

Book Review

Spiritual Formation: Ever Forming, Never Formed

Peter K. Nelson

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Hurriedness best describes the Western world culture—which does not mix well in God’s Kingdom and economy. Christians live in the venue of constant tension between instantaneous gratification and the development of patience. That same tension infiltrates spiritual growth as believers long for instant maturity, but experience a slow developmental process over the course of time. In addition to “the ravages of time on the Christian’s heart and soul” (p. 3), believers must contend with sin. How should a conscientious Christian deal with the polarity of living a holy life even in the midst of the growth process?

Nelson expresses concern regarding the discipleship approach that creates lofty goals to attain spiritual success. Most believers experience feelings of guilt and shame rather than a sense of overcoming sins. Nelson hopes this book will lead readers into a “biblical realism with biblical hope” (p. 10) in an all-sufficient God who will provide everything necessary for the process of spiritual formation. Drawing primarily from contemporary sources, the author navigates the relevant areas of spiritual formation with a strong biblical theology. Nelson begins with the discussion of five biblical foundations that influence spiritual growth, which includes, as noted in the chapter titles, “aiming high: the call to holiness,” “falling down: the fact of indwelling sin,” “fighting back: waging spiritual warfare,” “growing

up: on the journey with Christ,” and “paradoxes of spiritual formation.”

God desires that believers be holy as He is holy. The earthly life of the Christian should mirror God’s perspective and please Him. The Apostle Paul encourages believers to imitate God and flee from sin, but this is only possible as God provides the strength to resist temptation.

Unfortunately, Christians do not have immunity from sin and will fall. The effect of sins causes damage and interrupts the pursuit of holiness. Consequently, followers of Christ must be willing to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness from God and one another. Nelson, using Paul as an example, illustrates the struggle believers experience as they long to do right but fail miserably. Other heroes of the faith, whom God used mightily, also missed the mark. No one can escape the ravages of sin, which dramatically impacts a Christian’s ability to grow spiritually.

Spiritual growth, therefore, requires intentional engagement of spiritual warfare. Due to Satan’s hatred of believers made in God’s likeness, he creates havoc to cause them to fall into sin. In turn, Christians must learn to resist the devil and be sober-minded, because the devil seeks to steal, kill, and destroy their lives.

Paul urges believers to fight the good fight of faith, which includes engagement in warfare and the crucifixion of one's flesh. In other words, a person cannot manage or contain sin when pursuing holiness. Nelson reiterates the importance of prayer as the main weapon with which to wrestle against the devil's tactics.

Nelson insightfully notes that physical growth generally ends in adulthood, but spiritual maturation has no end. In fact, spiritual growth can have highs, lows, and getting stuck. Nelson believes that the lack of a strong spiritual foundation can stunt a Christians' spiritual growth. Believers need to know God's Word, develop critical thinking skills, learn to read and interpret the Bible correctly, and learn about different worldviews. Spiritual maturity occurs as believers grow beyond the milk of the Word. God equates the Christians' journeys with running in a marathon—with faith and discipleship as companions. Throughout the journey, believers must persevere and know that God is more than sufficient for the task.

Drawing from Philippians 3 and 4, Nelson cites the paradoxes of spiritual formation as being restless, but pressing on, and being restful, but at peace. Despite having to reckon with sin on a continual basis, believers can learn contentment as they trust in God's purpose and design for the journey. Spiritual formation does not happen in a nice straight line, but rather with dips and twists. Believers must seek wisdom and discernment during these paradoxical tensions of "stillness and striving" (p. 90).

In the second half of the book, Nelson explains how to apply the biblical foundations for spiritual formation in one's individual relationship with God by addressing the following concepts: spiritual growth in the community of believers, understanding imperfect leaders, the marriage covenant, God's sovereignty, holiness, and sin's presence.

Seasoned Christians will readily grasp the biblical principles in the book and enjoy the encouragement Nelson provides with a fresh perspective regarding the paradoxical tensions of spiritual formation.

Throughout the book, Nelson refers to Christians as sinners; I would prefer that he refer to them as "Christians who sin" because theologically as Scripture states Jesus imputed His righteousness in us and no longer calls us sinners. So there is a distinction between being a "sinner" and being a "Christian who sins." Despite this terminology, Nelson's book provides a fresh understanding on the "ever forming, never formed" aspects of spiritual formation.