

Leclerc, Diane and Maddix, Mark A., eds. *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011. 222 pages. ISBN 978-0834126138.

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*Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm* consists of twenty essays contributed by the faculty of Northwest Nazarene University that cover a wide variety of topics. Short chapters (ranging between 8-15 pages), discussion questions at the end of each chapter, and the breadth covered, all serve the practical aim of the book: “to be formational, even transformational” (16). Many of the essays offer practical insights and perspectives so that the book might easily serve as an introduction for college students, pastors, or laity.

Some of the most intriguing essays the book features interconnect spiritual formation with practical areas of life (as spiritual formation should): for instance, Michael Kipp’s suggestions for spiritually forming adolescents, Gene Schandorff’s ideas concerning college students, and Rhonda L. Carrim’s good overview of spiritual direction and mentoring.

Of course, editing a book of essays involves at least two difficulties: ensuring consistent quality among the essays and achieving overall unity within the volume. It goes without saying that any book of essays will exhibit unevenness in writing, but what about coherence? Considering the extensive range of subjects traversed, the authors make a valiant effort to return frequently to their thematic Wesleyan signposts: the means of grace, preventent grace, and sanctifying grace.

The fact that *Spiritual Formation* emerges unapologetically from a Nazarene perspective should not be a criticism of the book, for all theology develops from within some tradition, and clarity and honesty come from declaring one’s standpoint. Nevertheless, consider interpreting the subtitle, *A Wesleyan Paradigm*, as merely indicating a paradigm of spiritual formation *informed by a Wesleyan perspective* (rather than a more all-inclusive claim to represent all Wesleyans). For if we include Nazarenes, Wesleyans, Free Methodists, some charismatics, and the wide range of theological opinion represented by United Methodists, we cannot claim a single “Wesleyan perspective” on any topic that would satisfy all these communities.

More importantly, *Spiritual Formation* implicitly raises a number of key questions about the way we Protestants approach formation. The

book might, in fact, serve as a mirror for us, wherein we can see things we might rather like to overlook. Let me focus on two questions the book raises. First, one of the strengths of the book lies in the thematic attention given to “means of grace,” a term John Wesley used to refer to those divinely infused practices that offer followers of Christ spiritual sustenance. One suspects, incidentally, that what the authors are often referring to when they use the phrase “means of grace” might more accurately have been labeled “spiritual disciplines,” a term popularized in the recent Protestant world through the work of Richard Foster.

What the reader notices, in any case, is that every author in the book articulates his or her own particular list of “means of grace,” so that it becomes clear that different “means” (or disciplines) could be added here or subtracted there. While it is true that Wesley himself was fluid when it came to enumerating such means of grace, eventually it seems that almost anything practical could be included in one’s list of spiritual disciplines.

Actually, the more serious question is whether or not we as evangelical Wesleyans have fallen prey to the culture’s consumerist mentality where we choose according to what best fulfills us personally. For American Protestants, spiritual formation can mean almost anything that appears “helpful,” thereby devolving too easily into mere “Self Help.” As if at a buffet, we pick those disciplines or “means of grace” that best meet our needs or suit our tastes.

I am reminded of an experience I had a few years ago attending an Orthodox infant baptism of a friend’s child, perhaps the most aesthetically beautiful theological worship I have ever encountered. I had been reading books on the “emergent church,” pondering how as a United Methodist minister I might draw upon the rich liturgical resources of Christian tradition to deepen a rather bland and stagnant mainline protestant worship service. Every slice of this Orthodox baptismal service seamlessly combined deep-rooted theology with a colorful and vivid symbolism. Those of us visiting witnessed, for instance, an “exorcism” that included spitting on the devil at the door of the church and the priest blowing on the child three times in the shape of a cross. For most of the service, the child was held by the godparents to indicate the dear responsibility of the congregation. Then, at the high point of the service, the priest took the child, processed with him into the holy of holies, and reappeared laying him on the ground (as if on an altar) at the center door of the Iconostasis or icon screen—where the parents embraced their child for the first time in the service. Those of us visiting were transported into

a drama of liturgical worship as pure gift: one into which we simply entered, one that had been going on long before us and that would continue after we were gone. I began thinking about what a Protestant minister might “extract” from that service—what symbolism or liturgy—to enhance and deepen worship at one’s own church. But what would one select and why? Because every element of that service held together as part of a single fabric—woven by theology, practice, and community life—isolated elements would not make sense.

Might we draw a parallel from the way many of us “use” spiritual disciplines, culled from a half dozen or more books or sources, applied to our lives as we feel the need or have the time? A good friend of mine has convinced me that “the” key spiritual discipline, without which no other discipline makes sense, is obedience. But the question cries out to us: Obey whom, or obedience to what? Have we become our own spiritual authority?

A second question has to do with spiritual formation pedagogy and how we see that evolving in our culture. *Spiritual Formation* hopes to be a practical book, one encouraging transformation. While it certainly includes practical and transformational elements, the book remains primarily informational—telling us about spiritual formation, recommending ideas, new ways of interpreting, or helpful theological models. Books like these that stress theological foundations are important. But we also need to distinguish between theology and praxis. Christian spiritual writing can sometimes offer both information and transformation, both theology and praxis, but usually the emphasis falls mainly into one category or the other. For instance, relatively speaking, Thomas Merton’s writing surfaced more as ground breaking contemplative theology, while Henri Nouwen’s served more as practical guidance for the heart. Or consider that, if Dallas Willard appeared as Evangelicalism’s spiritual theologian, many general readers found his writing difficult, leading John Ortberg to write as a sort of translator of Willard’s ideas, simplifying, using illustrations, and telling stories. What follows in the wake of Ortberg, one imagines, would feel more like a spiritual formation workbook that leads the reader further into application.

Spiritual formation, it can be argued, is best mediated incarnation-ally—through retreats, small groups, spiritual direction, or group lectio. Wasn’t this Wesley’s way—his bands and classes? It is as if our spiritual formation books ought to come with a “saint” attached—someone to lead, direct, and model the Christlikeness we seek. *Spiritual Formation* could be the kind of book to use in this sort of hands-on way.