to a specific action, namely, sacrifice. This pattern is common enough in the Old Testament—a given patriarch has an encounter with God and, in response to that encounter, offers sacrifice.²³ In Paul's letter to the Romans, he argues that they have encountered God and, in response, there is now an implied need for sacrifice. But instead of the sacrifice of a sheep, goat, or dove, now the sacrifice is the person. The apex of Christian worship is the Christian person offering his or her body for the service of God—the act of becoming a *living* sacrifice. Worship, after Paul's pattern, is attention to God that leads to the offering of bodily life for the service of God.

This essay cannot attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the nature and scope of worship, but an illustration from C.S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms* may helpfully focus our discussion. Wrestling with the nature and performance of praise, Lewis argues first that praise is the natural activity of a person aware of God. When I see something praiseworthy—a thing that is beautiful, good, or true—to offer praise of that praiseworthy object is the most natural response. In fact, in such situations failure to praise displays either a lack of awareness (eyes closed to a sunset), ignorance (sitting inside when the northern lights are in view), or stupidity (being dull or immune to the natural effects of the praiseworthy). With this assertion in hand, it follows that God does not 'deserve' praise in the same sense in which a student might deserve a high mark, but rather "admiration is the correct, adequate or appropriate, response" to God, and "if we do not admire we shall be stupid, insensible, and great losers, we shall have missed something." (Lewis 1986, 92)

Behind this description of praise lies an account of attention. Lewis writes,

He is that Object to admire which (or, if you like, to appreciate which) is simply to be awake, to have entered the real world; not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all. The incomplete and

²³ The Exodus event—where Israel encounters God in Egypt and travels to Sinai for sacrifice—is the most significant, and perhaps paradigmatic, example of this.

crippled lives of those who are tone deaf, have never been in love, never known true friendship, never cared for a good book, never enjoyed the feel of the morning air on their cheeks, never (I am one of these) enjoyed football, are faint images of it. (Lewis 1986, 92)

Lewis argues that if we are able to praise God properly, it will be because we have been *looking* at Him; we will have *noticed* Him. To notice Him is to notice the praiseworthy. Attention to God as an object of apprehension ought to generate worship as a natural consequence. Here, Paul and Lewis appear to be of one accord.

Fascinatingly, Lewis adds a third feature to his consideration of praise: the praiseworthy naturally invites its viewers into community. Lewis writes,

...just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. (Lewis 1986, 94–95)

Lewis suggests that the grand vista is better when viewed alongside a friend, the best dessert better when shared, and that by extension praise of God is completed when in community. Not only is the praise magnified by companionship (so that, in Lewis's words, it "completes the enjoyment" [Lewis 1986, 95]), praise is also crippled without community. Contemplation of the divine, he suggests, drives the contemplative into the sharing of that vision with another. Unspoken praise is incomplete praise; unshared worship is incomplete worship.

Worship, then, is the central, explicit pillar of Christian formation. That to which you attend, and that to which you sacrifice, is that into which you are being formed.²⁴ In the words of A.W. Tozer, "We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God." (Tozer 1965, 9) Attention and sacrifice to the living God will render you a living being; attention and sacrifice to lesser beings, or creatures, or idolatries, or thought forms, will render you a lesser—if not a dead—being. Additionally, praise/worship naturally generates communities—gathered bodies of persons sharing attention focused on a specific object.²⁵ We will return to a fuller explication of this object and process when we examine the *telos* of formation in the next section.

²⁴ Schmemmann, consonant with this understanding of worship, argues that the proper designation for the human creature is *homo adorans*, suggesting that we become most human when we worship rightly. (Schmemmann 2004, 15)

²⁵ People naturally gather into communities around common interests—interests that they find praiseworthy, or enjoyable. But the gathering is a natural occurrence, consequent to the nature of praise as human creatures, and therefore while people will find themselves gathered around the praise of God, they can also be gathered around the praise of Sunsets, Birds, or Star Trek. They

Agencies of Formation and the Church

In this section we have documented three agencies of formation rooted in Christian Scripture: environment, ritual, and worship. We will note at this point how it is that all three of these agencies combine with a unique focus in the Church. The Church, of course, is the gathered body of believers, referred to in varying ways as the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of God, and the bride of Christ.²⁶ Each is a collective image for a unified group of people, somehow joined in relationship to one another through Christ and by means of faith in the person of Christ. Functionally, what the Church does on a weekly basis is *gather* (forming an environment), utilizing *rituals* (liturgy, eucharist, baptism, etc.), for *worship* (directed attention at the Triune God). All three formative agencies from Scripture are prominent in the gathered life of the Church, and it follows that the *ecclesia* operates (or should operate) as a hot house of formation. In point of fact, if the anthropology and processes of formation discussed thus far are accurate—of the complexity, irreducibility, and collectivity of the person, formed by worship, ritual, and environment—then in a crucial way *all Christian formation is ecclesiological formation*. Worship, ritual, and environment are irremovable from the groups in which they take place. Individual worship fails to praise in a group. Individual ritual fails to activate the community purpose of the ritual. Individual ‘environment’ doesn’t exist.

We can now to modify our definition one step further:

→ Christian formation occurs when a Christian person (*complex, irreducible, communal*) is formed or is being formed (**by ecclesiological environment, ritual, and worship**) into a Christian *telos* (so defined by theological anthropology).

Christian formation is participation in the life of the Church which forms the Christian into its *telos*. It is to an account of that *telos* that we now turn.

4. The *Telos* of Formation

Thus far we have argued for a definition of formation, clarified the person being formed, and documented key scriptural metrics of formation. In this final section

can also gather themselves around niche interests, such as horror novels, masochism, or deeply deviant behaviours. The gathered communities in turn grant a kind of permissiveness to the performance and celebration of these objects. The point, to quote the prophet Bob Dylan, is that “You gotta serve somebody. It may be the Devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.”

²⁶ 1 Peter 2:9, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, Revelation 19.

we must ask a further question: formation into what? In many ways we have left the most important inquiry last, since the *telos* of formation determines the particulars of all that precedes. In this section we will re-examine some common answers to the question of *telos* and propose an alternative, rooted in the nature of worship. Then we will turn to the nature of the Triune God and how that doctrine forms formation. We will then be in a place to complete our definition of Spiritual Formation.

Common Teloi and Worship

Most models of Christian Spiritual Formation appeal, when articulating the *telos* of formation, to some concept of ‘Christlikeness.’ Without a doubt, there is Scriptural warrant for such an understanding, and Galatians 4:19 might be taken as paradigmatic for the vision of formation: “My children, with whom I am again in labor *until Christ is formed in you.*” The goal—the end—of formation, is to be in some sense *like Christ*. And yet precisely what is entailed by ‘Christlikeness’ in its various advocates is not always as clear. Willard argues that “Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ’s will.” (Willard 2019) To be formed is to have a Christlike *will* (or spirit). Mulholland wants Christians to be “conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” (Mulholland 1993, 12) But what image is it, what part of the person does it target, and is it—in the context of the MBPI—chiefly for the sake of their own self-knowledge? Howard wants formation to change persons “into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God.” (Howard 2018, 18) Being formed means to be somehow like the life of God, and like the gospel of God. Jimmy Tan maintains that, “Spiritual formation is thus understood both as engaging our response to God in prayer and also as expressing our life in God in all aspects of our being as a reflection of our deepening communion with God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit.” (Tan 2018, 167) Is formation here Christlikeness, or communion? Can these be separated? Or does the formed person express his or her Christlikeness by means of communion?²⁷

While there is obvious (and traditional) merit in regarding Christlikeness alone as the *telos* of formation, at the same time I suspect that this fails to tell the whole story. I want to suggest that Christlikeness as a goal for formation *misses something important*. That important something becomes clearer when we consider again the nature of worship.

²⁷ Smith, in his argument for desire, claims (rightly) that “our love is always ultimately aimed at a *telos*”; however, he proceeds to identify this *telos* as “a picture of the good life that pulls us toward it, thus shaping our actions and behavior.” This, as a *telos* for formation, seems to me inadequate for the purposes of Christian spiritual formation. (Smith 2009, 57)

Worship, we argued above, is attention and sacrifice that inevitably forms the worshipper. We become what we worship. It follows that imperfect worship will lead to imperfect formation, while perfect worship should lead to perfect formation. The effects of sin corrupt the mind, heart, desires, and flesh in human persons, so we should anticipate perfect worship to be an impossibility. And yet, human persons should seek, and continually strive for, ever more perfect worship of the one true God. If the logic of Psalm 115 is correct, then the more perfected the worship of the one true God, the more life the person, and community of persons, should expect to embody.

Christians confess that Christ is God, therefore worshipping Christ is a *telos* that should activate formation in a positive way. However, if it is correct that we become what we worship, this target ought to be subtly altered. Christlikeness, without some defining clarifications, can focus on the person of Christ exclusive of his Triune interrelatedness. In other words, within Christian theology there is still a greater *telos* behind Christlikeness—that is, the nature of Christ’s divinity is as a member of the Trinity. Christian worship, which determines Christian formation, ought to be directed to the fulness of the Godhead, not merely a portion. This suggests that the true *telos* of Christian formation is to be formed into the image of the Triune God. In this respect, the Triune God *contains* Christlikeness as a part; perhaps the uniquely human part, but still a part within a whole.²⁸

(Mal)Formation, and a Triune Telos

If these assertions are correct—that worship determines human formation, and that the proper worship of the Church is the Triune God—then the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is consequently the single most important doctrine for Christian formation. It determines what Christians are becoming, the focus of Christian rituals and worship, should shape the Christian ecclesiological environment, and sets the boundaries of theological anthropology. How Christian theology understands what it means to be human in the world in the image of God depends on its understanding of the nature of that Triune God.

It is far beyond this essay’s parameters to outline the full contours of Trinitarian personhood and its consequences for theological anthropology. Three brief comments will have to suffice.

²⁸ Alternatively—and to bring this thesis into accord with the Scriptures—Christians are to become *like Christ* in his perfect imaging of a human in the image of the Triune God. In the words of Richard Meux Benson, “Christ must be incorporated into us till there remains no faculty that is not full of Christ.” (Benson 1966, 81) Christians are not merely to be like Christ, they are to be like Christ in the way that he is the image of the Triune God.

First, if Western individualism is as deeply entrenched as we have suggested, then the operative disposition of a given Christian will be to approach the Godhead *as* an individual. In other words, this suggests that it is not that Christlikeness is an inadequate *telos* for Christian formation, it is that rampant individualists warp that *telos* into an individualist Christ. Christ is apprehended not in the full form of his Trinitarian selfhood, but as an instrumentalized portion of it.

Second, my proposal that the proper *telos* of Christian formation is the Triune God suggests certain criticisms of existing Christian forms of worship, namely, that worship which (even subtly) neglects the Trinity as its object may result in malformation. A broad spectrum of churches in the past 100 years have focused attention on the Holy Spirit as the chief object of worship. This has generated an ecclesiological praxis often characterized by emotional worship—in other words, the emotional content of a Spirit-focused worship service is the natural litmus test of its value. Unfortunately, the prioritization of experience in those worshipping contexts has been matched by a poverty of doctrine—they have the Spirit, but the Father and the Son have been diminished. At the other end of the spectrum, certain cessationist churches attend to the Son (and occasionally the Father) to the conscious neglect of the Spirit. In praxis, a given Son-focused worship service emphasizes doctrine (and the security of words) to the almost complete neglect of experience. The result of their doctrinarian disposition, often as not, appears to generate a cold and lifeless piety. Consonant with this, it is suggestive that excessively Christocentric theologies—theologies which are quite favourable in an environment of Western individualism—will malform the person by virtue of its distorted *telos*.²⁹

Third, it is also the case that there are two broad trinitarian camps that have expressed themselves in Church history: the Orthodox East and the Catholic West. It is highly suggestive that in the Christian West where Augustinian monism has reigned, ecclesial polity has focused on the single figure of the Pope. In the Christian East, however, where Cappadocian trinitarianism has reigned, ecclesial polity has focused on the college of bishops. In each ecclesial body, their political formation would appear to be linked to their worshipping *telos*. There may here be a curious parallel to the earlier discussion about approaches to the human person. In the same way that physicalism and substance dualism were found inadequate for the purposes of spiritual formation—but between them a statement of personal irreducibility, complexity, collectivity was asserted—so trends toward monism and tritheism are similarly inadequate. To the degree that a given Christian theology over-emphasizes the oneness of God, persons formed

²⁹ To my knowledge, it is a curious observation that no churches at the moment exhibit an excessive focus on the Father.

in that image will be distorted; to the degree that a given Christian theology over-emphasizes the threeness of God, persons formed will be distorted. The Triune image that is the object of formation must be one *and* three, equally divine but expressed in a subtle relationship—irreducible, complex, and communal—a co-inherence of persons.³⁰

We have argued that only the Triune God can unlock the fulness of human personhood. This may be a key meaning to the description of humanity in Genesis 1:27. Humans are not made expressly in the image of Christ (although in his humanity we share an immediate resemblance to Christ that we do not with the Father or the Spirit), but in the image *of God*, Triune, Three-in-One.³¹ To be properly formed into our human nature, it follows, is to be formed into the image of the Triune God.

In this section I have argued that the worship of the church establishes the *telos* of formation, that the proper object of Christian worship is the Triune God, and that therefore a given doctrine of the Trinity inevitably forms, or malforms, a given person. We can finalize our definition of formation as follows:

→ Christian formation occurs when a Christian person (*complex, irreducible, communal*) is formed or is being formed (*by ecclesiological environment, ritual, and worship*) into a Christian *telos* (***an image of the Triune God***).

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that formation is inevitable but can be shaped. Formation can be divided fundamentally into three grammatical parts—the subject of formation (the person), the verb of formation (passive and intransitive), and the indirect object of formation (a given *telos*). With this grammar in view, I described the person as complex, irreducible, and communal, the process of formation as grounded in environment, ritual, and worship, and the indirect object of formation as the image of the Triune God, the proper object of worship for the Christian Church.

Two final observations are in order. First, an astute reader may note that I have not given space to the explicit role of the Holy Spirit in formation. This is not an oversight. Rather, in my understanding of pneumatology I perceive the Spirit's role to be in partnership with every aspect of the formative task—from the proto-

³⁰ See G.L. Prestige for a full account of the patristic harmony achieved in Trinitarian theology, and for a definition of their understanding of co-inherence. (Prestige 1936, 284–301)

³¹ We have not dealt here with the question of sin in formation. Suffice it to say, the account of the fall implies the corruption of the *imago*, and the business of formation can be seen as its further corruption or restoration.

evangelistic to the fulness of Triune Life (which, of course, couldn't be properly Triune without the Spirit). The Spirit pervades all the work of Christian formation and cannot easily be separated out from any part of it.

Second, it is important to note the thread of collectivity running throughout this essay—the person is communal, Christian worship is communal, and the Christian God is communal. Reductionisms at any point (into individualist persons or an individualist God), create distortions in the person. This suggests, again, that the more robust the account of the Triune nature of God—and the more it features in Christian worship—the better persons in the Church will apprehend their communal, collective natures. And yet, like the Triune God, their unity as collective persons comes not at the expense of their individuation. This should be the anticipated fruit of proper Triune worship—personhood, found in community, fully formed in the *Imago Dei Trinitatis*.

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