Title: A Scriptural Model of Relational Christian Formation

Abstract: This paper seeks to develop biblical/theological foundations for relational Christian formation by connecting and identifying the compatibility between relational Christian formation and that of the term “helper” as seen in the scriptures. It seeks to develop a scriptural, relational model of Christian formation. The term “helper” has its beginning in the marriage relationship described in Genesis but ultimately describes God as a helper to his people. Both Old and New Testament examples identify a relational model of “helper” that brings about Christian formation. OT examples of people who operate according to a relational model will be reviewed as examples which support and develop Christian formation. Wisdom literature particularly identifies relationships that may offer insight into “helping” relationships which might be understood in light of Christian formation. This is possible because wisdom is an outcome of Christian formation; it takes place in the context of relationship. NT examples of helping relationships also identify individuals who operate under this relational model to bring about Christian formation. This paper fleshed out this idea as seen in various relationships throughout the scriptures as a way of identifying who the “helper” is and what the “helper” does towards Christian formation in the church.
image of a triune and relational God. It is important to briefly see that people are relational in 
nature, as is the triune God is between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit when he says, “let us 
make man in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Anthony Hoekema (1986) 
addresses this when he asks the question, “What is man” (p. 2)? He notes, “The most important 
things about man is that he is inescapably related to God” (p. 4). And, “we should interpret the 
plural [‘us,’ and ‘our’] as indicating that God does not exist as a solitary being, but as a being in 
fellowship with ‘others’. . . .What is here merely hinted at is further developed in the New 
Testament into the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 12; e.g. see John 14). He states further, 

Resemblance [to God] must be found in the fact that man needs the companionship of 
woman, that the human person is a social being. . . .In this way human beings reflect 
God, who exists not as a solitary being but as a being in fellowship – a fellowship that is 
described at a later state of divine revelation as that between the Father, the Son, and the 
Holy Spirit. (p. 14)

Genesis 2:18-25 describes this first human relationship between Adam and Eve. It is 
important for this study to examine the implications and understanding of the term helper. The 
relationship between Adam and Eve is qualitatively more than that of a spousal helper.

Referring to Genesis 1:27, Hoekema (1986) states, “what is being said in this verse is that the 
human person is not an isolated being who is complete in himself or herself, but that he or she is 
a being who needs the fellowship of others, who is not complete apart from others” (p. 76). This 
can be seen clearly in Genesis 2:18, because the phrase that includes helper in the original, ‘ēzer 
kēnegēdō, can be literally translated “I will make him for him a helper as in front of him (or 
according to what is in front of him,” suggesting “that what God creates for Adam will 
correspond to him. Thus the new creation will be neither a superior nor an inferior, but an equal” 
(Hamilton, 1990, p. 175). Furthermore, “any suggestion that this particular word denotes one 
who has only an associate or subordinate status to a senior member is refuted by the fact that
most frequently this same word describes Yahweh’s relationship to Israel. He is Israel’s help(er) because he is the stronger one” (p. 176). Hamilton notes that “the verb behind ‘ēzer is ‘āzar, which means ‘succor,’ ‘save from danger,’ ‘deliver from death.’ The woman in Gen. 2 delivers or saves man from his solitude” (p. 176). By creating Eve, God develops and promotes relationships (p. 176). Similarly Schultz (1980) notes that ‘ēzer “designates divine aid, particularly in the Psalms (Cf. Ps 121:1,2) where it includes both material and spiritual assistance” (p. 257).

A short word study reveals that the root ‘ēzer appears in the Old Testament as a verb 80 times and generally means “to help, support, succor” (Harman, 1997, p. 378). “The nom[ative] ‘ēzer occurs ca. 20x and is predominantly used in reference to Israel’s God” (p. 378). Of these occurrences, six are specifically related to the idea of defense, because ‘ēzer is linked with the word shield, implying divine protection in a military sense. The feminine form ‘ezrâ occurs 26 times and “is used in the Psalms exclusively of divine help” (Harman, 1997, p. 379), but not in a military sense. For example, in Psalm 72:12, God helps the poor; in Psalm 10:14, he helps the fatherless; and the psalmist recognizes God’s help in times of illness, as in Psalm 28:7; and in times of great personal distress, as in Psalms 86:17, (Schultz, 1980, p. 661). This form, “while [it] designates assistance, is more frequently used in a concrete sense to designate the assistant” (p. 661). In the case of Genesis 2:18, the verb is used to imply “help among humans, either in a general kind (Isa 41:6; Ezra 10:15) or specifically of military help afforded (Josh 1:14; 10:4)” (Harman, 1997, p. 379). “It need not necessarily imply divine assistance, and the context rather suggests it is used in a general way to denote mutual assistance in the marriage relationship by the one who corresponds kēnegedō to man” (p. 379). That is, the word is used in conjunction
with compound proper names, designating a specific person as the one who helps (Kohlenberger & Swanson, 1998, p. 1195).

Another commentator (Waltke, 2001) sees this relationship between Adam and Eve as one that “is modeled after God who does not exist in isolation but is a triunity, surrounded by a heavenly court” (p. 88). He continues, noting that Eve is “to help Adam, to honor his vocation, to share his enjoyment, and to respect the prohibition. . . . It signifies the woman’s essential contribution” (p. 88). This relationship is meant to be one that provides assistance in the pursuit of what God intends for whole and healthy life in his world and with him. Von Rad (1972), similarly, sees man as one “created for sociability” where Genesis 2:18 speaks of Eve as “one who is to be for man the embodiment of inner and outer encouragement” (p. 82). That is, she is to be one who helps Adam in many and all ways. Brueggemann (1982) has some helpful insights along Waltke’s line of thinking, and adds a deeper dimension by thinking about this in light of a relational covenant. He says, “the place of the garden is for this covenanted human community of solidarity, trust, and wellbeing. They are one! That is, in covenant (2:24)” (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 47). The covenantal marriage relationship is a useful way of thinking about relationships that transform spiritual life.

Other commentators also understand Genesis 2:18 to mean “help” as found in the marriage relationship. The entire story in itself (Gen. 2:4-25) identifies the need that Adam has for someone to help him; “it alerts the reader to the importance of companionship for man. He needs a ‘helper matching him’” (Wenham, 1987, p. 68). God himself first recognizes that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), but then he parades the animals before Adam, thereby increasing the obviousness of the fact that “no suitable helper was found” (Gen. 2:20). In other words, there was none to be found in the animal world that would be adequate to assist and help
Adam: “they are sadly inadequate” (Wenham, 1987, p. 69). So God creates a woman from out of man, and, in doing so, “brilliantly depicts the relation of man and wife” (p. 69). That is, “just as the rib is found at the side of the man and is attached to him, even so the good wife, the rib of her husband, stands at his side to be his helper-counterpart, and her soul is bound up with his” (Cassuto, 1961, p. 134). Here, the relationship is to be “characterized by harmony and intimacy between partners” (Wenham, 1987, p. 69). This perspective must include a broad understanding of what it means to be a helper, one which most certainly speaks of spiritual help as well, as Cassuto notes. As a result of their unity as helpmates, Adam and Eve have no self-consciousness about their lack of clothing, even before God himself. “Since their relationships between man and wife and between them and their creator are unclouded by sin, there is no need for them to cover up. The fulness of their fellowship is here most vividly expressed” (Wenham, 1987, p. 88). There is an openness and authenticity about the relationship that precludes the need for clothing before each other or God.

Kidner (1967) points out that this passage, Genesis 2:18-25, “reveals [Adam] as a social being, made for fellowship, not power: he will not live until he loves, giving himself away (verse 24) to another on his own level. So the woman is presented wholly as his partner and counterpart” (p. 65). But Ross (1996) is more explicit in his understanding that the man-woman relationship outlined in Genesis 2:18-25 “must not be limited to the physical level. They help one another serve the Lord and keep his command so that they might continue their life as his representatives in the world” (p. 118). Further,

God has prepared human beings, male and female, with the spiritual capacity and communal assistance to serve him and to keep his commands so that they might live and enjoy the bounty of his creation. People have spiritual capacity, moral responsibility, and mutual assistance – albeit flawed by sin – because God so designed life. (p. 127)
In other words, God made humanity with these capacities and now humans are to be helpers of one another toward godliness, or spiritual formation.

In conclusion, and returning to Hoekema (1986):

The man-woman relationship, therefore, implies the need for fellowship between human beings. But what is said in Genesis 1 and 2 about this relationship has implications also for our relationship to our fellowmen in general. . . . Men and women cannot attain to true humanity in isolation; they need the fellowship and stimulation of others. We are social beings. The very fact that man is told to love his neighbor as himself implies that man needs his neighbor. (p. 77)

Hoekema goes on to say,

That we can only be complete human beings through encounters with fellow human beings is true in other ways as well. It is only though contacts with others that we come to know who we are and what our strengths and weaknesses are. It is only in fellowship with others that we grow and mature. It is only in partnership with others that we can fully develop our potentialities. This holds for all the human relationships in which we find ourselves: family, school, church, vocation or profession, recreational organizations, and the like. (p. 78)

Each of these relationships has the ability to serve as a helping relationship toward spiritual formation. But what other aspects or kinds of relationships are instrumental in bringing about this type of “true humanity” (p. 77) that helps us “grow and mature” (p. 78) as Hoekema describes?

Old Testament Examples

Having established that the helper in Genesis 2:18 must be viewed as more inclusive than simply one who physically completes Adam in marriage and who has other helping responsibilities and expectations, it seem that the key to the argument is to connect and describe other helping behaviors in the scriptures that are necessary. There are a number of other Old Testament examples of relationships in which people operate under a relational model in such a way as to bring about spiritual formation. These are reviewed as examples of relationships that
support and influence spiritual formation. Old Testament wisdom literature identifies a number of relationships that may offer some insight into helping relationships that could be seen and understood in light of the goal of spiritual formation.

The book of Proverbs, especially chapters 1-9, offer insight into the relational ways in which people are formed spiritually. In Estes’ (1997) book *Hear, My Son: Teaching & Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, he outlines the worldview, values, goals, curriculum, instruction, teacher, and learner in this process of education towards a sense of personal formation as seen in the first section of Proverbs. This book provides an excellent framework and is therefore used to outline this portion of the discussion.

Estes quotes Hubbard in speaking about the fear of the Lord as a “new way of looking at all of life, for it ‘sees each moment as the Lord’s time, each relationship as the Lord’s opportunity, each duty as the Lord’s command, and each blessing as the Lord’s gift (Hubbard 1989:48)” (Estes, 1997, p. 38). This worldview frames all of life and guides and directs its goals and outcomes. “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning point for wisdom and knowledge . . . because reverence for Yahweh cultivates the kind of life that mirrors the creator’s values” (p. 39). The second issue is one of value and Estes notes that “Proverbs 1-9 values teachability, or a humble willingness to accept instruction from Yahweh and from human teachers” (p. 62). He also identifies righteousness as a commitment of education, because “righteousness, or conformity to the law of Yahweh, is the objective standard by which every facet of life is measured. Wisdom is committed to righteousness throughout every dimension of human existence” (p. 62).

Estes (1997) notes three primary goals for education: commitment to the educational process, character formation into godliness, and knowledge of God. First a student must be
committed to the process necessary to grow spiritually. Practice of the spiritual disciplines is an active demonstration of this commitment. Second, Proverbs emphasizes “the development of character [as] a call to growth in maturity as a godly individual” (p. 69). This is the core of spiritual formation and can be seen in Proverbs 4:23 (Revised Standard Version): “Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life.” Finally,

Towering above all of the other goals of education is the ultimate prize of knowledge of God. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom (Pr. 9:10), and it is also the consummate end of wisdom (2:5). Education should produce in the learned more than just a sense of achievement; it should also cultivate reverence for Yahweh and an intimate personal fellowship with him. (Estes, 1997, p. 84)

Another important aspect of this issue regards curriculum. Estes (1997) points out that this comes from three significant sources. Individual observation, tradition that is communicated by the teacher, and divine revelation are the three sources of curriculum. The second is crucial for this study, for it is here, in the association a student has with his teacher, that one sees the importance of relationship in the teaching and learning process. Throughout the wisdom literature, the term “my son” is used frequently to indicate the intimate relationship the teacher has with the student. Crenshaw (1998) notes that “a teacher’s true son is the person who hears and obeys rather than one identified through biological descent” (p. 169). “The parent or, more commonly, the teacher transmits to the learner what he has personally observed or what he himself has received by testimony of another authority. The knowledge base for education, then, is determined by the superior experience of the teacher” (Estes, 1997, p. 98).

Instruction in Proverbs 1-9 is rhetorical in nature (Estes, 1997, p. 123). That is, the teacher is working to persuade the student of what is true by a number of methods and, in the end, the student will decide how to live; “it is the learner, however, who must choose how to respond to the alternatives presented to him” (p. 124). This only occurs however in the context
of a relationship between a teacher and student. In Proverbs 1-9 the instructor takes on multiple roles, from expert authority to facilitator, depending on the types of rhetorical devices that are used by the instructor (p. 125). Estes (1997) suggests that the “metaphor of the guide best pictures the multi-faceted role of the teacher. . . .As a guide, the teacher uses his knowledge and experience to provide direction for the learner. The ultimate goal, however, is that the learner will develop independent competence in living responsibly in Yahweh’s world” (p. 134). While the student is a beginner the teacher must bring to bear a high level of direction, which may drop off as the student develops their abilities and skills in life. “The teacher’s role is to be a guide, to motivate the learners on to maturity” (p. 134). Finally, the learner must play a role as well. Estes notes that, according to Proverbs 1-9, there are four main ways in which this occurs: through receiving instruction by listening, responding in obedience, valuing wisdom and following the way of God, and assimilating this wisdom into all aspects of life (p. 135).

Estes (1997) concludes by saying that the instructor must “assist” or help each student become a person of maturity (p. 152). The movement is from wisdom to righteousness to obedience, all within the context of an intimate relationship to God as a result of deep and meaningful relationships with others who assist, teach, train and guide on the way. These issues are intricately interconnected and play important roles in the lives of the teacher and student. To avoid lengthy exegetical discussion about a large number of passages within Proverbs 1-9, only one which is useful as an example, is examined here.

Proverbs 6:20-22 (Revised Standard Version) says, “My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart always; tie them about your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.” These verses are part of a longer
section admonishing to learner to avoid the “evil woman” who wants to flatter and seduce the student into sexual misconduct that would ruin him. These verses serve as an example of a number of issues previously mentioned regarding the relationship between teacher and learner. They also echo the law that was given to Moses and the importance that he placed upon remembering the law at all times. These recommendations “bound,” “tied,” and “written on the tablet of your heart” (Prov. 3:3, and Prov. 7:3) “seem to be a delicate recall of Deut 6:6-9 (the ‘Shema’)” (Murphy, 1998, p. 38).

Murphy (1998) goes on to say that “the agreement among these three inductions is significant. One may even draw the conclusion that sapiental and ‘Yahwistic’ teaching do not differ, one from another. The teaching of the parents is on a level with, or better, analogous to the commands of Moses” (p. 39). Another commentator suggests that the relationship outlined here is not only one of teacher and student, as seen in “my son” (Prov. 6:20), but also the very relationship that the student has with the content of the instruction itself. For “the Heb. for talk ([verse] 22) has the flavor of meditation. In verse 23, note how the parental rules and maxims of 20 are regarded as expressions of the absolute, divine law” (Kidner, 1964, p. 73). And, further, it is the relationship with truth that a student is able to keep himself from the adulterous woman (p. 65). In the end, there are a number of relationships that assist the student to grow in wisdom and live out a mature life that keeps him from evil. These can be both parental as well as teacher-student relationships. In the case of this proverb, the relationship is clearly familial because the son’s mother is identified (McKane, 1997, p. 327).

Another proverb, which stands in addition to previous observations regarding Proverbs is Proverbs 27:17 (New International Version): “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” This proverb is found in a section that thematically deals with relationships and
friendship. Here, however, the verse speaks of the influence those in a close relationship may have upon one another. There is some confusion regarding the translation of the second half of the original proverb, but each possibility carries with it “the beneficent personal effects that individuals can or do have upon each other” (Murphy, 1998, p. 208-209). A literal translation reads “Iron by iron is sharpened, and a man sharpens the face of his friend (Young’s Literal Translation; Young, 1898). Hamilton (1980) notes:

This particular word always occurs in the plural, perhaps indicative of the fact that the face is a combination of a number of features. [Here] the face identifies the person and reflects the attitude and sentiments of the person. As such, pānim can be a substitute for the self or the feelings of the self. In the Bible the ‘face’ is described not merely as an exterior instrument on one’s physiology, but rather as being engaged in some form of behavioral pattern, and is characterized by some personal quality. It is only natural that the face was considered extraordinarily revealing vis-à-vis a man’s emotions, moods, and dispositions. (p. 727)

While this is a rather lengthy explanation, it is valuable because it thoroughly notes the perspective of this proverb. That is, just as one iron tool is required to sharpen another, so one man is necessary to shape and sharpen the character of another. It is within relationships that one is able to influence the thinking and character of another.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 provides another example, within the wisdom literature, of the importance of relationships. In the preceding verses (Eccl. 4:1-8) the author laments the loss of value and meaning when one toils alone without son or brother to share in the work or the success of the work; he declares it “meaningless under the sun” (Eccl. 4:7). While Longman’s (2007) primary focus in his commentary is on authorship he takes a “canonical-christocentric approach to the meaning of the book” (p. 94) that is very helpful to the current study. “Thinking about the lonely miser leads Qohelet to consider the advantages of companionship. Companionship is a help when there is work to be done or when one falls down and needs help getting up. Further, a companion can keep a friend warm on a cold night and can help fight off
enemies” (Longman, 1998, p. 140). Verse nine in particular states the principle “that companionship is better than isolation” (p. 142). Delitzsch (1973) sees this as “the idea of the reward of faithful fellowship” (p. 277). There seem to be three benefits of friendship: help during difficult times in life (verse 10), warmth (verse 11), and resistance and aid to one another (verse 12) (Longman, 1998, pp. 142-143). The section concludes with a parable that encapsulates the issue and articulates the importance of relationships: “A threefold cord is not easily broken” (Eccl. 4:12, New Revised Standard Version). “The point of the image of the three-strand cord is rather that strength can be gained through human relationships” (Longman, 1998, p. 143-144). One final commentator agrees that “cooperation leads to a rewarding life, both for the individual and for the neighbor” (Provan, 2001, p. 106). He states, “the gain we make from our toil is found in the toil itself, completed in the context of our whole lives lived out before God and in the company of others to whom we are intrinsically and healthily connected as creatures of God” (p. 106). Provan sums up the importance of relationships and their relational spiritual transformational ability when he carries his commentary into contemporary life:

The Bible is about persons-in-community, whether in the Godhead of Father, Son, and Spirit, or in the church, or in the world at large. The proper goal of the Christian is not an individualistic heaven but is to be found in right relationship with God, neighbor, and God’s world now and in the future, which will include by God’s grace a future stretching beyond death. (p. 113)

This community is explicitly addressed in the book of Deuteronomy, where learning flows out of the context of relationships. “Yahweh was to be the sole object of Israel’s faith and obedience. . . .Moreover, [Israel] was to ensure continuity of this allegiance and this covenant faith by diligently teaching her children” (Thompson, 1974, p. 121). For the Jews who recite the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5) each morning it was true apprehension that those who live under the rule of the Lord of Israel are to set their lives and shape their daily conduct and their interior direction by these most important
and primary words. The struggle of faith was and is a constant effort to discover afresh in each situation the experience of the confession that is made in the Shema and the requirements of the demand imposed by it. (Miller, 1990, p. 98)

This is true today for those who are part of God’s kingdom, the Church. God’s people are to live according to the commandments. It is the members of Church who are to impress these (godly life and the commandments) upon one another, constantly teaching and talking about these principles of spiritual life in God (Deut 6:6-9). In this passage the first and foremost commandment is that God’s people are to love God with “whole-hearted devotion and allegiance” (Thompson, 1974, p. 123). Jesus is the example of completely living according to this commandment in the New Testament (Heb. 4:14-15; 5:7-10; 10:25; John 14:21).

It is precisely the community of believers that is to accomplish this task of “impressing” or “teaching” (Deut. 6:7) these lessons upon the hearts of those who come after their generation. “The demand of love towards God implies all other demands, and the disposition to love God implies the disposition both to obey His commandments and to impart these to the children of the following generations, so as to maintain an attitude of love and obedience among the people of God from age to age” (Thompson, 1974, p. 123). Another commentator suggests, “‘these words’ (i.e. the book of Deuteronomy) are to be known by every adult member of the community, and they are to be taught diligently to their children. Nothing is more important to the future of God’s people than the communication of ‘these words’” (Christensen, 1991, p. 143). Christensen (1991) goes on to reiterate that “the focus on teaching your children ‘these words’ diligently within the context of the family – at all conceivable times and places – illustrates once again the pedagogical purpose of the book of Deuteronomy. The content of this book was the primary curriculum in an ongoing program of religious education in ancient Israel” (p. 145). This relational type of spiritual formation is crucial for the goal to be successful. As in Proverbs
6:20-22, where there is a specific link between the commandment and the method of instruction, the commandments themselves are to be like companions and are to be taught by parents/teachers/youth ministers through the common practices of life and then lived out, in the regular routines of the day (Miller, 1990, p. 105).

Psalm 78 is another passage that emphasizes the importance of conveying information to the next generation and beyond. Allen (1987) notes that, at the beginning of this psalm, there is hope that “our fathers” (Ps. 78:5) would “pass down from generation to generation the basis of Israel’s self-understanding” (p. 103), that is, that the wise people of God would proclaim the truth of God to future generations, “children yet unborn” (Ps. 78:6), so that they would “set their hope in God” (Ps. 78:7). This psalm begins in the manner of the wisdom literature and in verse seven “show[s] a threefold cord of faith, as personal trust, informed and humble thinking, and an obedient will” (Kidner, 1975, pp. 281-282), which is meant to shape one’s life as a follower of God’s way. Goldingay (2007) introduces this psalm under the title, “the story that needs passing on” (p. 474) and says that “the psalm itself introduces the narrative by an exhortation to listen and a reminder about the need to learn from the story of the ancestors a lesson about faithfulness. It is designed not merely to record the past but to change people for the future” (p. 479). He continues that this psalm “does make one point explicit and inescapable: the vital importance of faithfulness and obedience rather than rebellion and defiance” (p. 479). So Psalm 78 is another reminder that previous generations must teach the truth of God, seeking to shape people in their future living. At the same time it is a warning of impending consequences should this wisdom be disregarded. Results of disregarding truth can be seen in the remainder of this psalm, and further in Judges 2.
The previous paragraphs on Deuteronomy 6 and Psalms 78 have outlined the importance of spiritual transformational learning in the context of relationship and of passing those lessons along to the next generation. Judges 2 describes the disastrous results of not making this effort:

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you. For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you. (Judges 2:1-3, Revised Standard Version)

When the spiritual lessons of Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 were not taught and lived out the results were that God “has ceased acting on the Israelites’ behalf to drive the Canaanites out of the land, and second, that he is allowing the Canaanites and their gods to have their way with his people” (Block, 1999, p.115). The principle implied here is that believers must be responsible, ensuring that they are faithful to the mission set out by God in order to continue in spiritual growth and prosperity. Because the Israelites were not faithful in their covenant with God to teaching and living out what he wanted, they were prone to follow other things of little worth which became detrimental to them: “The inhabitants will be traps into which the Israelites will stumble by being led astray to worship the gods of the country” (Cundall, 1968, p. 65). As a result, they did not prosper spiritually.

Wisdom

These passages analyzed in Old Testament Examples have dealt primarily with the wisdom literature as a way of observing the development of spiritual formation, because wisdom is an outcome of spiritual formation. The wisdom literature outlined identifies relationships that guide and direct the development of spiritual formation, and ultimately of wisdom. Biblical
Wisdom literature points to these relationships in various places and demonstrates that true wisdom is acquired through the assistance of others who are willing to be in relationship. It has been seen that there is a close relationship between spiritual formation and wisdom that is developed in the context of relationship. A number of inferences can be made towards spiritual formation from the wisdom literature.

Curtis (2005) notes that “wisdom’s goal is to produce a skilled craftsman who can frame an appropriate response in any situation he or she faces” (p. 116). This is done through the use of relationships with wise mentors who guide and challenge the thinking of the student or “son” (Prov. 1-9). For example, “Ecclesiastes 12:11 describes the words of the wise as ‘like goads,’ which are used to guide cattle and move them in the direction they are supposed to go” (Curtis, 2005, p. 118). Curtis identifies two important observations regarding this pedagogical relational method of education:

The first has to do with the value of this teaching method and the goals of the instruction. Qohelet challenged his students and was willing to take the risk of allowing them to reach their own conclusions. Qohelet saw questions and tensions as important teaching devices. He used his words as goads to direct students, but he left it to them to discover appropriate answers. His method reflects confidence in his students; it also suggests that he thought something important was gained in the process. (p. 122)

Curtis’s second conclusion is that the kinds of questions used in relationship between the wise sage and the student are crucial to the outcome (p. 123). This is to say that the sage is to ask questions that will force students to think for themselves in the development of wisdom, or spiritual maturity. They are to struggle for themselves, but always with the assistance of the sage, to develop wise conclusions. “Kidner (1964) says about Proverbs 2:1-5, ‘The search [for wisdom], strenuous as it must be, is not unguided. Its starting point is revelation. . . its method is not one of free speculation, but of treasuring and exploring received teachings so as to penetrate
to their principles. . . and its goal, so far from being academic, is spiritual” (Curtis, 2005, p. 124). In conclusion, Curtis comments that

it would seem that the sort of radical methods found in Ecclesiastes would best be reserved for mentoring situations or small groups where the teacher/facilitator knows his or her students well and can remain in close touch with his students’ thoughts as the struggle with these difficult issues. When used appropriately, however, such methods can play an important role in helping us fulfill Paul’s instruction of ‘teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ’ (Col. 1:28). (p. 128)

This points to the New Testament as a guide for understanding a relational model of Christian spiritual formation.

New Testament Examples

There are a number of New Testament examples of relationships in which people operate under this relational model in such a way as to bring about spiritual formation. Examples that support or play a role in spiritual formation are reviewed in the following subsections. First it is important to understand the word helper in the New Testament.

A short word study is helpful in framing the issue of how helper is understood in the New Testament. According to The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology the term paraklētos or helper is used to describe someone who puts in a good word for another, and brings active assistance (Braumann, 1999, para. 3) Braumann says that “the sense of helper and intercessor is suitable in all occurrences of the word” and even goes so far as to suggest that Saint John (referencing 1 Jn. 2:1) “gives the term a soteriological character in calling ‘Jesus Christ the righteous’ our ‘advocate’ (paraklētos)” (Braumann, 1999, para. 3). In 1 John Jesus is identified as the paraklētos or helper. This is an acceptable but unique understanding because the paraklētos is typically understood biblically to be the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13). In the case of 1 John 2:1 and John 14:6 Jesus himself is called the paraklētos.
Regarding 1 John 2:1 Brown (1982) agrees, “certainly [paraklētos] is salvific here where the just Jesus serves as a Paraclete for sinners. . . . Jesus stands before the Father both as intercessor and defending advocate” (pp. 216-217). This idea is seen again because “Christ’s advocacy of man is addressed to God in that relation of Fatherhood which has been fully revealed in the Son who has taken manhood to Himself” (Westcott, 1955, p. 43). That is, Jesus himself, as the Son of God is our advocate or helper because he came to seek and save those who were lost (Luke 19:10).

He has Himself fulfilled and pleads for the fulfillment of that which is right according to the highest law. He is not an advocate who wishes to set aside that law but to carry it out and apply it. In Him the idea of manhood has obtained its absolute satisfaction, and in turn He claims that the virtue of this satisfaction be extended to all in fellowship with Himself. (Westcott, 1955, p. 43)

In John 14:16, Jesus himself demonstrates what he thinks of his role and responsibility as a helper. “The Greek should be rendered: ‘another, a Paraclete’” (Brown, 1970, p. 638). There is some debate among commentators regarding this passage as to whether or not Jesus is referring to himself as a Paraclete. “It can be contended that though Christ has not used the word Paraclete of Himself He has spoken of performing actions which a Paraclete might well perform” (Morris, 1971, p. 649). The life and actions of Jesus are helper actions. Morris believes that this is not enough, “It seems best to understand Jesus as a Paraclete and the Spirit as another, all the more so since this term is actually used of Him (1 John 2:1)” (p. 649).

The word [Paraclete] is always in this Gospel used by Jesus, who speaks of the Spirit as sent to supply the need of His followers after His departure. The Spirit is to be with the disciples continually, and, indeed, to be in them (14:16f.). He is to be their teacher, and to remind them of all that Jesus has said (14:26). He bears witness to Christ (15:26). He has one work to do in unbelievers, namely to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8). He can come only when Jesus goes away (16:7). This appears to mean that the work of the Spirit in the believer is a consequence of the saving work of Christ and not something separate from it. The same truth may be implied in the statement that the Spirit is sent in the name of Jesus (14:26). It is only because Christ has died for us
and put away our sin that the Holy Spirit can be found at work within our hearts. (Morris, 1971, p. 663)

In his life Jesus fulfilled many of the roles of helper for his disciples. Milne (1993) makes a further connection and notes that the relationships between Jesus and his followers and the Paraclete and Jesus’ followers are the same:

The Spirit is nothing less than the life-breath of the exalted Jesus, who makes the victory of Jesus available for the people of God in history. The title Jesus uses in Greek, *paraklētos*, [means] ‘one called alongside (to help)’. It has a legal context outside the New Testament, and is used in that sense in 1 John 2:1. The meaning in these farewell discourses is arguably wider, as in the verbal form of *paraklētos* which occurs regularly throughout the New Testament, and is variously translated ‘exhort’, ‘comfort’, ‘entreat’ and ‘encourage’. . . . Perhaps the most important consideration is expressed in verse 16 . . . give you ANOTHER (my emphasis) Counselor. The Spirit will fulfill a role parallel to the role Jesus had fulfilled to this point; he is ‘another Christ’. Such is the gift of the departed Jesus. (p. 214)

This broader role can be seen in the high priestly prayer in John 17 where Jesus speaks of protecting his followers because he “kept them . . .and guarded them” (Kostenberger, 2004, p. 494, translation of John 17:12). In other words, “[This] verb may conjure up the image of a shepherd guarding his flock” (p. 494, note 49). Here Jesus is the one who has protected, guarded and helped his followers stay faithful to his life and mission.

Second, Jesus is identified numerous times as a teacher: “It is the unanimous testimony of all the Synoptic writers, and one that doubtless coincides with historical reality, that Jesus ‘taught’ publicly, i.e. in synagogues (Matt. 9:35; 13:54), in the temple (Mk. 12:35; Lk. 21:37; Matt. 26:55) or in the open air (Matt. 5:2; Mk. 6:34; Lk. 5:3)” (Wegenast, 1999, para. 8). For example, “in the NT *didaskalos* occurs 59 times, the vast majority of which are in the Gospels (12 times in Matt. and Mk. respectively; 17 times in Lk. and 9 times in Jn.). The word refers to Jesus on 41 occasions of which 29 represent a direct form of address and the meaning is almost
always to teach or instruct” (Wegenast, 1999, para. 16). Jesus was one who helped his followers understand who he was and what his mission was about.

As a final example from the life of Jesus, the way in which he redefines relationships with his followers is useful to round out an understanding of the term helper. While the term helper is not used in this story, Jesus does redefine relationships in a way that identifies his closest followers to be similar in intimacy with him as is his family. As a result, Jesus teaches them and helps them to follow him in obedience to his word. In Matthew 12:46-50 Jesus points to his disciples and says, “whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50, New King James Version). Here Jesus redefines relationships. As Schweizer (1975) notes, “Matthew’s purpose is, on the one hand, to show that even family ties with Jesus do not suffice to separate people from the ‘evil generation,’ and on the other to show by counterexample who Jesus’ true family are (p. 295). It is not Jesus’ physical family that he identifies as family but those who obey and follow Him. Jesus warns of being part of the “evil generation” similar to the way Proverbs warns against following the evil woman (Prov. 6:24-29). Obedience to the wise Word from the Lord is the command that demonstrates true family relationships. “Because the Son of God is present in Jesus, there is now a band of men who are learning to do the will of the Father and thus distinguish the family of God from the evil generation” (Schweizer, 1975, pp. 295-296). Morris (1992) agrees: “When he speaks of ‘doing the will’ of the Father, Jesus is. . . pointing to the importance of conforming to God’s way and not imposing one’s own pattern on heavenly things. It is relationship to the heavenly Father that constitutes membership in the family” (p. 332).

The final biblical example that supports the notion of a relational model of spiritual formation can be seen in various communities throughout the New Testament. These function as
helping communities and are outlined descriptively, showing that mentoring relationships are crucial toward effective spiritual transformational learning outcomes. They fit within the relational model outlined above. Broadly viewed, the introductions and epilogues of John’s and many of Paul’s letters to communities of believers show a kind of relationality that he viewed as crucial to his readers’ spiritual formation.

For example, the commendations in the epistles of John reflect these principles. First and Second John are written to communities who are addressed with great affection, as of a parent to a child, “my little children” (1 John 2:1); and to one who is deeply loved, “to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth” (2 John 1:1) (Marshall, 1978, p. 10). Both epistles were written by way of instruction and admonition, meant to address specific problems that had developed in the church (Marshall, 1978, p. 14). Smith (1991) notes that these letters were written to “lay down the true doctrine and defend it against proponents of the false” (p. 18). These lessons have particular spiritual implications: “The believer must live in obedience to Christ: in particular he or she must accept and obey the commandment to love” (p. 20).

Third John is written to one who is called “beloved,” who is loved (3 John 1), as a “child” of the author (3 John 4). That is, the author has deep affection for Gaius and is writing to ask for his assistance in ministry through the act of hospitality (Rensberger, 2001, p. 12). Gaius is compared to another Diotrephes (3 John 9), who is not serving God but seeking his own authority and speaking against the author (3 John 10). As a result of his deep relationship with Gaius the writer is able to instruct him toward godly faithfulness: “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God” (3 John 11).
Similarly, the longstanding relationship the Apostle Paul had with Timothy demonstrates relational spiritual transformational learning through the influence of the helping model. While both letters to Timothy are seemingly addressed only to him, there is also a sense in which they are addressed to the communities in which Timothy lives and ministers.

The church as a whole, and specific groups of church members, are instructed through Timothy. . . . Paul is writing to the whole church as well as his fellow worker. This implicit fact surfaces in the plural ‘you’ in the concluding benediction of each letter: ‘grace be with you’ (1 Tim. 6:21; 2 Tim 4:22). (Knight, 1992, p. 6)

First Timothy demonstrates relational spiritual formation occurring in two directions: first, in Paul’s relationship with Timothy, “[Paul’s] true child of faith (1 Timothy 1:2), and second through Paul’s admonition to Timothy to join him in proclaiming the Gospel” (Quinn & Wacker, 2000).

In this greeting Timothy is Paul’s legitimate son in Christ, but he has a particular relation to Paul that is rooted in their sharing in the Pauline apostolate itself. This relationship is distinct from that produced by faith in Paul’s proclamation of the gospel and subsequent conversion. . . . The father/child paradigm is the master image for analyzing the relationship between Paul and his co-worker-successors, an image which simultaneously suggests the intimate continuity as well as the profound, incommunicable difference between the man whom Christ and God the Father charge with the apostolic office in the strict sense and those persons who come to share in that office in a less immediate fashion. . . . [Timothy] is Paul’s true child because he has received and transmits the Pauline preaching and teaching and, in fact, the apostle’s whole way of life. (Quinn & Wacker, 2000, pp. 54-56)

While this is a rather lengthy explanation, it identifies the relationship between Paul and Timothy in an important manner as something much larger than simply spiritual parenthood. Knight (1992) views this relationship as having multiple facets, including

(a) Spiritual paternity, i.e., Paul the evangelist and Timothy the convert (see 1 Cor. 4:14-17); (b) spiritual adoption and training, i.e., Paul the nurturer and Timothy the son who grows under his adoptive father; or (c) simply of shared faith, with Paul being the older (the “father”) in that faith and Timothy the younger. (Knight, 1992, pp. 63-64)
In all these cases relationship outlined is one of a mature believer helping a younger believer to grow in the faith and work and live out the same mission.

In First Timothy 4 Paul encourages Timothy to undertake training so as to be spiritually mature (1 Tim. 4:8) in order that Timothy will be able to join him in ministry (1 Tim. 4:11-16). It is in this deep mentoring relationship between Paul and Timothy that spiritual formation occurs. At the end of the chapter, the result of Timothy’s faithfulness is said to be “progress” (1 Tim. 4:15) and salvation (1 Tim 4:16).

Conclusion

These New Testament passages demonstrate visible and tangible examples of the Old Testament foundation of a helper. The relationships, whether physical or spiritual in nature, always have the same goal and purpose. That is, the relationships outlined are all intended to help one another grow in godliness toward spiritual transformation. This brief biblical survey provides support for and evidence of spiritual transformation occurring as a result of helping relationships.
Reference List


Holy Bible. (1898). *Young’s Literal Translation*.


This volume discusses the importance of a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach to Christian formation based upon godly love and the imago Dei (Latin, image of God). Grounded biblically and theologically, this interdisciplinary collection offers perspectives drawn from spirituality. Diane J. Chandler is an associate professor of spiritual formation and Christian leadership at Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA. Along with published book chapters and journal articles, she has authored Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach to Personal and Relational Wholeness (2014). Show all. Reviews.