



**Transformational Theology:
Forming the Soul**

Kenneth Boa: Forming *an Authentic Self in an Inauthentic World*

“Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” (John 21:15, NASB) In recent days, I have been haunted by this penetrating question. Perhaps “these” referred to the boon of fish, symbolizing the joy of successful work. Or Jesus may have meant the other disciples, alluding to the pleasures of friendship with like-minded people. Our Lord could even have been asking Peter whether his love for Him exceeded the other disciples’ love for Him. Regardless of the referent, however, the piercing point of the question remains the same. As we substitute our names for “Simon, son of John” we sense the voice of Jesus as His eyes gaze into our souls, inviting us to a ruthless examination of what we may love more than Him. There in the wellspring of the soul we find the conflicted desires of our true and false selves.

There is little doubt that when Peter saw the charcoal fire on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:9), the pain associated with his triple denial of the Lord before another charcoal fire (John 18:18) returned to him with searing heat. In Luke’s account, Peter’s third denial was immediately followed by the crowing of a rooster and the worst moment of his life: “The Lord turned and looked at Peter”

(Luke 22:61, NASB). That penetrating gaze caused him to go out weeping bitterly, and it was upon him once again as Jesus took him aside to confront, heal, and restate him with renewed purpose and mission (John 21:15–19). The three commissions in this text, corresponding to and superseding the three denials, illustrate the profound and unique biblical truth that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20, NASB).

The harsh reality is that the sometimes wrenching journey from the false self toward the wholeness of the true self is replete with our own denials of the Lord when we turn to our own way instead of His way. We deny Jesus’ rightful rule when we crave pride-driven autonomy rather than the humility of radical trust and abandonment to divine providence.

The false self, engendered and nourished by the quest for having, being, and doing on our own terms, can choke the life of the new self that has been implanted in the heart of the believer. The illusory persona is inherently biased to follow false compasses because of our pursuit of need gratification. Given the power of continually reinforced cultural

cues, it is little wonder that people who wish to follow Jesus often end up following the fantasies of this present darkness. The corrupting effect of invalid role models and the erosion of our knowledge of goodness, truth, and beauty through the accelerating process of relativism conspire against the formation of meaningful identity in this world.

As films like *Memento*, *The Bourne Identity*, and *The Man Without a Past* vividly portray, the prospect of living in this world without a coherent identity can be terrifying. We are driven to cobble together some sense of past and of place, of possession and position, in an attempt to authenticate our being and assure our trajectory. The sea is wide, and our boats are small and frail, and we are desperate to think we are on course, though few people have a clue as to their real destination. Without a transcendent source of meaning and identity, people will cling to the detritus of myths that happen to be floating about: myths of power and fantasy, myths of success, coming-of-age myths, travel myths. Our ambient world system promotes and rewards a fundamental desire to succeed in the false self that naturally outstrips the desires of the true self.

In spite of its shortcomings, the recent film *Bruce Almighty* well illustrates the quest for the godlike power to reshape the world according to our liking. Bruce Nolan, a television reporter in Buffalo, New York, is unhappy with his life. At the end of a terrible day, Bruce rants and raves against God, who responds by challenging him to see if he can do a better job. Temporarily endowed with divine abilities, Bruce is giddy with power, using it selfishly and foolishly with unintended consequences. To cope with millions of prayer requests, he answers them all with a blanket “Yes”—thus, for instance, 400,000 people win the lottery and then are outraged to discover that they have won only \$17.00 apiece! As the plot progresses, Bruce begins to discover a fundamental biblical truth in which God in effect tells us all, “I am God, and you are not.... You cannot be Me, and you wouldn’t want to be Me.”

Scripture clearly teaches that we were never meant to be autonomous individuals who make our own way in this world apart from God. We cannot even know ourselves without knowing the One through whom and for whom we were created. We can find and nurture the true self only by abandoning our illusions of control and committing ourselves to the boundless goodness and grace of the living Lord of all. It has been rightly affirmed that our service to

him is perfect freedom.

The false self will always worship and serve the created order through the idolatry of possessions, positions, and people. These idols are cruel taskmasters, and their service is burdensome. The true self, embraced by dying to the idolatrous quest of the false self, revels in the fact that nothing less than God will satisfy the restless heart.

The Old and the New Self in Paul’s Thought

All who are born in this world receive the gift of *bios*, or biological life, but the greater gift of *zoe*, or spiritual life, is a product of the second birth. This *zoe* is a radically new form of life, because it is the life of Christ in us (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27). Since we were formerly dead, blind, and bound (Ephesians 2:1; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Timothy 2:26), the new self is more than a resuscitation of the old self; it is a new entity before God (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). I see the new self as the life of God’s Son within us, uniquely expressed through the prism of each believer’s personality. This new self must be perfect before God, or we could not have intimate communion with the holy

Father of lights.

On the other hand, I would not equate the new self with the *imago Dei*, since the image of God in its various dimensions (e.g., our soul, relationality, God-given authority, and spiritual capacity) was distorted, but not eradicated in the Fall. The new or true self, which is our inner life in Christ (Ephesians 3:16; Romans 7:22), impinges on and progressively transforms our thinking, character, and actions in such a way that the *imago Dei* is gradually being purified, though never fully or perfectly in this earthly life.

I associate the false or old self with the way Paul uses *sarx* (“the flesh”) in texts like Galatians 5:13-24 and Romans 7:18, 25. When God implanted His *zoe* in our regeneration, He did not erase the old memories, false scripts, and inauthentic ways of having, being, and doing. In this life of progressive but often fitful growth in sanctification, we are fully capable of thinking, speaking, and acting in ways that express the deeds of the flesh instead of the life of the Spirit within us. False patterns of beliefs and behaviors can be manifested in the hidden self (avoiding God and others), the unseen self (not perceived until illuminated by grace), and the masked self (the false images we act out before others).

The radical contrast between what we actually were, when stripped of our pretense and pos-

The false self will always worship and serve the created order through the idolatry of possessions, positions, and people. These idols are cruel taskmasters, and their service is burdensome.

turing, and what we are now called to be in Christ is evident in Paul's exhortations to the Colossians:

Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him (Colossians 3:5–10, NASB).

The “image of the One who created him” is the very image of God's Son, and it is God's ultimate intention that we become conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). The marred *imago Dei* is now being restored by the redemptive power of the new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). The world does not now see us as we will be, but our Lord already sees us as we truly are in the depths of our being in Him. Because we have been purchased by His blood and metamorphosed into new creatures, we have died, and our new life is hidden with Christ in God; when He is revealed, then we will also be revealed with Him in glory (Colossians 3:3–4). This is proleptic life—living in anticipation of the age to come and manifesting the presence and power of the kingdom in this passing age. Spiritual formation involves living the not-yet in the midst of the now, the life of the new creation in the context of the old, and the splendor of the eternal in the sphere of the temporal.

Progressing Toward the True Self

For this to be a viable process, we need access to incarnational truth—valid and palpable role models that distinguishably manifest the immediacy of Christ in the theater of human endeavor. Such agents of kingdom life are visible compasses that help us discern the authentic in a world of image, posing, and externalism. But they are in short supply in this fallen world, as is evident from the shallowness and hypocrisy that is so often associated with Christendom. I just heard about someone who was wearing a T-shirt with the words, “Jesus, save me from Your followers.” It is generally easier to see the beauty, order, and creativity of God in nature than it is in people. Nevertheless, God has chosen to use imperfect people as agents and mediators of His grace, and the paradoxical tension is that we cannot become authentic selves without being embedded in community. A both/and problem requires a both/and solution; God is concerned about both the personal and the corporate expressions of following His Son. This is why the historic disciplines of the faith are both personal (e.g., meditation, prayer, fasting, simplicity, solitude, and study) and corporate (e.g., confession, worship, guidance, celebration, submission, and service).

As Kierkegaard observed, the great task of becoming an authentic self requires the overthrow of the illusory and sensate self that was forged in the personal and social milieu of youth.¹ Most people successfully resist this arduous process by embracing avoid-

ance strategies to guard them from reflection, ambiguity, and pain. Pascal predicted that distraction and indifference would characterize the age of modernity, since these are powerful means of living in immediacy without ultimacy. “Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices” (Ecclesiastes 7:29, NASB). We use multifarious devices to sidestep God's claims on our lives because they challenge our attempts at autonomy, our selfish pride, and our illusions of control.

Yet God has multifarious means of getting our attention. Recall C. S. Lewis' insight in *The Problem of Pain*: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The Greek playwright Aeschylus made this poignant observation: “Even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.” It is the “awful grace of God” that drives the false self to the point of despair through affliction, disappointments, adversity, and failure. The defining moment in the parable of the Prodigal Son was “when he came to his senses” and said, “I will get up and go to my father” (Luke 15:17–18, NASB). Without the experience of radical desperation, he would never have reached this defining moment. Grace drove him to it, and grace drew him through it to the father's house.

It has been observed that the doctrines of grace elevate us without inflating us and humble us without degrading us. The elevation of Romans 6, the humbling of Romans 7, and the empowering and glorification of Romans 8 portray the counterpoint of grace. In

this harmonious dance, God takes the lead, and the soul follows His lead in glorious submission to the music and majesty of His loving embrace.

The true dynamics of human depravity and dignity and of divine holiness and grace are not learned from culture, but from Scripture. The empirical and rational ways of knowing must be suffused with the light of revelation, the third way of knowing. If God had not revealed His powers, perfections, will, and ways through the prophets and apostles, and most decisively through the person and work of His Son, we could never hope to arrive at answers to the fundamental issues of origin, purpose, and destiny. Only in Scripture do we find definitive answers to the questions, Where did we come from? Why are we here? and Where are we going? Without these answers, we cannot arrive at authentic identity, because an understanding of the true self must be shaped by the truth of our condition.

Cultivating an Eternal Perspective in a Temporal Arena

The problem is that the world is always ready to define us by default—do nothing, and it will readily tell us who we are, what to want, and what to do by means of the ubiquitous carriers of our increasingly secularized, pluralistic, and privatized culture. While the world defines us by default, the Word will define us only by discipline. This requires the repeated choices of habituated intention to

energize the ongoing renewal of the mind through the infusion of Scripture in the soul. To “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2, NIV) is to engage in the process of developing an eternal perspective in a temporal arena, and this steadily moves us away from conformity to the world system toward welcoming the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

There is no permanent change in our lives without a change in our perspective. Thomas Keating in *Intimacy with God* refers to this spiritual orientation as the intention of consenting to God’s presence and action within us.² This active intention requires self-surrender and trust, so that we freely and boldly welcome God’s presence and action in our inward being. As we do this, we learn to live from the center, engaging in the inward-to-outward process of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength (Mark 12:30).

Through the new covenant miracle of redemption and justification, God has given us a new heart and a new life (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26,27; Matthew 26:28; Romans 6:3–11; 8:9–17; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21; Colossians 1:27; Hebrews 9).

Our deepest identity and thus our true self in Christ has been created in the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Ephesians 4:24) and is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10). Our new inward identity with God as His regenerated, justified, and adopted children is unchanging, but our outward practice is one of fitful growth and gradual transformation in the painful and joyful journey of sanctification. The process of formation and maturation involves growth in trust and dependence, movement from the new being on the inside to its manifestation on the outside, and releasing the power of the Spirit through the episodic brokenness of self-renunciation.

All the classical spiritual exercises relate to and enhance one another (see the section on Disciplined Spirituality in my book, *Conformed to His Image* ³), but some of them are particularly suited to the formation and maturation of the true self. Here are eight, but bear in mind that disciplines such as solitude and silence pervade all of them.

1. FORMATIONAL READING

In *Shaped by the Word*, M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. contrasts two approaches to Scripture:⁴

INFORMATIONAL READING	FORMATIONAL READING
Seeks to cover as much as possible	Focuses on small portions
A linear process	An in-depth process
Seeks to master the text	Allows the text to master us
The text as an object to use	The text as a subject that shapes us
Analytical, critical, and judgmental approach	Humble, submissive, willing, loving approach
Problem-solving mentality	Openness to mystery

There is an important place for informational reading of Scripture and for exegetical and topical methods of Bible study. But those who approach Scripture only in this way often overlook the formational approach that centers on speaking to the heart more than informing the mind. The Bible is not merely an object, but a divinely inspired oracle that is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12, NIV) and has the power to transform those who receive it in humility and obedience (James 1:21,22). The true self is nurtured by the formative power of revealed truth as we come to love God through His Word.

2. RECOLLECTION

The discipline of recollection relates to the practice of the presence of God and can be habitual or actual. Habitual recollection is analogous to a man’s or a woman’s love for a spouse or children, and does not require an ongoing consciousness. Just as we can form a habitual identity as being a husband, a wife, or a parent, so we can ask for the grace to form a habitual state of mind as a follower of Jesus Christ. Actual recollection involves the developing habit of turning to God at regular times throughout the course of the day. This is more along the lines of what Brother Lawrence, Frank Laubach, and Thomas Kelly pursued in their quest for a more conscious awareness of God in the routines of everyday life.

3. SETTING THE MIND

The apostle Paul urged his readers to set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5,6), to keep seeking the things above where Christ is (Colossians 3:1,2), to walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25), and to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). As we set our minds on

Jesus, we will abide in Him, and His words will abide in us (John 15:4–7). By fixing the eyes of our heart on Him, we will run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1,2).

4. REFLECTION

The spiritual exercise of reflection at the end of the day on the events and conversations that transpired can reveal patterns of attitudes and behaviors that emerge from the false self. We can also profit from answering diagnostic questions like those of A. W. Tozer’s *“Seven Rules for Self-Discovery.”*

- What do we want most out of life?
- What do we think about most in this life?
- How do we use our money?
- What do we do with our leisure time?
- Who is the company that we enjoy?
- Whom and what do we admire?
- What do we laugh at?

5. DISCERNING PRAYER

Because we have deep impulses of which we are not fully conscious, it is good for us to invite the Spirit of God to search us and reveal any hurtful ways in us (Psalm 139:23,24). (For this discipline, I recommend the particular and general examinations of conscience in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.⁵)

6. PERSONAL AND CORPORATE THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE

Since the heart becomes steadily conformed to what it most admires, the practice of gratitude and of delighting in His beauty, goodness, and glory makes the soul increasingly responsive to His gracious initiatives. As said by William Temple, “For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the

holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open up the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”

7. CORPORATE EXAMPLE, EXHORTATION, AND SOUL CARE

The discipline of meeting together to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” and to “encourage one another day after day” (Hebrews 10:24,25; 3:13, NASB) is essential to the formation of an authentic self in an inauthentic world.

8. THE DISCIPLINE OF GRATITUDE

Nothing ages more quickly than gratitude. As we take the many blessings of our lives for granted, the grace of God degenerates into entitlement. As my friend Ed Dudley used to put it, if we were born on third base, we wake up believing we just hit a triple. If we are wise, we will not leave gratitude to spontaneous moments, but cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving for all God has done in our past (Deuteronomy 8:2,3, 11–18), contentment with what He is doing in our present (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18), and joyful hope for what He has promised for our future in Christ (1 Peter 1:3-4; 5:10). A heart of gratitude enhances the true self because it reminds us that all we are and have comes from the hand of God.

By God’s grace and power, may we grow in the true knowledge of Him, in love of Him, in trust and obedience to Him, and in likeness to Him. In this way we will experience the truth, beauty, goodness, love, joy, and peace of becoming the true selves God always intended us to be, increasingly conformed to the glorious image of His beloved Son.

AUTHOR NOTE



Kenneth Boa is engaged in a ministry of relational evangelism and discipleship, teaching, writing, and speaking. He holds a B.S. from Case Institute of Technology, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, a Ph.D. from New York University, and a D.Phil. from the University of Oxford in England.

Dr. Boa is the president of Reflections Ministries, an organization that seeks to encourage, teach, and equip people to know Christ, follow Him, become progressively conformed to His image, and reproduce His life in others.

Kenneth Boa also writes a free monthly teaching letter called *Reflections*. If you would like to be on the mailing list, visit <http://www.reflectionsministries.org> or call 800-DRAW NEAR (800-372-9632).

³Kenneth Boa. *Conformed to His Image*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

⁴Robert M. Mulholland, Jr. *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1985, p. 49-58.

⁵St. Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964, p. 48-53.

¹Soren Kierkegaard. *Either / Or*. 2 Volumes. Translated by David F. Swenson, Lillian Marvin Swenson, and Walter Lowrie. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944, 1959. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lawrie. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941.

²Thomas Keating. *Intimacy with God*. NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994, p. 35, 59