

Was Paul among the contemplatives?



Authors:

James Panaggio¹
Ernest Van Eck¹

Affiliations:

¹Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Project leader: E. van Eck

Project number: 2400030

Description:

This research is part of the project, 'Socio-Cultural Readings', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Ernest Van Eck,
ernest.vaneck@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 05 Mar. 2016

Accepted: 26 July 2016

Published: 30 Sept. 2016

How to cite this article:

Panaggio, J. & Van Eck, E., 2016, 'Was Paul among the contemplatives?', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(3), a3399. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3399>

Copyright:

© 2016. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article offers a critique of the contemporary Contemplative Tradition's view of spiritual transformation from the lens of the universally accepted letters of Paul. The article argues that contemporary contemplatives, especially Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, differ from Paul in three principle areas. Firstly, whereas Paul's concept of transformation is based largely on objective realities, representatives of the Contemplative Tradition tend to focus on subjective realities. Secondly, contemporary contemplatives view transformation as coming as one imitates the life of Christ, his daily disciplines and activities, whereas Paul's view centres on the death of Christ as foundational to the Christian's identity and thus vital to the way they live out their faith. Finally, the cornerstone of the contemporary Contemplative Tradition's view of spiritual transformation is the belief that the essential means by which transformation takes place is engagement in the spiritual disciplines. It is argued that many of the activities that are denominated as 'spiritual disciplines' are not in fact 'transformative' activities, and thus do not fit the category of spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, this study insists that Paul seldom links the practice of the disciplines with the means of transformation, offering instead five examples of specific means of transformation that flow out of Paul's accepted letters.

Introduction

Was Paul among the contemplatives? According to contemporary contemplatives such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard the answer is a resounding, 'yes'! Foster (1998) refers to the Contemplative Tradition as one of the six major 'streams' of Christian tradition. According to Renovaré, the spiritual renewal ministry started by Foster, the main focus of the Contemplative Tradition is 'spending time with God in prayer and meditation' (Renovaré 1998). A perusal of the now vast literature of contemporary contemplatives demonstrates that one of their chief convictions is that the practice of the spiritual disciplines is necessary for spiritual transformation. And according to major adherents of this very influential 'stream' Paul definitely was a contemplative. This is evidenced by Dallas Willard's assertion:

it is clear that ascetic practices were seriously engaged in by Jesus as well as by St. Paul. Both were upon occasion intensely involved, for long periods of time, with solitude, fasting, prayer, poverty and sacrificial service, and not because those conditions were unavoidable. It would seem, then, that those who would follow Christ, and follow Paul as he followed Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), must find in those practices an important part of what they should undertake as His disciples. (Willard 1985:5)

The Contemplative Tradition flourished in the desert fathers of the fourth century and was maintained in the practices of the Catholic mystics during the Middle Ages. This same Contemplative Tradition which experienced a revival in the twentieth century through the writings of contemporary Catholic mystics has now overflowed these borders and become very influential in the Evangelical Church.¹ Authors such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard, both evangelicals, have written extensively about the spiritual disciplines and their essential role for spiritual transformation and fit into this contemplative 'stream'. Both have been extremely influential in bringing the ideas of the Contemplative Tradition into the mainstream of the evangelical movement.² It is these authors who claim unequivocally that Paul was among the contemplatives!

1. In the literature on Christian 'spirituality' diverse titles are used to describe the Contemplative Tradition. Bruce Demarest (1999:75–79) simply refers to it as 'Christian Spirituality'. Others refer to it as Christian 'mysticism' or the Spiritual Formation Movement. We have chosen to follow Foster and refer to it as the Contemplative Tradition.

2. Demarest (1999:76) writes, 'Foster arguably has done more than any other contemporary evangelical to unfold the treasures of Christian spirituality for the church'. Yet Foster writes, 'It was through the friendship and teaching of Dallas Willard that I first saw the meaning and necessity of the Spiritual disciplines. His life is the embodiment of the principles of this book' (Foster 1978:vi). Later Foster adds, 'Those teachings gave me the Weltanschauung, the worldview, upon which I could synthesise all my academic and biblical training' (Foster 1978:xiv). The significant influence that both Foster and Willard have had on the Evangelical Church, especially in the area of spiritual formation, is the primary reason why we have chosen to interact with their writings in this study.

Note: This article represents a reworked version of aspects from the PhD thesis of James Panaggio, titled *Paul and spiritual transformation: Evaluating the contemporary Contemplative Tradition in light of Paul's μωρη texts*, in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, with Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck as supervisor.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

But does this claim have adequate biblical support? Our goal in this article is to analyse such claim. More specifically we hope to contrast several aspects of Paul's concept of transformation with that espoused by the modern Contemplative Tradition, especially evangelicals, Foster and Willard.

Although there is no doubt that Paul and the contemporary contemplatives share certain theological convictions regarding the process of transformation in the life of Christian disciples,³ there are fundamental ways in which they disagree. This study will focus upon three such areas of disagreement.

Transformation based upon objective versus subjective realities

Whereas Paul's view of transformation is undergirded by certain objective realities that are true for all Christ-followers,⁴ the adherents of the Contemplative Tradition focus on certain subjective realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in their differing emphases on the vital concept of union with Christ. For Paul, although union with Christ has definite experiential benefits – the one united with Christ enjoys real communion with the living Christ – yet this union is rooted in objective historical events – the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵ These objective historical realities serve as the basis for Paul's theology of transformation. Yet Willard and Foster seldom address the objective side of union with Christ, preferring to focus on the subjective side instead. For example, Willard comments:

So our union with God – his presence with us, in which our aloneness is banished and the meaning and full purpose of human existence is realised – consists chiefly in a conversational relationship with God while we are each consistently and deeply engaged as his friend and collaborer in the affairs of the kingdom of the heavens. (Willard 1999:56)

Thus for Willard, union with Christ is almost exclusively subjective. It refers to our personal relationship with the indwelling Christ who is the remedy to our loneliness. Later he writes:

3. For example, both the modern contemplatives and Paul recognise that the goal of all spiritual transformation is to be conformed to the image of Christ and that genuine transformation is always a work of God's grace so that humankind's efforts alone will never be capable of producing real change.

4. See for example Romans 6:1–14 and Galatians 2:20. Compare the comment by Moo (1996:355), 'Dying and rising with Christ refers to the participation of the believer in the redemptive events themselves; and the ultimate basis for Paul's appeal in this chapter is not what happened when we were baptised, but what happened when Christ died and rose again. That death of his to sin is also our death to sin (vv. 2, 6, 9–10); and that resurrection of his to new life, in which we will "participate" in the future (vv. 5b and 8b), is even now working to enable us to "walk in newness of life" (vv. 4b, 11)'. In other words, the capacity to live a new life is based upon the objective reality of Christ's death and resurrection and the believer's participation in these events, not the believer's own subjective experience.

5. Campbell (2012:327) writes, 'in the mind of Paul, union with Christ is inextricably linked to the work of Christ'. Ridderbos (1975:59) adds, 'It has come to be understood increasingly, however, that with this "mystical" explanation of "in Christ" and "with Christ" one is on the wrong track. This is evident even from the fact that "being in Christ," "crucified, dead, raised, seated in heaven with him," obviously does not have the sense of a communion that becomes reality only in certain sublime moments, but rather of an abiding reality determinative for the whole of the Christian life, to which appeal can be made at all times, in all sorts of connections, and with respect to the whole church without distinction ... Rather than with certain experiences, we have to do here with the church's "objective" state of salvation'.

But in the progress of God's redemptive work communication advances into *communion* and communion into *union*. When the progression is complete we can truly say, 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' ... When communion advances into union, however, the sense of 'mine' and 'thine' may often be absent ... This condition of union is realised in a marriage where the two partners have indeed become one. For this reason marriage can serve as a picture of the relation between Christ and his church, and between the soul and God. It is this union beyond communion that Paul speaks of when he says the redeemed have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) as well as when he exhorts us to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). (Willard 1999:155 emphasis in the original)

Evidently for Willard, union with Christ is part of a process towards which one must strive, but not all achieve. As our personal relationship matures it can reach a level of intimacy that is akin to the marriage relationship, a true union. Those who do not achieve this communion which eventually grows into union cannot truly say the words of Galatians 2:20. But is Paul asserting that co-crucifixion with Christ and the indwelling of Christ in the Christ-follower are merely subjective experiences and thus the privilege of only those who somehow reach communion and then union? Willard seems to be espousing this. The problem is his truncated view of union with Christ as something mostly subjective and as the 'end' of a process of deepening communion, without the undergirding indicative which is so vital to Pauline theology and which is objective in nature.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines* Willard attempts to work out concretely how our habits are transformed. Our essential response, he claims, is found in Romans 6:13 where Paul expounds three stages of personal redemption. The first stage is 'baptised into Christ'. Regarding this stage he explains:

We were baptised *into* Christ and brought to 'experiential union' with him. What he experienced *then* we *now* also experience through our *communion* with him. And this also means that we share his death to sin powers that run the world. As they were not what moved *him*, so they are also not what move us. We participate in the new form of life, the one in Jesus and the one so powerful it could overcome physical death. Remember, this is a matter of what we find in our conscious experience. This new form of life provides not only new powers for our human self, but also, as we grow, a new center of organisation and orientation for all of the natural impulses of our bodily self. (Willard 1988:114 emphasis in the original)

Although we agree with Willard that Paul is teaching that our baptism into Christ results in death to sin and the powers behind sin, we question Willard's conclusion that Paul is emphasising our subjective experience. Is our union something that we now experience through our communion with him, as Willard asserts, and thus, by implication, when we lack vital communion with him fails to be true, or is it something that is true regardless of the state of our communion? This is not to deny a subjective side to our union with Christ, but rather to observe how Willard seems

to neglect the objective side, which for Paul is fundamental to our identity in Christ and thus crucial to our capacity to overcome sin's practical reign in our lives. Paul's point is that we have in fact been baptised into Christ and this objective historical reality has practical implications – we are dead to sin and thus sin has absolutely no right to rule over us (Rm. 6:2–11). This is the case whether or not we subjectively feel that it is true or whether we are presently enjoying sweet communion with Christ. My union does not change, although my enjoyment and appropriation of the benefits of this union may be affected.

Willard does not seem to grasp this side of the believer's union with Christ commenting:

It is less a status than it is a modulated flow of life in which transformative experiences of God come and go, along with a constant undertone of divine presence interwoven with the events of a normal human existence. (Willard 2006:35)

Once again, he sees union with Christ as largely subjective and thus misses the objective side.

The Pauline concept of union with Christ differs significantly from Willard's stated view. For Paul the most notable feature of his concept of transformation is its rootedness in the redemptive work of Christ and the believer's union with Christ-crucified, buried and resurrected.⁶ It is precisely here, at the cross and the empty tomb, that the believer finds the only glimmer of hope for true life-change. The possibility of transformation does not stand upon the strength or depth of the Christian's commitment, or the passion of his individual efforts of personal reformation, nor on the rites and rituals he engages in, no matter how pious they may be. The possibility of transformation rests squarely upon Christ and what he has already accomplished on the sinner's behalf, an accomplishment that then accrues to the Christian's benefit through her union with Christ by faith. Again, the possibility of transformation rests not upon the Christian's subjective fluctuating experience, but rather on certain objective historical realities – the redemptive work of Christ and the believer's union with Christ in these saving works.

This crucial truth so evident in Paul's theology of transformation is not central in the teachings of contemporary contemplatives. Paul bases his view of transformation on objective realities; the contemplatives tend to base theirs on subjective experiences.

6. It is essential to grasp, as a part of the Christ-believer's union with Christ, the profound importance of the believer's co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ. Thus Paul can exclaim, 'I have been crucified with Christ' (Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι, Gl. 2:19) and 'our old man was crucified with him' (Rm. 6:6). Also, Paul asserts that 'we have been buried with him' (συνετάφημεν αὐτῷ Rm 6:4). And if we have died and been buried with him Paul is confident that we will also share with him in his resurrection (Rm. 6:5, 8). Paul is making a radical claim in these texts: Christ-followers participate in Christ's redeeming works through their union with him. They die together with him, are buried together with him, and rise together with him. His death becomes their death just as his resurrection becomes their resurrection. These are not pipe dreams or pious platitudes; these are deep objective realities that the believer experiences by faith and must reckon to be true in daily practice (Rm. 6:11). The person who is 'in Christ' shares in Christ's redemptive works, having been crucified and resurrected together with Christ. Again, these are objective realities and not mere subjective experiences. There are subjective, 'this-worldly' results, for sure, but even during a 'bad day' these truths hold up and remain objectively true for the one who by faith is 'in Christ'.

Transformation through imitation of the life of Christ versus reliance on the death of Christ

A second point of separation between Paul and the Contemplative Tradition is that the Contemplative Tradition focuses on the life of Christ – imitation of the way he lived and specifically the practices he engaged in – whereas Paul centres his view of transformation around the death of Christ and its impact on our identity and thus ultimately, the way we should live in light of this death (Romans 6:6). It is not that the Contemplative Tradition says nothing about the death of Christ, nor that Paul says nothing about the life of Christ. The point rather is one of emphasis. Notice, for example, Foster's comment:

As Jesus walked this earth, living and working among all kinds and classes of people, he gave us the divine paradigm for conjugating all the verbs of our living. Too often in our concern to make doctrinal points we rush to expound upon Jesus' death, and in so doing we neglect Jesus' life. This is a great loss. Attention to Jesus in his living gives us important clues for our living ... We are, to be sure, reconciled to God by Jesus' death, but even more, we are 'saved' by his life (Rom 5:10) – *saved* in the sense of entering into his eternal kind of life, not just in some distant heaven but right now in the midst of our broken and sorrowful world. When we carefully consider how Jesus lived while among us in the flesh, we learn how we are to live – truly *live* – empowered by him who is with us always even to the end of the age. We then begin an intentional *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ. (Foster 1998:3, emphasis in the original)

Foster appears to be saying that, although the death of Christ brings reconciliation, the life of Christ brings even more: it brings salvation. But Foster misunderstands Paul. What Paul wrote to the Roman Christians was 'For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, *now that we are reconciled*, shall we be saved by his life'. The addition of '*now that we are reconciled*' is important to Paul's overall point, serving as the foundation for what follows, 'we shall be saved by his life'. Reconciliation precedes salvation; it is the basis for what follows, namely salvation by his life. Foster's exclusion of this phrase puts the emphasis where Paul never intended it to be. In addition, Foster quotes Romans 5:10 without considering Romans 5:9, yet Romans 5:10 is a restatement of Romans 5:9 with the exception that Paul substitutes reconciliation language for justification language (Moo 1996:311). Therefore, we cannot miss the parallelism as Foster does in Figure 1.

| | A1 | B1 | C1 |
|---------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Rm 5:9 | δικαιοθέντες νῦν | ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ | σωθῆσόμεθα δι' αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς |
| | A2 | B2 | C2 |
| Rm 5:10 | ὄντες κατηλλάγημεν | διὰ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ | σωθῆσόμεθα ἐν τῇ ζωῇ αὐτοῦ |
| | πολλῶ μᾶλλον καταλλαγέντες | | |

Figure 1: Interpretation of Romans 5:9–10.

Paul's point is that justification (A1) and reconciliation (A2) come through Christ's death (B1 and B2). If we have in fact experienced this justifying, reconciling work through the death of Christ, then there is assurance that we will likewise be saved by his life (C2). But to what does this salvation refer? Foster claims that it is our future and present experience of eternal life. But when verses 9 and 10 are viewed together it is evident that Paul is referring to salvation from the wrath of God not to a *quality* of life that we can experience both now and in the future. Perhaps we could restate Paul's emphasis by asking, how is it that a person can escape God's wrath and thus condemnation? Paul's answer is, 'through the reconciliation and justification won by Christ through his death'. In addition we must ask, to what does being saved by 'his life' refer? What is 'his life'? For Foster it refers to Christ's earthly existence, his lifestyle and specifically the spiritual disciplines in which he engaged. But contextually Paul has in mind, not Jesus' earthly existence, but rather his resurrection. Christ's vindicating resurrection secures our salvation from God's wrath. Paul is not speaking about Jesus' earthly life as the purveyor of eternal life. Foster has misunderstood Paul and reinterpreted his words (specifically, 'his life') to support his conviction that it is the earthly life of Christ that is key to a person's transformation. Such a focus is not what Paul intended and is not supported by the evidence of Paul's letters.

Willard also sees the earthly life of Christ as the key to a person's transformation:

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father. (Willard 1988:ix)

Thus the key to Christlikeness is imitation of the life of Christ and specifically the habits he engaged in. Foster (1998:21–22) speaking of Jesus states, 'he trained himself in prayer, solitude, worship, and like disciplines. And we are to imitate him in this, as in all central aspects of his living'. Willard (1988:5) agrees, 'The secret involves living as he lived in the entirety of his life – adopting his overall life-style'. And if we ask, what does it mean in concrete terms to live as Christ lived, Willard responds:

I am writing about what it *means* to follow him and about how following him fits into the Christian's salvation. I want to explain, with some precision and detailed fullness, how activities such as solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, service, celebration – disciplines for life in the spiritual kingdom of God and activities in which Jesus deeply immersed himself – are essential to the deliverance of human beings from the concrete power of sin and how they can make the experience of the easy yoke a reality in life. (Willard 1988:10 emphasis in the original)

Thus for Willard and Foster the key to a transformed life is to live like Jesus. And to live like Jesus requires that one practice

the same spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. In other words, imitation of the lifestyle and daily practices of Jesus is what makes a person 'new'. Thus we read:

so, basically, to put off the old person and put on the new we only follow Jesus into the activities that he engaged in to nurture his own life in relation to the Father ... his use of solitude, silence, study of scripture, prayer, and service to others all had a disciplinary aspect in his life. And we can be very sure that what he found useful for conduct of his life in the Father will also be useful for us. (Willard 1997:354–355)

But does this square with what Paul taught regarding the key to a transformed life? There is no doubt that Paul often spoke of imitating Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; Phlp. 2:5:5–11; 1 Th. 1:5–7; cf. Rm. 15:1–3) or Paul himself (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Gl. 4:12; Phlp. 3:17; 2 Th. 3:7–9) or one of the churches (1 Th. 2:14). However, generally these are calls to follow specific attitudes or virtues.⁷ That is, the focus of imitation is ethical (Clarke 1998:340). Paul seldom ties this imitation to the means of a personal transformation. In fact, more often imitation is described as an evidence of a transformation that has already taken place (1 Th 1:6–10), not the key to seeing transformation occur. Hence, imitation for Paul is the natural result or product of a transformed life, not the vehicle that brings it about. Thus, though Paul does in fact call the Christian community to imitate Jesus, nonetheless, a call to imitate the daily habits and disciplines Jesus engaged in as espoused by the Contemplative Tradition is not prominent.⁸

So then, if Paul's emphasis regarding personal transformation does not rest on an imitation of the earthly life of Christ, on what does it depend? The death of Christ! Paul illustrates this most powerfully in Romans 6:6. In Romans 6:2–4 Paul asserts that the believer has died with Christ. Then in verse 5 Paul concludes that this death with Christ guarantees a resurrection with him. What is the basis of this confidence? Romans 6:6 answers, 'because we know this, our "old man" has died!' Paul grounds the Christian's confidence in her co-crucifixion with Christ. The 'old man', which refers to the pre-conversion status of the person, what she was 'in Adam', is gone because of her union with Christ in his death. But then Paul shares the assured result of having died with Christ, 'the body of sin was destroyed'. That is, that aspect of our person that lived enslaved to sin has been decisively neutralised and sin's rightful reign over the disciple's life has ended. She no longer must live as an unwilling pawn to sin's inclinations. She is free! This implies a radical transformation resulting in new life – victory over sin and freedom to live God's will – all of which is firmly based upon the death of Christ. This is not

7. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul calls the Corinthians to imitate his commitment to seek the benefit of others and not his own benefit so that people might be saved. This is the same attitude Paul witnessed in Christ. Also, in Philippians 2:5:5–11 the call is to imitate the mindset that Christ displayed in his self-sacrificing incarnation and death. Rather than seeking to exalt self, Paul calls the congregation to follow Christ's example of selfless humility whereby he emptied himself of the enormous privileges he enjoyed and chose costly obedience instead. In Romans 15:1–3 although Paul does not use the language of mimesis the idea is clearly present. If love and unity are to predominate in the congregation then the prevailing attitude must be the one Christ himself portrayed, an attitude whereby no one seeks self-pleasure but rather the good of the other.

8. It is interesting to note that though Jesus invited people to follow him and obey his teachings, he is never recorded to have called people to imitate his daily habits. The language of mimesis is missing.

mere doctrinal truth; it is practical Christian living. The Christian *has* died with Christ and therefore *is* truly able to conquer sin in daily practice. Now she must live consistent with this truth.

This same emphasis on the death of Christ rather than his earthly life as the basis for transformation is implied in several passages in Galatians. Paul begins his letter by declaring that Christ's death 'delivered us from the present evil age' (Gl. 1:4). Later Paul ends the same letter by affirming that it is through 'the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' that 'the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gl. 6:14). In these two statements Paul avows that something dramatic has occurred that has resulted in a wholesale transformation in his existence. Paul's whole 'location' has changed. He no longer lives in the sphere of darkness ruled by the forces of darkness. He no longer is a helpless slave to the warped system that opposes God. The death of Christ has 'relocated' Paul. He has been transferred from Satan's realm, from Adam's world, to the kingdom of Christ, to the realm of the Holy Spirit. Although Paul does not specify in these verses the practical consequences of this resettlement project, they are nonetheless implied. This 'evil age' no longer enslaves those who have died with Christ. The 'world' no longer enthralls and controls those united to Christ in his death. Freedom is the operative word. The co-crucified ones are free to live in obedience to their new governing authority, the Crucified and Risen Christ.

In Galatians 2:19–20 Paul affirms that his present earthly life, his life in the flesh, is radically different now. It is a life lived 'by faith' whereas before his life was under the law. He has 'died to the law' so that he may now 'live to God'. Once again his life has a radically new orientation. To what does he owe this whole new direction in his life? He has died together with Christ! This miraculous act has resulted in a radical change in his life so that now he is free to live a 'by faith' life with Christ living in and through him. This new faith-controlled life will result in new fruit, a truly transformed existence. The change is a result of the death of Christ.

This focus on Christ's death as the primary factor in the initial and ongoing transformation of the Christian's life is central to Paul's theology. Although the adherents of the Contemplative Tradition would probably give a hearty 'Amen' to this emphasis it is not always reflected by their writings. More often than not their emphasis rests on imitating the life of Christ rather than focusing on the death of Christ. This is an unfortunate weakness in their theology of transformation. Such a misplaced emphasis treads dangerously close to transformation by personal effort, a claim that the very same advocates of the Contemplative Tradition would soundly deny. And yet, when so little attention is given to the death of Christ as foundational for all true transformation and so much attention is dedicated to *imitatio Christi*, one begins to wonder. Paul's emphasis is clear; the death of Christ is the key factor in the reshaping of misshapen persons so that ultimately they take on a new

Christoform shape. This clear emphasis is lacking in the Contemplative Tradition.

The primary means of transformation: the practice of the spiritual disciplines

With this third point we come to the heart of the difference between Paul and the contemporary Contemplative Tradition as it relates to the concept of transformation. What are the means by which transformation is produced in a person? The Contemplative Tradition confidently asserts that it is the practice of the spiritual disciplines. This is unequivocally avowed, for example, by Foster (2008:18), 'Training in Spiritual Disciplines is the God-ordained means for forming and transforming the human personality so that in the emergency we can be "response-able" – able to respond appropriately'.⁹ Mulholland (1993:136) communicates this same unwavering conviction, 'without our performance of the disciplines, God is, for all practical purposes, left without any means of grace through which to effect transformation in our lives'. Dallas Willard makes the bold claim:

Full participation in the life of God's Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ comes to us only through appropriate exercise in the disciplines for life in the spirit. Those disciplines alone can become for average Christians 'the conditions upon which the spiritual life is made indubitably real'. (Willard 1988:26; emphasis in the original)

The obvious conviction of the Contemplative Tradition is that the primary means of transformation is the regular practice of the spiritual disciplines. Yet Paul's letters seldom if ever describe the practice of spiritual disciplines as the means by which transformation occurs. Why is this so? Contemporary contemplatives allege that for Paul and the culture in which he lived the practice of the spiritual disciplines was so readily understood and so commonly practiced 'that he would feel no need to write a book on the disciplines for the spiritual life that explained systematically what he had in mind' (Willard 1988:95). In other words, Paul took it for granted that his readers understood that he had developed the habit of practicing the spiritual disciplines. Contemplatives see such concepts as 'put off the old man' and 'put on the new man' or 'train yourself for godliness' or 'I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage' or 'put sin to death' as clear references to the practice of the spiritual disciplines, references that Paul's readers would recognise without further elaboration. Thus we read:

The Bible called people to such Disciplines as fasting, prayer, worship and celebration but gave almost no instruction about how to do them. The reason for this is easy to see. Those Disciplines were so frequently practiced and such a part of the

9. Both Willard and Foster claim that the essential process by which transformation occurs is described by VIM; Vision, Intention, Means, where means refers to the practice of the spiritual disciplines. For example, Foster (2008:xi) asks, 'How, you may ask, does such a transformed life come into being? Vision. Intention. Means', referring to the VIM process developed by Willard (2002:85). And Willard (2002:85) writes, 'If we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must have and must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means. Not just any path we take will do. If this VIM pattern is not put into place properly and held there, Christ simply will not be formed in us'.

general culture that the 'how to' was common knowledge. (Foster 1978:3)

Even more pointed:

Zeal without knowledge or without appropriate practice is never enough. Plus, one must train *wisely* as well as intensely for spiritual attainment. Paul did not have to explain or argue for this assumption. It was commonplace to the developing Christian Church, as well in the surrounding culture, whether Jewish, Hellenistic, or Roman ... It is almost impossible in the thought climate of today's Western world to appreciate just *how* utterly unnecessary it was for Paul to say explicitly, in the world in which *he* lived, that Christians should fast, be alone, study, give, and so forth as regular disciplines for the spiritual life. (Willard 1988:98–99; emphasis in the original)

Thus, contemporary contemplatives seem convinced of two truths: the primary means of transformation is the practice of the spiritual disciplines and so prevalent was their practice in Paul's context that he did not need to mention it in his letters.

But was this truly the case or have modern adherents of the Contemplative Tradition read into Paul the practices and beliefs of contemplatives from the fourth century on? There is little question that Paul was a man of prayer and of the study of Scripture, yet he does not often link the practice of these and other spiritual disciplines to the process of transformation. Thus in spite of such strong protestations from modern contemplatives, clear concrete evidence that Paul was a 'contemplative' is difficult to find. Though some confidently assert, for example, 'This behavior is a *fact* and can be confirmed by a casual reading of the biblical literature, as well as other written records of the time' (Willard 1988:100; emphasis in the original), no direct evidence is provided, only arguments from silence. And Paul himself is relatively silent on this matter. We must conclude, therefore, that Paul had a different idea regarding the means for realising ongoing transformation.

Now, before considering Paul's perspective on the means by which transformation takes place, it is necessary to define 'spiritual disciplines' according to the Contemplative Tradition. Foster (2008:16) states, 'a Spiritual Discipline is an intentionally directed action by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability (or power) to do what we cannot do by direct effort'. Willard (2006:133) agrees stating that a spiritual discipline is 'any activity that is in our power and enables us to achieve by grace what we cannot achieve by direct effort'. He elaborates:

A discipline for the spiritual life is ... nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (charis) is gift (charisma), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts. Spiritual disciplines, 'exercises unto godliness', are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others. (Willard 1988:156)

And what is the role of these spiritual disciplines? Willard comments, 'these disciplines make room for the Word and the Spirit to work in us' (Willard 2002:155). Foster (2008) states:

When we engage in the Spiritual Disciplines, we are seeking the righteousness of the kingdom of God through 'indirection'. You see, we cannot by direct effort make ourselves into the kind of people who can live fully alive to God. Only God can accomplish this in us. Only God can incline our heart toward him. Only God can reprogram the deeply ingrained habit patterns of sin that constantly predispose us toward evil and transform them into even more deeply ingrained habit patterns of 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' ... we ... train with Spiritual Disciplines ... This indirect action will place us – body, mind, and spirit – before God as a living sacrifice. God then takes this little offering of ourselves and in a divine time and in a divine way produces in us things far greater than we could ever ask or think. (pp. 15–16)

So then, the practice of the spiritual disciplines places us in God's way where he can bring about significant changes in our lives. One of the changes these disciplines produce is to enable us to respond and live like Jesus did in the moment of crisis. Foster (2008:153) explains, 'The bottom-line goal of practicing the Spiritual Disciplines is so that when the moment of action comes, our automatic default-mode is to "act naturally" according to the Spirit, not the flesh'. In other words, the way that a Christian can successfully prepare herself to live like Christ in all ways and at all times is through a regular lifestyle of practicing, as Jesus did, the spiritual disciplines. When a person's regular routine incorporates solitude, silence, fasting, prayer and the other disciplines of the spiritual life these disciplines will 'bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order' (Willard 1988:68). Why is this? It is because the disciplines 'enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself' (Willard 1988:68).

Now if spiritual disciplines are the primary way by which deeply ingrained sin patterns are broken and people are reshaped into the image of Christ, then which activities should be included as spiritual disciplines? Unfortunately it is here that we encounter a serious question, can this transforming power rightfully be claimed for all of the practices that contemplatives allege are spiritual disciplines? Scepticism abounds. This scepticism is aptly applied, for example, to Foster when he asserts:

Whatever leads to the genuine formation of our spirit in Christlikeness can become for us a 'spiritual' discipline: walking in the woods; singing and making music; creating a work of art; laughing with friends in the goodness of companionship; caring for animals; or ... performing simple tasks associated with meeting food and shelter needs for self and others. (Foster 2008:147)

It appears that almost any activity whatsoever is a so-called 'spiritual discipline', even 'play' (Foster 2008:147) or 'pleasurable walks or bicycle rides' or instrumental music (Foster 2008:168). But when every activity from the most

mundane and common to the most 'ascetic' is considered a spiritual discipline one wonders if the concept of spiritual discipline has any significance at all. In what way is caring for my pet or riding my bike truly 'sin-destroying' or capable of creating true intimacy with Christ? Although it is perfectly valid that we should avoid the kind of dualism that divides life into sacred versus secular activities, it is not at all helpful to apply the term 'spiritual discipline' to any activity thus implying that all of these practices, even going to a baseball game (Foster 2008:147), have the power to truly transform the inner most being. This seems to be the error into which Foster falls and is a major weakness of many in the Contemplative Tradition. Coupled with this problem, Foster and Willard have the tendency to read the practice of the disciplines back into New Testament passages where these disciplines may not have been intended by the biblical author at all (i.e. 1 Cor. 9:27; Rm. 6:13). This anachronistic reading of New Testament texts distorts the author's intended meaning and gives the false impression that the spiritual disciplines were more central to the Bible's view of transformation than they may have been.

This is not to say that Paul rejected the practice of specific 'spiritual disciplines', nor that he denied that certain activities could be used to produce change in the Christian. Paul's letters demonstrate with great clarity that Paul was a man of prayer and a man of the Scriptures.¹⁰ He appears to have practiced these particular spiritual disciplines with great regularity. However, what we do not clearly see is Paul connecting the use of these disciplines to the means of transformation as though the practice of prayer itself was the necessary means by which God brought about changes in him. In other words, it is not clear that Paul believed that by engaging in the discipline of prayer itself that this engagement in prayer was the effective agency through which transformation occurred. Rather Paul's prayers are petitions to God asking him to work in the lives of others. The act of prayer was not the means of transformation and thus a discipline that Paul had to engage in in order to be changed but rather a means of personal communication with God to be enjoyed.¹¹

So then, if Paul did not espouse the practice of the spiritual disciplines as the primary means of transformation, what was Paul's view? Here are a few examples of different 'means' that Paul develops in his letters.

Transformation is experienced through faith

In Galatians 3:1–6 Paul's interest is to clarify how one reaches the goal of the Christian pilgrimage (ἐπιτελεῖσθε). The Galatians have been influenced to believe that they could reach maturity in Christ by means of the 'flesh' (νῦν σαρκὶ ἐπιτελεῖσθε). The apostle corrects this erroneous idea and

10. See, for example, the many prayers of Paul (Rm. 1:9–10; 10:1; 15:5–6; 13; 30–33; 2 Cor. 1:11; 12:8; 13:7–9; Phlp. 1:9–11; 4:6–7; 1 Th. 3:10, 11–13; 5:17, 23–24, 25; 2 Th. 1:11–12; 2:16–17; 3:1–2, 5, 16; Phlm. 6).

11. Notice 1 Thessalonians 3:10 where the means of transformation was Paul's presence and ministry, not his prayer. Compare also Romans 1:9–12.

points the Galatians towards the only adequate means of transformation, namely 'by the Spirit', the very same way that they were brought into a relationship with Christ. In other words, the means by which ongoing transformation towards the goal of Christlikeness occurs is the same as the means by which one begins the Christian life (ἐναρξάμενοι). It is from beginning to end a work of the Spirit of God. But Paul is even more concrete in his description of the proper means for spiritual transformation. Notice the parallels and contrasts that Paul draws (Figure 2).

Paul uses two rhetorical questions each of which expects the same answer – 'by the hearing of faith' – to demonstrate that both the beginning of the Christian pilgrimage (receiving the Holy Spirit), and the ongoing life of the Christian (the powerful working of the Spirit in the midst of the church) take place through a believing response to the gospel (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). The Christian life begins and continues by faith! Or viewed from the opposite perspective, a person does not begin the Christian life by successful performance of 'law-works' nor does she experience the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through 'law-works'. Paul amplifies this parallelism with a third rhetorical question from Galatians 3:3 (Figure 3).

It is evident that Paul equates πνεύματι (a work of the Spirit) and ἀκοῆς πίστεως (a believing response to the gospel). At the same time, Paul equates ἔργων νόμου (obedience to the requirements of the law) and σαρκί (human effort). In other words, seeking to receive the Spirit or to experience an ongoing work of the Spirit through 'law-works' is the same as attempting to reach the goal of the Christian life 'by the flesh'. In the same way, receiving the Spirit and experiencing His ongoing work through 'the hearing of faith' is the same as beginning and continuing 'by the Spirit'.

Paul's point is simply that progress towards the goal of the Christian life – conformity to the image of Christ – is never attained through human effort (σὰρξ ἢ ἔργων νόμου), no matter how diligent. Progress towards the goal of Christian maturity is a work of the Spirit of God. And Paul equates this 'Spirit-work' with 'the hearing of faith'. In other words, to be brought to completion (ἐπιτελεῖσθε) by the Spirit goes

| Galatians 3:2 | Galatians 3:5 |
|---------------------|--|
| ἐλάβετε τὸ πνεῦμα | ὁ οὖν ἐπιχορηγῶν ὑμῖν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἐνεργῶν δυνάμεις ἐν ὑμῖν |
| ἐξ ἔργων νόμου | ἐξ ἔργων νόμου |
| ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως; | ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως; |

Figure 2: Comparison of Galatians 3:2 with Galatians 3:5.

| Galatians 3:3 | Galatians 3:2 | Galatians 3:5 |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ἐναρξάμενοι | ἐλάβετε τὸ πνεῦμα | ὁ οὖν ἐπιχορηγῶν ὑμῖν τὸ πνεῦμα ... |
| πνεύματι | ἐξ ἔργων νόμου | ἐξ ἔργων νόμου |
| νῦν ἐπιτελεῖσθε; | | |
| σαρκί | ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως; | ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως; |

Figure 3: Comparison of Galatians 3:3 with Galatians 3:2 and Galatians 3:5.

hand in hand with responding with faith to the Christian message. Or to relate this to the work of transformation, true change comes through faith.

Transformation comes through a renewal of the mind

To the degree that a person's mind is mired in the thought patterns of 'this age' their life will reflect the 'will of this age' and thus confusion regarding the will of God. Thus Paul in Romans 12:2 urges the Roman Christians to avoid all conformity to the present evil age and instead to be profoundly changed. This change will come, according to Paul, as the Christian's mindset is reformatted. Their whole structure of thought must be made new, and they must begin to 'rethink' life from a totally new perspective. No longer can they adopt and reflect the attitudes and perspectives of the depraved world system that serves as their daily environment. Instead they must embrace the mindset of the 'age to come'. This is not a mere superficial change of opinions or a simple exchange of old ideas for new ones. Mind renewal means a deep internalising of the convictions, priorities, and attitudes of the new age to replace those of the present age. As this 'rethinking' process works itself out in the believer's life, they are progressively transformed.

Transformation comes through beholding as in a mirror the glory of God

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul compares Christians with Moses who enjoyed unfettered access to God. Whenever he returned to God's presence he went 'unveiled' and was thus able to see God's glory which had a transforming effect on him, causing his face to shine with this very same divine glory that he beheld. In the same way, says Paul, all Christians are now 'unveiled-ones' who have been granted the incredible privilege of open communion with the God of glory. This communion, however, is 'as in a mirror'. That is, it is now indirect, coming through fellowship with Christ in the gospel. That is, when the gospel is proclaimed, when it is read or heard, or meditated upon, the Christian can see clear manifestations of the living Christ in it. Yet, even this indirect glimpse of the glory of God has a transforming impact on those who enjoy it. As the Christian enjoys personal communion with Christ in the gospel she is gradually changed by this encounter into the same image of the one whom she beholds. In other words, she is progressively becoming more like Christ by beholding his image through an internalisation of the gospel. This change is not something magical that simply comes as a result of reading or hearing. The transformation is wrought as the gospel is understood, applied and lived out in all of life.

Transformation comes through a participation in the sufferings and mission of Christ

In Philippians 3:10 Paul reveals that his deepest longing was to know Christ in a profound and personal way. This kind of deep intimate knowledge of Christ meant for Paul experiencing both the power of Christ's resurrection – the

comprehensive power of God displayed through Christ's victory over death – and a participation in Christ's sufferings – the sufferings he endured as a result of his earthly life and ministry. And as one actively participates in the sufferings of Christ, Christ is at work reshaping the person until they take on the form of Christ crucified.

But what does it mean to participate in Christ's sufferings? It simply refers to the hardships and privations that come with engagement in the gospel mission or sincere identification with Christ and his cause. This is most clearly illustrated by the example of Christ displayed in Philippians 2:5–11. Christ's decision to not use or abuse his privileged status for his own gain (Phlp. 2:6), his total self-emptying by which he took on the form of a servant (Phlp. 2:7), his extreme self-humiliation through which he demonstrated whole-souled obedience (Phlp. 2:8), and his ultimate self-sacrifice, whereby he gave himself up to be publicly crucified for sinners (Phlp. 2:8), all of these are graphic examples of Christ's suffering. Everything Christ experienced in fulfilment of his mission constitutes 'his sufferings'. Paul too participated in these sufferings as he selflessly engaged in gospel mission and was continually hounded and mistreated. His decisions to consider loss all that he had gained, to forsake his own righteousness and to consider everything as rubbish in exchange for Christ was evidence that Paul was sharing in Christ's sufferings and thereby was being conformed by the divine hand into a cruciform image, the very 'form' that Christ had in his death.

In the same way, as Christians selflessly serve others even at great personal expense, as they make decisions to pursue the knowledge of Christ at all costs, as they humble themselves to live in joyful obedience even when this means death or personal humiliation, and as they engage in gospel mission and endure privations and persecution, God is at work slowly 're-forming' them into the image of the Crucified One.

Transformation comes by severing all conformity to this age

One of the chief obstacles to the transformation process is the continual pull of the forces of 'this age' which persist in exercising a shaping influence in the lives of Christians. Though the Christian has been rescued from 'this age' and has been crucified to the world yet these enemy forces display incredible resilience in their ongoing efforts to mould Christians to their image. Thus Paul was forced to exhort the Romans 'do not be sculpted by this age' (Rm. 12:2). Earlier he charged the Corinthians to cleanse themselves from everything that pollutes (2 Cor. 7:1) including inappropriate relationships with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14) and through this they would 'perfect holiness in the fear of God'. The threat of being sucked into the filthy vortex of this age or being contaminated by the muck of the ungodly world is ever present. Therefore, the Christian, in order to promote the transformation process must break all allegiance to this present evil age. This primarily means living in consistent obedience to the commands of Scripture. Thus Paul

encourages the Roman Christians 'do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts'. They must stave off the world's influence through continual decisions to reject sin's advance, abstaining from deceitful desires, rejecting 'this-worldly' thought patterns and by avoiding compromising relationships. They also must dedicate themselves to God (Rm. 12:1). All of this is crucial to chipping away at the obstacles to transformation, severing all ties to this age, and fostering change away from a 'this-world-conformity' towards Christoformity, the very goal of the Christian pilgrimage.

Conclusion

So was Paul among the contemplatives? If by this we mean, did Paul believe that the spiritual disciplines were the primary and ultimately essential means by which God transforms people into the image of Christ, then our answer would be a firm, no. Paul practiced certain 'spiritual disciplines' but he does not explicitly include them as essential ingredients for transformation. For Paul, the essence of transformation was the Christian living consistently each day with his new identity in Christ – a new creation citizen united with Christ in his redeeming works.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This article represents a reworked version of aspects from the PhD dissertation of J.P., titled 'Paul and spiritual transformation: Evaluating the contemporary Contemplative Tradition in light of Paul's *μορφή* texts', in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, with E.v.E. as supervisor.

References

- Campbell, C., 2012, *Paul and union with Christ*, Zondervan Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Clarke, A., 1998, 'Be imitators of me: Paul's model of leadership', *Tyndale Bulletin* 49(2), 329–360.
- Demarest, B., 1999, *Satisfy your soul*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Foster, R., 1978, *Celebration of discipline*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA.
- Foster, R., 1998, *Streams of living water*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York.
- Foster, R., 2008, *Life with God*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York.
- Moo, D., 1996, *The Epistle to the Romans, new international commentary on the New Testament*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Mulholland, M., Jr., 1993, *Invitation to a journey*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Renovaré, 1998, *Perspective: Stream of living water*, viewed 9 January 2016, from <http://blog.renovare.org>
- Ridderbos, H., 1975, *Paul: An outline of his theology*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Willard, D., 1985, 'Asceticism: An essential but neglected element in the Christian theory of the moral life', unpublished paper presented at the meeting of The Society of Christian Philosophers, San Francisco, CA. March, 1985.
- Willard, D., 1988, *The spirit of the disciplines*, HarperCollins Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- Willard, D., 1997, *The divine conspiracy*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York.
- Willard, D., 1999, *Hearing God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Willard, D., 2002, *Renovation of the heart*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Willard, D., 2006, 'Christian mysticism', *Journal of Christian Nursing* 23(3), 34–36. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/00005217-200608000-00013>