REVIEW OF *SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS IF THE CHURCH MATTERED*

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A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Barry Jones

Dallas Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

SF901  Spiritual Formation in the Local Church

by

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March 2012

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**Content**

Wilhoit starts his presentation by rooting the reader in the great importance of his subject matter, stating, “Spiritual formation is the task of the church. Period. […] Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence” (15). He grounds the reader in the basic tenets that define spiritual formation by appealing to three common metaphors (Nature and Agriculture, Journey and Struggle, and Death and Resurrection) and by re-explaining the gospel to believers as not a doorway to salvation, but also the compass and road map for the saved. According to Wilhoit, *spiritual formation* is “the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and being conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (23).

After laying the foundation, Wilhoit explains how Christlikeness is the model upon which a church’s spiritual formation curriculum must find its basis. We follow after Jesus
because He Himself “grew through means that are available to us and which He has given to us as the ordinary way of growing up into the fullness of His love and grace” (42). Of great importance are the actions and heart-attitudes to which Jesus invites His followers. The two greatest are (1) to love and obey God, and (2) to love one another. More specifically, Wilhoit elaborates on four subcategories of invitations: to steward the gospel, to extend Jesus’ compassion, to worship, and to think rightly about God. The invitations listed in these subcategories reappear in later chapters that describe the four dimensions of community formation. The “Four Rs” of Community Formation are receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. Wilhoit quickly addresses six myths, or false models, of spiritual formation before diving into these four Rs, the skeleton of his curriculum for Christlikeness.

**Receiving** means to cultivate spiritual openness and continual repentance through communal activities such as confession, worship, sacraments, and prayer. Receptive communities realize the depth of their sin and the reality of their yearnings, and they grow in grace. The concept of optimistic brokenness acknowledges the internality of our sin problem and the redirected yet persisting yearnings of our hearts, “restless till they find their rest in” God, as Augustine would describe it. The community accepts brokenness, welcomes it, and has space for it, because of the hope they have without ignoring it. In a corollary, Wilhoit notes that worship, rightly offered, is the most important context of community formation. The invitations of Jesus pertaining to receiving include depending on God’s grace, joyful and free discipline, discernment, prayer and blessing others, worship and sacraments, using bodies in prayer and worship, using money wisely, and repenting and drawing close to God.

**Remembering** means to teach transformationally, leading to a deep awareness of our being part of God’s community and His beloved children. Communal activities of remembering include teaching, preaching, evangelism, meditation, spiritual guidance, and small groups. The foundational truths of remembering start with acknowledging the God-Human Gap, the difference between our perceived need for grace and the real divine-human difference. With this established, the church / community encourages one another to let the cross grow: to see the need
for grace extend beyond previous limits set by one’s blindness of God’s holiness and one’s attempts at self-justification. After this foundation, Wilhoit applies the Remembering principle to patterns of community learning, congruence/integrity, community disciplines, and anointed teaching – the last of which serves as an excellent word at DTS, whose pupils are to “Preach the Word!” Remembering includes Jesus’ invitations to tell others the good news and make disciples (by the gospel and by catechesis), to create space for God in solitude, to study and meditate on Scripture, to learn for all of life, and to believe Jesus is Who He claims to be.

*Responding* means to be formed for and through service through discernment, honoring relational commitments, setting aside prejudices, and ministering compassionately. It is a “grace-oriented inculcation of the tendency to respond, through training, in a Christ-imitating way” (159), and “our construct for appraising how we view what we have received and what we are remembering over time” (175). With a memorable example from Communist recruitment, Wilhoit teaches that we are both formed to serve and formed by serving. Indeed, responding is the natural outflow of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Appealing to Martin Luther and Philipp Jakob Spener, all believers have a spiritual responsibility to respond as part of their spiritual priesthood. Therefore all believers must be equipped to respond to the Gospel and to respond to and through God’s transforming grace. After suggesting some applications, Wilhoit connects *responding* with Jesus’ invitations to tell others the good news and make disciples, to practice discernment, to keep relational commitments, to show compassion to the poor and marginalized (“machine people,” for example) and eliminate prejudice, to weep and show emotion, to live with integrity, to use money wisely, and to handle conflicts and forgiveness well.

*Relating* means to be formed in and through community through hospitality, handling conflict well, honoring relationships, observing Sabbath, and attending to the pace of one’s life. “Our goal,” writes Wilhoit, “is a spiritual formation that, by the receiving of God’s grace and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, moves a curriculum for Christ-likeness from a teaching approach to a living, breathing, gospel-directed life of shared community” (202). The confession “Jesus Is Lord” calls us to action and must result in *tendency learning*, “producing alterations in what
students tend (are disposed, are inclined) to do” (179). Attributes of the forming community include meaningful worship, compassionate service, public witness, and disciple-making. Churches need to encourage formational relationships by switching from a driven preoccupation with the future to an orientation where people willingly “waste” time with God. Arriving at this place means putting community first and growth second, for, like happiness, the hope and healing we often find in community comes “as the by-product of other pursuits [and] will forever elude us when we pursue it directly. […] Much hope and healing can come […] only if we relate to the community in a receptive and investing way” (184). A challenging series of questions for a church’s internal audit lead into a study of the kinds of time members spend in community, the effects of which “are going to be different depending on how it is spent” (190). Jesus invites us through relating to depend more and more on God and His grace, to joyfully and freely practice spiritual disciplines, to practice both discernment and detachment, to worship and celebrate sacraments, to extend hospitality, to keep relational commitments, to show compassion to the poor and marginalized and eliminate prejudice, and to handle conflicts and forgiveness well.

Concluding his book, Wilhoit offers a series of assessment questions in two parts. The first part assesses the presence of the Four Rs generally in one’s church: Where do people receive God’s grace and love? Where are people encouraged to remember who they truly are as children of God and whose they truly are? How do we foster a disposition to be people of love and right living (response)? And where do we provide opportunities to grow in and through relationships? The second part addresses formation for differing church members’ stages on the journey: the new Christian, those who are struggling, the dark night of the soul, and others.

Compliments

Wilhoit give an excellent grounding in spiritual formation from the very beginning. His opening chapter helps the reader understand his passion and how he views the nature and process of spiritual formation. His definition is Trinitarian, God-focused with a clear understanding of the Spirit’s role. It is clearly stated, short, and accessible. He also includes a
beneficial sidebar on pp. 188-189 taken from Bruce Demarest’s *Soul Guide* which offers definitions of evangelism, spiritual formation, discipleship, mentoring, and other terms to clarify the reader’s understanding.

This book presents the focus on the gospel and the cross that I felt was missing in Orteberg’s *The Me I Want to Be*. For Wilhoit, the gospel is not just the front door one enters to “get saved;” it is also the guiding principle for the Christian’s life. His chapter on “Remembering: Letting the Cross Grow Larger” is both the shortest and the best in the book. The depiction of sanctification as a growth in grace, an expansion of our confined perceived need to our truly vast need, easily grips the reader’s mind.

A smaller point Wilhoit helpfully addresses is how we spend our time. He reviews six false models of spiritual formation, some of which are obviously pernicious (the quick-fix model, the facts-only model; cf. pp. 51-52) and some of which can be helpful but are prone to disappointment (the conference, insight, or faith models; cf. pp. 54-55). Later in the book Wilhoit addresses time directly as a necessity for community (pp. 187-190), showing how different kinds of time in a community lead to different formative experiences. Such attention to the nature of time in formation sheds light on both our methods and our expectations.

Wilhoit also attends to *teaching* spiritual formation. He may sound charismatic, but his extended treatment of what he calls “anointed teaching” must be grasped by the reader regarding the work of the Spirit within, upon, and among the teacher and his students; cultivation of such anointing; and the fruit of anointed teaching. Themes he isolates in teaching and preaching for response include a Biblical focus, absence of self-concern, grace-based response, empathy, and evangelism (166). He also makes careful distinctions between teaching and learning, knowledge and knowing, for the end result of *tendency* learning described above.

The final pages on formation (208-210) address formation for those in different stages of their spiritual journey. At first glance, this appears redundant from *Move* or *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, but Wilhoit’s approach differs significantly. His classifications, while not comprehensive, shed light on a variety of stages for people in every part of the Hearer-Seeker-
Kneeler-Faithful continuum. Failure to grapple with these differences means missing out on vital moments of spiritual formation for many people! For example, I was missing a fuller formative relational experience in my church until a current “crisis” moment – the birth of our firstborn – took place, allowing the brothers and sisters of our church to minister to us afresh because of our new situational need. Wilhoit captures the importance of formational ministry on an entirely different situational plane than the REVEAL study or Webber expressed.

As far as structure, Wilhoit offers many beneficial sidebars with great resources upon which to draw via his index. His corollaries summarize major take-aways throughout the book. The cycle of foundational material and application with Jesus invitations establishes a good rhythm for the reader. He does especially well with drawing from other sources for quotes to begin chapters and subsections, for sidebars to summarize helpful ideas, and for recommended reading briefly commended to the reader at the ends of the chapters.

**Critiques**

This book has much to commend itself and only a few things to qualify its purchase. First, the material is hard to follow and organize at times. For the novice reader Wilhoit brings in too much information and too many stories so that one occasionally misses the main thrust of his chapter, if there is one. His writing didn’t unify well or seem to drive coherently in one direction. Second, he failed to offer a summary page of his eleven corollaries, or even an index on where to find them. If the information merited such importance to be singled out, it would be equally beneficial to help the reader find them again. Third, stating the commands of Jesus as invitations instead gets at the same point, but truly the command language of the New Testament is strong. This is a very minor disagreement, and if an invitation elicits better response than a command from his audience, may God be praised! Fourth, his focus was much more on function than on form. This is a blessing and a curse. Forms, like the conference model of spiritual formation or the regularly hosted prayer meetings, are beneficial only insofar as they serve the purpose for which they were intended. They can turn sour when abused or adored idolatrously.
But concrete examples of the ways churches employ or pursue the invitations of Jesus could inspire his readers to think creatively in their own contexts – or, dare I say, re-use a culturally appropriate and beneficial form for their own spiritual benefit!

**Conclusion**

Overall, the book offers spiritual directors and pastors of spiritual formation the skeleton of a well-thought “curriculum for Christ-likeness.” Wilhoit’s foundation in the gospel for life and the ever-growing cross of grace brings great refreshment and strength to the reader. One will recall without much difficulty four Rs of receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. His unique warnings and insights make his work both instructive and at times devotional. The depth of supporting material from which he has drawn and which he also offers to the reader ensure that any church director will find himself or herself on an excellent, God-focused journey to lead others into the imitation of Christ.