

# **Book Review: *Spiritual Formation for the Global Church: A Multi-Denominational, Multi-Ethnic Approach***

Brandt, Ryan A., and Frederick John eds. 2021. *Spiritual Formation for the Global Church: A Multi-Denominational, Multi-Ethnic Approach*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. x, 238 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-5518-6. Approx. 514.67 ZAR (27.99 USD). Paperback.

## **1. Introduction**

Although the world has become more interconnected, evangelicals remain absorbed in their “narrow regional, national and denominational, and racial/ethnic boundaries” (p. 1). As a result, Ryan A. Brandt and John Frederick brought together in one volume the work of a truly diverse group of scholars to focus on exploring spiritual formation for the global church. The editors carry significant academic credibility with Ryan A. Brandt (Ph.D.) serving as Associate Professor of Christian history and theology at Grand Canyon University. Furthermore, he acts as the managing editor of the *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*. His co-editor, John Frederick (Ph.D.) serves as a Lecturer in New Testament and Greek at Trinity College Queensland, Australia. He has authored two other works and is ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church in North America. The selected contributors

are duly equipped and experienced to fulfill the bold ambition, outlined in the book’s introduction, to pursue a “cohesive yet diverse constructive theology and praxis for spiritual formation for the global church in the twenty-first century” (p. 1).

## **2. Overview**

Interest in the topic of spiritual formation has increased amongst evangelicals in recent decades, which has paved the way for more academic attention to be given to the subject. However, the various academic endeavors each explore the topic from a unique vantage point and contextual background. The editors, aiming to establish a general starting premise, outline the basic definition of spiritual formation for the purposes of this book as “the process by which personal change takes place in Christ by the power of the Spirit” (p. 2). To bring a degree of coherence to the diverse cultural and theological backgrounds of the contributors, as well as to allow them the freedom to express their unique global perspectives, the book is divided into three thematic sections, each containing four chapters. The sections explore 1) biblical and theological study as spiritual formation, 2) acts and elements of worship as spiritual formation, and 3) Christ, contemporary culture, and spiritual formation. These thematic overtures act as riverbanks to what sometimes, especially initially, feels like disjointed arguments. Maintaining an awareness of the broader theme each chapter forms a part of equips the reader with the necessary orientation to maintain perspective.

## **3. Spiritual Formation for the Global Church**

The opening theme of the book is introduced by Michael J. Gorman who boldly states that it is time for the West to learn from the global church to move beyond the bifurcation of *spiritual* and *academic* readings of Scripture

(p. 33). Next, Sammy Alfaro argues that theological education through Latina/o Pentecostal Bible institutes provides both academic training and spiritual formation that will train much-needed spiritual academics as ministers for the church (pp. 44, 47). In turn, Alfred Olwa posits that churches are suffering from a lack of biblically faithful and spiritually formed leaders, yet ironically the pattern for a spiritually formed life is, in fact, faithfulness to the Bible that is properly pursued by means of the Spirit (pp. 53, 61). Finally, John H. Coe announces a “sanctification gap” evident in conservative evangelical circles due to the pursuit of an academic understanding of growth and spiritual formation at the cost of caring for souls and the process of growth offered by spiritual theology (pp. 63–64, 66).

The coherent message that ties all the distinct views in this section together is the unified plea not to promote the intellect alone without duly employing theology for its rightful purpose of spiritual transformation and growth, which is only achieved through the work of the Spirit. This emphasis on faithfulness to Scripture that leads to transformed lives by the work of the Spirit is both timely and crucial for the global evangelical church and a noteworthy observation from the theme of this first section.

Several causes for further thought arise, namely, that the centrality of Jesus in spiritual formation has been somewhat neglected in the discussion thus far. There is also an over-romanticizing of certain eras of church history by some contributors without considering the negative implication that some of the practices in those eras brought, and an overly programmatic approach suggested by some of the contributors. Although the contributors make a robust case for the necessity of Biblical study and theology as spiritual formation, not reflecting on the highlighted thoughts in greater depth could stifle spiritual formation.

The second section shifts the focus from theology and biblical study to the important role that acts and elements of worship play in spiritual formation. Robyn Wrigley-Carr introduces liturgical prayer as spiritual formation, which is the first act of worship to be considered. It is argued that using liturgy engages one’s senses, acts as a reminder of the universal church one belongs to, presents a means of “unselfing” (p. 99) through praying prayers of saints who have gone before, and reminds us of the reality that God is the initiator of our spiritual formation (p. 101). Markus Nikkanen presents the Eucharist as a reminder to “center us on Christ” and in the process discover that spiritual formation is “an intra, inter and transpersonal experience” requiring every aspect of life to be affected (p. 104). John Frederick and Jonathan K. Sharpe argue that “contemporary evangelical worship would, on the whole, benefit from an intensified focus on the formative practices of grace empowered works of ecclesial love” (p. 136). The love of Christ is “embodied, enacted, received, and re-presented” and in the process, the church is formed into the same image of Christ whose love was demonstrated through sacrifice (p. 137). Ryan A. Brandt concludes this section by summarizing Augustine’s argument for the beatific vision as a Christian’s highest goal, namely, to gaze upon God and be transformed by him (p. 143).

The four examples that were presented demonstrate a hunkering back to age-old forms of worship and devotion that have been practiced by Christians for many centuries. The four acts and elements of worship are reminiscent of the sacraments elaborated on during the Reformation era. What appears to be evidenced here is that, as church history unfolded, the proverbial baby was thrown out with the bath water as a new era rejected practices from previous eras. Many of the Reformed and Catholic sacraments were not eagerly adopted with workful enthusiasm by early evangelicals. The authors in this section bring the centrality of Jesus and

God's preeminent role in spiritual formation to the front in a way that was neglected in the previous section. One further observation of value that was expressed by several contributors is the need to understand oneself in a bigger context, whether that context is praying the prayers of those who have gone before us or seeing the Eucharist as an interpersonal sacrament. Surveying church history reveals that many of the practices described can become ritualistic and empty religion. This is something to be guarded against by not simply practicing the acts of worship without keeping God as the primary focus.

The final section explores Christ, contemporary culture, and spiritual formation and is commenced by S. Min Chun outlining the role that Old Testament ethics plays in a New Testament understanding of spiritual formation. The climactic argument of this exposition is that the Old Testament acts as a channel to reveal Jesus's values and, therefore, a deeper understanding of the Old Testament will lead to a closer revelation of Jesus's heart and mind as well as deepening Christlikeness (p. 172). In the next chapter, Le Chih Hsieh proposes that spiritual formation is a "way of life that forms and transforms the person as a whole" and it includes the "soul, body, and the world that nourishes the body." In other words, the whole of the person and their environment (p. 175). This chapter includes a discussion on ontology that will require a paradigm shift in some streams of Christian thought, but it is significant seeing that Hsieh claims that spiritual formation "depends on how we understand ourselves in the world" (p. 185). Next, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu argues that Pentecostal interventionism matters, especially in a non-Western context, to inform spiritual formation. The focus is twofold: "release of persons from affliction and their empowerment for prosperity and flourishing" (p. 191). In closing the final theme, HaYoung Son expounds on the role of failure and faithful perseverance in spiritual formation. Learning in particular from

Peter, Son highlights that spiritual growth will "providentially include tough times and failure" (p. 219). What matters is not momentary success or failure, but eternal spiritual growth. This growth is often only achieved through persevering through failure and allowing Christ's faithfulness in our failures to transform us (pp. 219–220). This section drew from the practical realities of human life and Christian ministry.

One of the greatest themes expounded on by several of the contributors is the holistic nature of spiritual formation that reaches beyond a set of practices or disciplines. The deep perspective on failure is a key notion of spiritual formation often neglected, and sadly many Christians are written off in failure rather than encouraged to turn to the faithfulness of Jesus to transform and restore them. One caution is that some of the contributors appear to have a significant personal bias and, as a result, do not apply the balanced exegetical principles expected in a robust academic conversation. In particular, the chapter on Pentecostal interventionism feels like it is written from a place of frustration rather than reflection. In that chapter the hermeneutics practiced is questionable and tends towards a prosperity gospel interpretation of Scripture rather than truly revealing what spiritual formation means in the African Pentecostal movement. At its best what was presented could be summarized as a perspective on African Pentecostal spirituality as opposed to spiritual formation. What is not acknowledged is the wide diversity of indigenous African Christians that would be of a different persuasion.

#### **4. Strengths**

It is an ambitious undertaking to write a work on spiritual formation for the global church. This volume succeeds in presenting an insightful introduction to a range of models, disciplines, and practices from a broad cultural and theological spectrum on the topic in question. One of the

key strengths is the level of engagement from such a diverse group of contributors; the thoughts presented are not from one church tradition, gender perspective, or culture. The editors carefully curate an exemplar of thoughts, practices, and paradigms that are of benefit to the contributors in their own individual settings. Most chapters contain additional commentary by the editors describing the context for each contributor, which helps to illuminate their thoughts even more. Through this analysis, readers are exposed to vantage points and practices of spiritual formation that may be new to them, albeit in some cases the practice itself may be centuries old. The reader encounters a safe and beneficial way of broadening horizons and breaking down barriers to what is culturally and theologically acceptable.

## 5. Weaknesses

In the process of presenting a broad exposure to various themes of spiritual formation, the risk of not going deep enough is exposed. There is a whole field of thought and academic study behind each of the chapters presented that in some cases, like the chapters on the beatific vision and suffering and faithful perseverance, could have benefitted from a deeper exploration. These chapters in particular focus on a transcendent idea rather than discipline, institution, or practice, which sets them apart from other chapters. If the global church could grasp the immense depth of these chapters, it may be worth more than learning to apply another method of spiritual formation. Furthermore, drawing attention to such a wide range of different Christian streams across theological and cultural lines could lead to espousing traditions surrounding spiritual formation rather than focusing on the Person spiritual formation should be centered on. This could in some cases enhance the spiritual formation for those trying something new for the first time; however, as history has proven, traditions

can become religious, legalistic, and programmatic, acting as a restriction of true spiritual formation. In most cases, a robust level of academic discussion was adhered to, but in one or two chapters it seems the personal bias of the contributor watered down solid exegetic practices.

## 6. Conclusion

What is presented is best understood as a collection of introductions serving as an invitation to further study should any of the ideas presented be relevant to the reader. Those approaching this work as a means of deep diving into the topic of spiritual formation may walk away disappointed. What this book successfully achieves is presenting a rich depth of theological, practical, and ideological approaches to aid spiritual formation that is of tremendous benefit to the global church. It cannot be overestimated how transformative each of the examples given is when applied appropriately.

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