

CONCEPTS IN FORMATIONAL PRAYER

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## Introduction

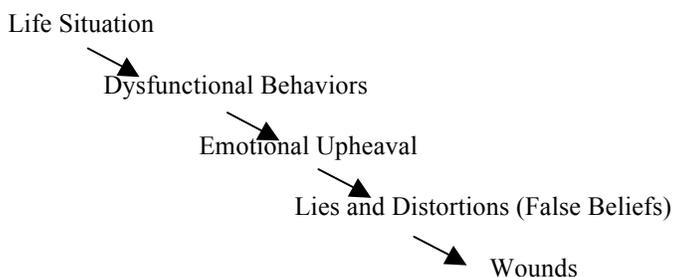
This paper will address three aspects of the process of formational prayer. To give this discussion a context, a general description of the nature and practice of formational counseling and formational prayer will also be presented. The three specific aspects of formational prayer to be dealt with are deep wounds, false beliefs and the centrality of Christ.

## Formational Counseling

Formational counseling may be generally defined as a way of giving spiritual and psychological care to individuals in need of healing with the goal of providing ongoing transformation in their lives through the experience of encountering Jesus Christ. A basic concept of formational counseling is that dysfunctional behaviors and emotional struggles are most often directly associated with unprocessed woundings of the past. When people go through traumatic or extremely stressful events, the impact may be such that they begin to develop false beliefs about themselves, their own private world and about God. According to Terry Wardle, a negative chain of events unfold:

Those *false beliefs*, in turn, create powerful feelings that chronically stir within, bringing significant discomfort to their lives. That *emotional upheaval* is unsettling, and over time not always consciously linked to the internal false beliefs. But the discomfort is significant and, as a result, people engage in a wide variety of *dysfunctional behaviors* designed to kill the emotional pain. Those dysfunctional, sinful responses to the internal feeling are acted out in their daily lives. (Wardle 2007,72)

The process can be seen in the following structural framework (Wardle 2001, 137):



Scripture makes it clear that it is God's desire is to transform human beings into the very image of Christ. Romans 8:29 says, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." God's purpose is to undo the damage to man's image made in the likeness of God that came as a result of Adam's sin. Christ, the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), is the Source of connection from God to man who can bring about authentic transformation. This transformation is the life-long and ongoing process of sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, that allows for increasing degrees of freedom as one is restored to the image of God's original design. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 aptly describes the process:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Formational counseling also employs secular counseling tools as well as calling upon the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to provide a comprehensive approach to bring healing to broken people. The overall process of formational counseling includes, pastoral counseling, spiritual direction and healing prayer. The ministry of formational counseling is based upon the premise that Jesus is "willing to be present and active in human life" and partners with us in working towards setting captives free from emotional and spiritual bondage (Kraft, 2002, 145). This process is aided by formational prayer in which an individual is positioned before Christ in such a way that He brings his healing power and light to wounded, broken and dark places.

### **Formational Prayer**

Traumatic, hurtful and painful events of the past often leave an individual with unprocessed feelings and emotions that need to be re-visited, processed and released. Through formational prayer, Jesus is invited to come into the negative episodes of the past and to bring

whatever level of healing He desires for the individual. Christ is more than willing to become present to the person in need of healing. It is in this sacred moment of encounter that true transformation often takes place. A knowledge of memory processes is helpful in understanding basic principles of formational prayer. Wardle cites author Daniel Schacter from his work in *Searching for Memory* to explain three basic types of memory: Procedural (activities learned to do automatically); Semantic (remembering concepts, words, data, etc.); Episodic (engaging at many different levels the five senses, feelings, images, behaviors and determination of subjective meaning). When dealing with traumatic events of the past, procedural and semantic memory are somewhat limited in helping to fully address and process consequential emotional and psychological issues that lead to false beliefs and ultimately dysfunctional behavior. Although gaining insight and knowledge about a problem (semantic) and working to replace old negative thoughts and messages with new ones (procedural) is helpful, Wardle believes that the most effective way to release unprocessed emotions of the past for healing to take place is through countering the episode with a new one involving right brain sensitivities. The new episode involves Jesus entering the episodic memory of the past to bring healing and wholeness. As Wardle states, “When this happens, the images, senses feelings, actions and meanings of the negative past are faced, re-experienced and processed, released and then overpowered by a new episode with Jesus” (Wardle 2007, 112-114).

This is not to say, of course, that God does not employ many and varied ways of making his healing presence to be known and experienced. Throughout the biblical record we see that God intersected and interacted with the lives of godly men and women in very dynamic and real ways (Boyd 2004, 82). According to Boyd, however, “The insight that imagination is central to our relationship with God and to our transformation is hardly new” (Boyd 2004, 81). Biblical

faith, as evidenced by godly examples throughout Scripture is both full of life and is experiential in nature. In the New Testament we find an intensification of the interaction of the divine and the human elements through the work of the Holy Spirit—to the extent that all believers are enabled to experience the Lord Jesus Christ actively living, moving and being present in their lives (Acts 17:26).

The use of imaginative prayer has root in early church history. Boyd cites St. Teresa of Avila, among others, who noted that since in Christ God became a man, He is someone “we can concretely envision in our minds when we pray” (Boyd 2004, 92). In modern times theologian A. W. Tozer, speaking of the value of a “sanctified imagination,” says that the Holy Spirit “presents Christ to our inner vision” (Wiersbe 1978, 49-50, 138, 152). Tozer also states that, “What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God” (Tozer 1961, 1-2).

Another noted theologian, Richard Foster, has written that although there are legitimate concerns that our imagination can be distorted by the evil one and that due to our fallen nature human manipulation and self-deception are possible, “God created us with an imagination, and, as Lord of his creation, he can and does redeem it and use it for the work of the kingdom of God.” Further, if we are desirous of seeking God’s thoughts, as well as delighting in his presence and in his truth, God uses our imagination for his divine purposes. Foster concludes that, “To believe that God can sanctify and utilize the imagination is simply to take seriously the Christian idea of incarnation. God so accommodates, so enfleshes himself into our world, that he uses the images we know and understand to teach us about the unseen world of which we know so little and find so difficult to understand” (Foster 1992, 148). Leanne Payne also addresses the importance of Scriptural imagery. She says that imaging stories of healing as presented in

Scripture represent an incarnational experience in which the grace of God is channeled to us. It is God who sends his Word and through it his healing Presence (Payne 2003, 135). In formational prayer, then, a person is positioned to enter into the eternal present reality of the risen and living Lord to experience whatever affirmation of love, encouragement, peace, truth, and healing He may wish to provide.

### **Deep Wounds**

Terry Wardle states that, “Regardless of how forgotten or hidden, old wounds shape the way people think, feel and respond to life” (Wardle 2001, 189). It is understandable that people prefer to forget painful, episodic memories of the past, not wanting to re-experience them as they often are associated with emotions and feelings of shame and fear. We work hard to forget and oftentimes create elaborate protective mechanisms to keep ourselves from the pain of damaged emotions. Such mechanisms can manifest themselves as various forms of addiction such as alcohol and drug addiction as well as workaholism, perfectionism, and physical illnesses.

Wounds that we have received in the past do not necessarily come from severely traumatic or what could be classified as “catastrophic” in nature. Wardle says that less than severe occurrences in one’s past can still have a crippling effect on people, and that this is especially true of infants and of small children who are completely vulnerable to such events (Wardle 2007, 58). He has developed a non-clinical typology of traumatic wounding that helps to understand how unprocessed traumatic events often lead to one’s current emotional struggles. The first is “Traumatic Wounds of Withholding in Childhood.” This happens when a child does not receive enough love, affection and care in order to progress successfully through the early states of normal childhood development. When there is a consistent absence of any aspect of the love and nurture needed for healthy development, a wounding can occur that will have an impact

on the rest of the child's life. The second type of traumatic wounding Wardle calls "Aggression in Childhood." Sadly, these types of "woundings" of physical, verbal and sexual abuse are becoming increasingly evident in society today. They occur when a significant person aggressively acts against a child's wellbeing and also include such things as abandonment, rejection and severe or harsh treatment. A third type of traumatic wounding takes place when, at any age, highly stressful events occur. Another type of wounding is when one experiences betrayal. Betrayal trauma, although similar to stress-related trauma, is of such a severe nature that it stands alone in its impact—an impact often leads to mistrust and insecurity. It comes as the result of an abuse of power on the part of someone who is trusted such as a caregiver, and this would include "parents, teachers, pastors, priests, physicians, counselors, psychologists" (Wardle 2007, 60). Wardle's final typological category of trauma is that of wounds caused by long term duress—negative stress that is ongoing and thus becomes the "water torture" of traumatic events:

Long term exposure to duress affects a person like drops of water falling on granite. A few drops will evaporate without having any significant impact. But if the dripping continues long enough, it will wear down even the strongest person. Whether it is prolonged seasons of opposition, criticism, physical pain, isolation, or any of countless other pressures, it can deeply wound most anyone. That is particularly true if long term duress occurs to children" (Wardle 2007, 68).

Everyone responds differently to traumatic events. One reason for this is the age of the person suffering the trauma—adults most probably will handle events better than children for example. An important consideration is one's personality type and temperament. Some are able to externally process their issues by talking them out with those willing to listen, while others are internal processors who try to deal with inner tensions in isolation. Other factors include whether the response of those close to the individual is caring and compassionate or unsympathetic and judgmental. Finally, the meaning that a person gives to the event will determine the level of

distress experienced. Wardle compares the releasing of unexpressed emotions to the shooting of an arrow. Emotional turmoil that is either killed, denied, or stuffed allows for powerful energy to remain trapped inside and ultimately results in a breakdown. It is important that the formational counselor provide instruction about how the appropriate expression of negative feelings is a fully permissible and healthy response to a person's deep pain. Jesus himself responded with deep emotion to the events of his life (Wardle 2001, 168-172). The Psalms also clearly reflect this human need for expression in that one of the major categories of those writings are considered to be laments.

Much of how a person responds or reacts to a traumatic event also has to do with the degree of "attachment bond" experienced during infancy. This is why it is vital that children experience continual acts of unconditional love. Wardle says that the failure to experience bonding, love, and nurture as an infant is a wounding of the worst kind. He correctly states that when parents do not commit themselves to the nurture and development of their vulnerable, infant, this is one of "life's greatest violations" (Wardle 2007, 71). To appreciate the significance of the attachment bond in childhood, it is helpful to have an elementary understanding of how the brain functions with regard to emotional experience and response. The experiencing of emotion takes place in a portion of the brain called the amygdala. This organ is fully developed at birth and this allows for even the smallest baby to have feelings about what is going on around him or her. In terms of emotional responses and feelings another part of the brain called the hippocampus also plays a key role. Unlike the amygdala, it is not fully developed at birth and must grow over time so that emotions can be processed appropriately and events remembered without re-experiencing the original feelings involved. If the hippocampus is not allowed to do its work, perhaps due to some distortion of normal life processes (an event causing a false belief

leading to dysfunctional behavior) or a more severe disorder (clear inability to function in some aspect of life because of unprocessed emotions), then there is a need for healing. In some cases the cause of emotional wounding may be due to an inappropriate attachment of the child to the mother during the period of six to eighteen months of life, a very delicate time of child development.

The work of formational prayer is to aid those who are wounded in positioning themselves before Christ in a safe environment so as to be set free from prisons of darkness and despair (Wardle 2007, pp. 70-76). Our woundings can easily lead to long-term effects of a poor self-image, a lack of self-esteem and confidence, an inability to carry on successful relationships, both male and female. For many people a false concept of God and his love develops that hinders belief and trust. Stephen Seamands says that, "Deep wounds require deep healing." In other words, although this kind of healing may have its moments of major breakthroughs, it often involves a slow and difficult process which is like the peeling of an onion that generally happens one tearful layer at a time (Seamands 2003, 12). With the guidance of a formational counselor employing formational prayer, spiritual direction and pastoral/biblical counseling as well as the healing touch of a caring community of people, a wounded person can experience new levels of healing, wholeness and freedom. The good news in all of these woundings is that the living Christ is present in our past, present, and our future and is more than willing to bring healing and wholeness. It is this same Jesus who also experienced much trauma in his lifetime and in his passion on the cross. As Wardle states, "He stands ready to meet anyone and everyone in the painful place of the past" (Wardle 2007, 65).

### False Beliefs

One of the major effects of emotional wounding is to cause an individual to begin to think in an unhealthy way about himself, his world and about God. Depending upon the level of woundedness and upon the extent of false beliefs that develop as a consequence of the pain that one experiences, it is a relatively easy process to begin to erect emotional walls of protection around that pain so as to numb and avoid it. Gerald May relates that most people, in spite of outward appearances to the contrary, have a sense that something inside of them is not loveable or acceptable. In some internal place of their being they feel that there are defective with even sinister and dark things that if brought into the light, would cause them to be rejected by others. Oftentimes there are no logical, objective reasons for this vague feeling of inadequacy. The result is, however, that even though we long to be fully known and fully loved, “we are generally too afraid to relax enough for it to happen” (May 1982, 88-89).

Leanne Payne says that when we believe the lie that we are unacceptable we deny the truth of authentic Christianity. She says that, “the self-hatred and self-depreciation that accompanies our failure to accept ourselves is not Christian; it is utterly destructive toward the self” (Payne 1991, 32-33). She correctly asserts that it is only with an acceptance of ourselves that we are able and free to love others. If we focus on hating the soul that God himself loves and is in the process of spiritually forming to be like Christ, then we are practicing “the presence of the old self; we are *self*-conscious rather than *God*-conscious” (Payne 1991, 32-33). Payne quotes the wisdom of C. S. Lewis on this matter of self-acceptance:

Since I have begun to pray, I find my extreme view of personality changing. My own empirical self is becoming more and more important, and this is the opposite of self-love. You don't teach a seed how to die into treehood by throwing it into the fire: and it has to become a good seed before it's worth burying (Lewis 1966, 34).

The walls of self-protection that we erect around us actually represent an idolatrous self-image in that they are not the true self, and must be continually maintained through human self-effort.

Boyd explains that,

Whenever we believe a lie about who God is and who we are, we cease trusting God to be our sole source of life. Whenever we cease trusting, we have to perform as a strategy for getting life. Whenever we perform as a strategy for getting life, we have to hide every aspect of ourselves that is inconsistent with this strategy. And whenever we hide aspects of ourselves, we are in a process of destroying ourselves. (Boyd, 2004, 47).

Virtually all emotional and psychological illnesses are related in one way or another to this unwillingness or inability to face truth. This distortion of truth (false beliefs) about oneself, therefore, produces an inner sickness that must be healed in order for us to be whole as God intended.

Wardle states that the best way to recognize false beliefs and lies is to be thoroughly equipped with the truth. Knowing our identity in Christ is vital to countering all kinds of lies. Neil Anderson in his book *The Bondage Breaker* lists some thirty New Testament Scriptures that express the truth of who we are in Christ and places them in three categories: “I am accepted.” “I am secure.” “I am significant” (Anderson 2000, 43-45). The formational counselor will do well in making this knowledge available to those who do not believe in the truth of who they really are in Christ. The counselor must also listen carefully in order to recognize destructive lies and be prepared to help the counselee identify those false beliefs that are the trigger point for emotional upheaval. Combining healing prayer, that positions one to encounter the Truth experientially, along with the filling of the mind with the truth of God’s word and guided counsel in how to keep in step with the Spirit of truth (Gal 5:25), the destructive pattern of false beliefs can be reversed.

Not only do false beliefs about ourselves produce negative and unhealthy behavior, but the same is true with false beliefs about God. Our deepest need in life is an intimate relationship with God who loves us unconditionally and who values our worth beyond measure. The false belief that God is only interested in our good behavior or our performance in order to please Him, is a major factor in dysfunctional behavior. Boyd appropriately says that, “When receiving love and affirmation depends on our performance and our meeting certain conditions, we know deep down that it is the external behavior that is being loved and affirmed, not our innermost being. Hence, our souls starve” (Boyd 2004, 50). We are all looking for love and to be loved and to give love, yet we so often look in the wrong places, and this often is due to the lies we believe regarding God. The reality is, however, that the God of the Bible demonstrates his love towards us even while we were and are yet sinners (Rom 5:8). David Benner in his book, *Surrender to Love*, says that regardless of what one may believe erroneously about God due to life experience, the truth is, “God bursts with love for humans. He is far from being emotionally uninvolved with his creation. God’s bias toward us is strong, persistent and positive....love pervades every aspect of God’s relationship with us” (Benner 2003,16). In formational prayer the reality of the love of God often is affirmed and wherever God’s love is present there is transformation. One simply does not have an encounter with the living Christ and remain unchanged. This leads us to the next section dealing with the centrality of Christ in formational prayer.

### **The Centrality of Christ**

Foundational to Formational Prayer and all of Christianity is the truth that Jesus Christ is the Sovereign Lord, through whom and for whom all things were created. The Message version of the Bible so aptly addresses the centrality of Christ in all aspects of life in Colossians 1:16, “For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank

after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him.” Paul goes on to explain that by his position and power he holds all of creation together. He also organizes and holds the church together. Verses 19 and 20 continue:

So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.

As we have indicated previously, our wounds (physical, psychological and spiritual) often lead to false beliefs or lies about ourselves, our world and about God. The truth is that we are all wounded people in one way or another. Boyd says that just as much as a physically ill or wounded person needs rest and nourishment in order to be restored to health, so too a person who has been spiritually wounded needs the same. He says that “The primary way the sickness of the soul is cured is by resting in the health and life of its Creator. We grow healthy as we rest, in the midst of all our sickness and wounds, in the unconditional love and acceptance of Christ” (Boyd 2004, 104-5). As we grow in our spiritual health, of course, healthy spiritual activity naturally will result. But the healthy doing is always predicated on our healthy being. Scripture reveals that the Sovereign Lord is more than willing to come and bring health and wholeness by setting captives free. His heart’s desire is to “to bind up the brokenhearted,” (Isaiah 61:1), and to release them from their prison of darkness so that they may enter into the joy of love and companionship that is nowhere else available but in the life of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Leanne Payne addresses the incarnational reality of Christ’s presence in human life in her book *The Healing Presence, Curing the Soul Through Union with Christ*. She says that we have a Savior of deep mind and heart who descends into that depth and becomes its righteousness, sanctification and holiness (Payne 2003, 135). Because of what Jesus has done in

the Incarnation, reconciling all things to himself (Col. 1:19-20), we are in communion with Him.

As Payne relates in another work:

His life can radiate throughout our souls—that is, our minds and hearts—including our memories, our willing (volitional), feeling, intuitive, and imaginative faculties, and beyond that, even to our sensory and physical being. Then as His light encounters dark places of unforgiveness and woundedness within us, healing can take place. (Payne 1991, xiv)

Stephen Seamands says that bringing our hurts to the cross of Christ is the therapy that we all need. He says that it is the cross that illumines our pain and sheds light on its meaning. In terms of healing prayer, painful memory images can be reframed from the wood of the cross of Calvary (Seamands 2003, 12). Taking up our own cross is often a misunderstood concept. Many feel that it means only suffering that involves anguish and pain. The reality is, however, that taking up one's cross is most often a denial of self-centeredness. Of course, taking up our cross may indeed involve persecution and difficult, painful moments of contradiction from many sources both past and present, but the good news is that Jesus is with us at every moment, even in the midst of our pain. He has taken our suffering into Himself. 1 Peter 4:13 states that we are to rejoice that we “participate in the sufferings of Christ.” There is a fellowship of suffering that we share with Him, and as He walks in the midst of our suffering, we are able to know Him and the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10). Seamands, in reference to the words of Isaiah, “by his wounds we are healed,” encourages his readers to bring their scars to the cross and allow for Christ's scars to touch theirs. In doing this, over time, our scars can testify to his grace and to his scars, actually becoming just as radiant in significance as his wounds are for us (Seamands 2003, 178). The symbol of the cross itself can often serve as a limbic, right-brained engagement tool to help people work through unprocessed emotions. As with other symbols, this can be a strong

stabilizing factor in opening the door to encountering the Lord in a safe place during formational prayer.

Wardle relates Jesus' agonizing experience in Gethsemane as an example of how Jesus responded to the full force of traumatic pain, and as a key to understanding how to unlock people from episodic events of a broken past. The Lord is truly able to sympathize with all of our weaknesses (Heb 4:25), including when we are trapped in the emotional past where "We find Jesus a compassionate Friend who holds the promise of deep transformation" (Wardle 2007, 116). The living Christ is not afraid nor reluctant to connect his own woundedness to ours and to lovingly walk into our woundedness bearing his radiant scars of healing power. In formational prayer, then, the Lord's Presence is invoked and He comes to bring healing, wholeness, affirmation and his transforming love to our wounds.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus is the central figure of all of life. He is the Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our faith, the creator of all things and all things new. As Christians we have the blessedness and the opportunity to co-labor with Him in his transforming work of bringing healing and wholeness to an ailing and needy world. Jesus is the foundation upon which we build in that work, and in that sense we serve as an extension of his life to others. Leanne Payne says that we can build in two ways upon that foundation:

One is incarnational. We can remember always that Another is with us and allow Him to live through us. In this case we will have works that will last; they will be of eternal, redeeming value. We can then, in a most astonishing way, bring prisoners out of the prison house, take the chains off of captives. Or we can ignore God's Presence and live from the focus of the old self. (Payne 2003, 229)

Formational prayer is a means of grace in which Christians can participate in positioning hurting people in the presence of Christ. It is a sacrificial work of intercession, much like that of the four

individuals who brought their friend to Jesus by cutting a hole in the roof (Mark 2:1-11). It can often be a difficult task, but the joy of being a participant in Christ's healing work far outweighs whatever necessary effort and sacrifice that may be required. By helping people to come into a safe place and inviting the Lord to be present, emotional wounds of the past, false beliefs and consequent dysfunctional behavior can be healed, and a part of the transformational process of being formed in Christ becomes a greater reality for those being served. This is the ministry work of Jesus Christ, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world (Seamands 2005, 178).

John 14:12-13 (NLT)

“The truth is, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son brings glory to the Father.”

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