

# Experiential Christian Formation

## VIDEO HANDOUT

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### Vocation & Discernment: Reflection Groups as Experiential Christian Formation

Everything that happens in a congregation is formative for parishioners, whether that formation is toward the image of Christ or not. Therefore, every aspect of a congregation's life together is *potentially* a matter for faithful Christian formation. This video teaches the New Testament rationale for group discernment and a method for allowing small groups to reflect upon how they live their faith in daily life.

The biblical witness (in particular the New Testament) is the basis for reflection and discernment for both classes. This video demonstrates for participants a particular biblically-based, small group practice of discernment that has proven to be effective for groups facilitated by St. Benedict's WorkShop<sup>1</sup> for over a decade. Participants will learn about a practice for how individuals can interpret the Bible together in ways that will illuminate concrete events taking place in the lives of the members of the group and suggest faithful responses to those events.

#### The "Symposium" in 1<sup>st</sup> century dinner parties

The following method of reflection and discernment traces its roots to the common pattern of dinner parties in the Greco-Roman world, a pattern that influenced the practices of Paul's early Christian congregations.

- \* Ordinarily, a formal dinner party had two parts: the meal itself and some form of entertainment that followed. The two parts were separated by the passing of a cup of wine.
- \* In the case of a purely social function, the entertainment might be some form of music or dancing, or even bawdier pursuits (!).
- \* In the case of clubs organized for ethical or philosophical groups, the activity following the passing of the cup of wine would be a time of moral conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Benedict's Workshop, a non-profit that teaches Christian formation, is located in San Antonio, Texas.

- \* This latter pattern was most likely the one that influenced Paul’s congregations when they celebrated the “Lord’s Supper.”
- \* For evidence of the two-part meal practice, see 1 Corinthians 11:25, “In the same way he took the cup also, **after supper....**”
- \* For insight into the activities that constituted the second half of the Lord’s Supper, see 1 Corinthians 14, esp. verses 26-32.
- \* In reading 1 Corinthians 14, remember that “prophecy” does not mean foretelling the future, but boldly speaking forth an insight that you believe is divinely inspired.
- \* **Conversations like the one that we are suggesting are marked by trust and accountability. The person who convenes such a group is responsible for seeing that it proceeds in a way that is healthy and up-building for all of the participants** (see Paul’s repetition of the verb “to build up” in 1 Corinthians 14).

When you teach people to reflect together upon their faithfulness in daily life, you are joining a practice that was central to the very earliest Christian gatherings.

**Question: Who are the two people below?**



Caption



Caption

**Answer:** Ordinarily, people will say that the two people are General Patton and Harry Potter. But in actuality, they are the actors George C. Scott and Daniel Radcliffe. Each has become almost synonymous with his most memorable role in films.

St. Paul taught the people in his churches to take on the being of Christ to such an extent that they would become completely identified with Christ. The following passages illustrate this point.

“Clothe yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27-28)

**Gal 2:19-20** *I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ*

*who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live in faithfulness<sup>2</sup>, the [faithfulness] of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

**Galatians 3:27-28** *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

The Greek verb that is translated above as “clothe yourselves” is a word often used in the context of the theater, where it refers to an actor’s costume. Like an actor on a stage, the Christian is to “put on Christ” in such a way as to play the role of Christ on the stage of life.

To use a different way of expressing this idea, we might say that we “put on Christ” as a way of **training ourselves** to be as Christ is all aspects of our daily lives.

But to do so effectively, **we must really know Christ and his ways**. What follows is Paul’s most concentrated way of teaching the core of what it means to live as Christ: the so-called “Christ Hymn” from Philippians.

### The Pattern of Christ (Phil 2:1-30)

*2:1 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation from love, if any partnership of spirit, if any compassions and mercies, 2 complete my joy: that you might think the same thing, having the same love, as co-souls, thinking the one thing. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Think this among you, which was also in Christ Jesus,*

*6 who, existing in the form of God, did not regard being equal with God as something to be clutched,*

*7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*

*And having been found in appearance as a man, 8 he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death – even death on a cross.*

*9 Therefore God also exalted him and gave to him the name that is above every name,*

*10 so that in the name of Jesus every knee should bend of heavenly beings and earthly beings and sub-earthly beings,*

*11 and every tongue should confess that the Lord is Jesus Christ, unto the glory of God the Father.*

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<sup>2</sup> Your translation probably says, “faith.” “Faith” and “faithfulness” are equally good translations for the Greek word, *pistis*, which Paul uses here. There are not two different Greek words for faith and faithfulness, as there are in English. Paul probably intends a combination of both senses of the word, as the faith of believers joins itself with the faithfulness of Christ, which then results in the believer’s own practices of faithfulness.

*12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you always obeyed, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, y'all work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for God is the one working among you, both to will and to work for what is well-pleasing to God. 14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing, 15 so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as light-giving bodies in the world. 16 It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you – 18 and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.*

*19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. 20 I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. 21 All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. 23 I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; 24 and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.*

*25 Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus – my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; 26 for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. 29 Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, 30 because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.*

### Notes on the Passage

The NRSV translation of Philippians 2:1-5 uses the phrase “to be of one mind.” We have chosen to translate the phrase more literally: “to think the same thing” (v. 2) and “to think the one thing” (v. 2) and “think this among you” (v. 5). Note how Paul then develops an image of the “one mind” that is to unify the Philippians. They are not simply to agree, but to take on the mind of Christ, who sought the well-being of all, above his personal well-being or comfort or status.

Epaphroditus and Timothy are used as examples of what the “mind of Christ” looks like when lived out by someone known to the congregation.

To use our images from above, Epaphroditus and Timothy have each “put on” Christ like a garment. They are still themselves, of course, and yet they also look like Christ. Christ lives in and through them.

This passage is tricky to apply in everyday life, as it requires first an analysis of relationships of power and status. Key to the passage’s effectiveness is that **it is the one with all power and status (Christ Jesus, “existing in the form of God” and “being equal with God”) who freely relinquishes power and status in order to be the slave of God in the world.** Likewise, in applying the teaching, it is only for the

person who has power in a situation to give it up for others. It is NOT for the person without power to defer to the person with power. The passage has been applied to people without power or status with destructive effects (e.g., applied to women in situations in which they had less power than the men around them, applied to minorities, etc.). The analysis of power and status is central to applying this model faithfully.

Verses 12-13: Note that Paul does not tell the Philippians concretely what they are to do. He only gives them a pattern of relationship to follow: those with power and status in the community are to humble themselves, to be the slaves of God, and seek the good of the whole. They will need to adopt patterns of group discernment to “work out their own salvation,” with confidence that God is also in the midst of them, empowering their faithfulness.

### Questions for reflection

In this passage, how does Paul characterize the pattern of Jesus for those who seek to follow him? Use language from the passage in your answer, and then “translate” that language into more familiar terms.

What does Paul seek from the Philippians through his repeated call for them to think the same way? How would you explain to other members of your parish what it means to think the same way?

How might the Philippians go about discerning how to embody Christ in their own situation?

In what unique ways do Timothy and Epaphroditus embody the pattern of Christ that Paul set out in 2:1-11?

Identify a time this week that you saw someone faithfully “clothe themselves with Christ” or embody the pattern of Christ as Paul sets it out in Philippians 2:6-11.

Think of a specific issue going on in your work or parish or family life. Identify some concrete ways you might “clothe yourself with Christ” or embody this pattern of Christ that Paul sets out in Philippians 2:6-11 in this situation.

Identify a specific time or event this week when you were able to recognize and say to yourself “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Can you identify the source or grounding for how you recognized Christ living in you?

