

James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008) 233 pp.

Conversation in Protestant circles about spiritual formation has come a long way since 1978 when Richard Foster first released his *Celebration of Discipline*. With a plethora of titles and approaches, along with the recovery of the treasures of the Christian tradition, many people are exploring, probing, and developing what it means to be formed spiritually. What James Wilhoit distinctly offers is a voice that calls attention to the foundational way in which community—the local church—indispensably plays a role in forming persons.

Written primarily for pastors and practitioners, Wilhoit places his eyes on the formative life of congregations. He leads his readers to consider a “curriculum of Christlikeness”—a term that comes out of Dallas Willard’s work. Wilhoit’s contribution comes in two ways. First, Wilhoit anchors this curriculum with a review of Jesus’ use of invitations within the gospels. These invitations give way, according to Wilhoit, to four distinct dimensions that frame the balance of the book.

Second, Wilhoit is not content to merely speak about spiritual disciplines or practices in isolation from the practices of congregations. The curriculum:

[R]efers to a lifelong course of study designed to promote spiritual transformation, largely through the teaching of core Christian knowledge, service learning opportunities, training in key spiritual practices, and the continual representation of essential spiritual truths...coupled with opportunities to be coached through specific applications of the gospel to person issues” (p. 50).

This outline represents Wilhoit’s conviction that spiritual formation is not an individual endeavor but rather rooted in the life of a community—and it is this contribution from Wilhoit’s work that is particularly needed and useful.

As noted earlier, Wilhoit identifies four dimensions of community formation that reflect his understanding of the various invitations of Jesus in the gospels—receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. These four verbs comprise the organizational structure of much of the book. What makes Wilhoit’s book valuable is not simply the various theological values and practices that he uses to surround each of these verbs. Rather the value to the reader is in the way he presses to speak to the intentional life and practices of communities that prompt and reinforce these values.

The intentionality of Wilhoit’s book presents a compelling framework for the role that congregations play in formation. The call for a curriculum of Christlikeness creatively helps to revision adult education in congregations and pushes the conversation beyond information to formation. One thing that would strengthen the book’s thesis would be the inclusion of more concrete examples from ministry and congregational contexts that reinforce the very thing that the author is commending.

Wilhoit writes from a reformed, evangelical point of view; however, Wilhoit demonstrates a cogent awareness and appreciation for the larger church tradition and uses the tradition to good effect. Each chapter concludes with an annotated bibliography that sends the thoughtful reader to a broad array of other voices. For persons who teach in the area of congregations and spiritual formation, Wilhoit’s book provides a lively place for conversation and reflection on what it means to foster spiritual formation within congregations.

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