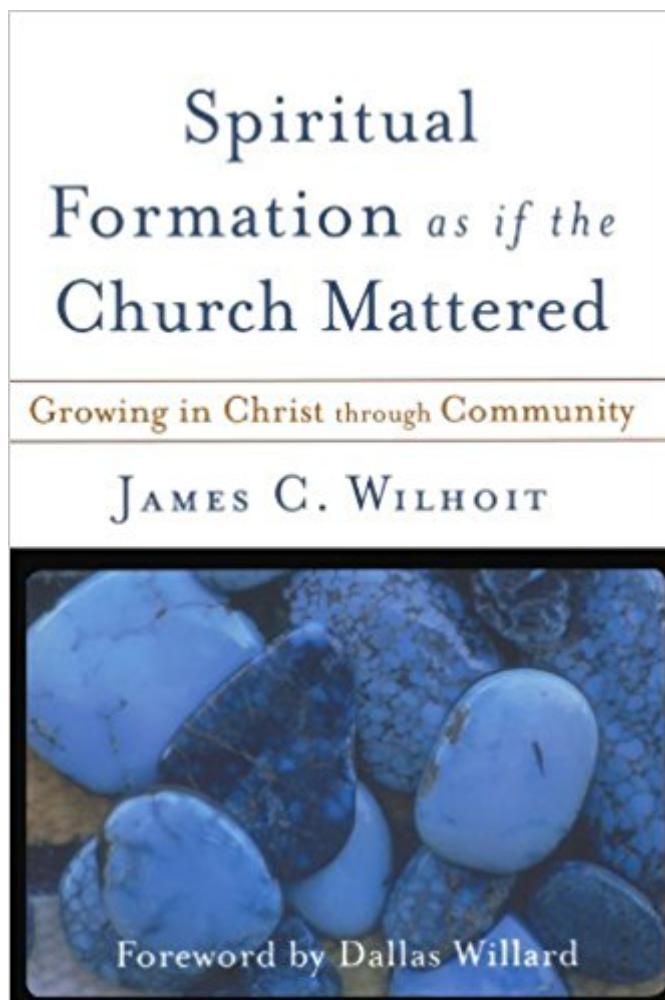


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# Spiritual Formation As If The Church Mattered: Growing In Christ Through Community



## **Synopsis**

The yearning and restlessness of our souls drive us toward God. This hunger and homesickness is the beginning of spiritual formation, according to James C. Wilhoit. In *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, Wilhoit takes a unique approach to the topic. Whereas most books focus on the individual's spiritual transformation, this one intentionally concentrates on how the local church itself is the seedbed of spiritual growth and how the process is a community effort. This book's short chapters, sidebar material, and concluding prayers fit well with readers' busy lives without sacrificing quality and depth of content.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Starred Review. The title of this tightly woven, consistently challenging meditation on Christian spiritual formation serves notice that this book is going to be more than another self-help manual. Indeed, Wheaton College professor Wilhoit, author of *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, asserts that although developing Christlikeness in its members is the church's main job, many congregations have either abandoned old practices without developing new ones or have relied on stratagems instead of on God's grace. Because he views spiritual growth as a lifelong process, Wilhoit delineates a communal perspective on responding to Jesus' invitation to love God and neighbor, emphasizing shared practice and learning. His four pillars of formation include receiving, or being open to God's grace; remembering, or understanding who we are and why we were created; responding in service to neighbors and the world; and building relationships

in the context of community. In alternating chapters, Wilhoit gives readers theological and biblical foundations for each principle, then suggests a set of practices. While it would be easy to get lost in the sober volume, this skilled writer uses many pedagogical tools to keep his audience focused. Clearly written from an evangelical perspective, this cogent and passionate book deserves to have wide appeal. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"James Wilhoit has written a book of special urgency for our times. . . . With a warm heart and a gentle and intelligent manner, [he] helps us see, in great detail, what we can do to relocate spiritual transformation at the center of what we do in gathering as disciples of Jesus. He helps any serious person engage the project from where they are, discover what really works for Christlikeness and what doesn't, and assess outcomes realistically to make needed adjustments as they go."--Dallas Willard (from the foreword)"Clearly written from an evangelical perspective, this cogent and passionate book deserves to have wide appeal."--Publishers Weekly (starred review)"Wilhoit presents an exciting paradigm for spiritual transformation in the community of faith--God's setting for transformation. It is a seminal work that I trust will be taken seriously."--Larry Richards, author and distinguished educator, North American Professors of Christian Education"Theologically grounded, educationally sound, and gracious in tone, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* is a robust response to Dallas Willard's challenge to the church to give greater attention to congregation-wide spiritual formation. Pastors and church teachers will appreciate this rich resource--well versed in the spiritual formation literature, with its summaries, stories, and practical steps--to guide and discern growth toward Christlikeness."--Klaus Issler, author of *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God*"Wilhoit offers a means for the church to provide an accessible pathway for growth in the ordinary events, relationships, and brokenness of our lives. This lovely work nourished my heart, instructed my mind, and opened my spirit to the Spirit of Christ."--Adele Calhoun, pastor of spiritual formation, Christ Church of Oak Brook, IL"Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered is the mature fruit of a devout scholar. Here Jim Wilhoit weaves theory, passion, and practice together into a rich re-presentation of the gospel for the local church. He takes the discussion about spiritual formation an important step forward, shifting the emphasis from private pursuit to corporate culture. Sensitive to the seldom-noticed dangers along the path of growth toward Christlikeness, this book is loaded with wisdom for those who desire to facilitate communities of formation."--Evan Howard, author of *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*

The title of this book gives its direction. So much spiritual formation (his word for discipleship) tends to be treated as though being formed in Christ might take place primarily in private. Wilhoit argues against this and says that discipleship is meant to take place in the context of community. Bill Hull, who has written extensively on discipleship, explains that discipleship in the New Testament moves from being centered in Christ as he is physically present to a new context where the church is the main context. Wilhoit states, "Spiritual formation is the task of the church. Period" (15). The church is to be a "transformative culture" 913). His definition of spiritual formation is that it is both intentional and communal (23). He explains spiritual formation by means of three biblical images: life and nurture, journey and struggle, and life and resurrection (24-26). He also points out that being formed as a believer means not seeing the gospel as the beginning but permeating the whole of Christian experience. This reviewer agrees whole-heartedly with his statement: "A bifurcation of salvation into a grace-filled regeneration followed by a human-striving sanctification leads to so many spiritual sorrows. The gospel is the power of God for the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. It is not merely what we need to proclaim to unbelievers; the gospel also needs to permeate our entire Christian experience" (27). The author then explains Christ's gracious invitations to us as receiving, remembering, and relating done personally and in community. Anyone concerned about discipleship as primary in the church will profit from each aspect of these three experiences. The book has twelve corollaries as each aspect of spiritual formation is summed up in a precise way. This book provides a "way" of discipleship that is organic rather than programmed. One lack, however, in his how baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of spiritual formation as if the church mattered.

I have just finished reading the book and found it to be very challenging from a praxis standpoint. It will take some time to review and digest all Wilhoit has suggested here. The model he proposes has the advantage of being able to be clearly communicated and is thoroughly biblical. The breadth of this use of resources, both ancient and recent, is impressive. The implications for how the Church approaches spiritual formation and discipleship are profound. There is a great deal of value here and much that needs to be appropriated in the Church, generally, and in my church, specifically. I would highly suggest this book. It has already had a profound effect on my thinking and my sense is that its influence will only grow. I highly recommend this book.

If I had to sum up three reasons why you should read this book here they are: (1) this book is Gospel-centered not only in word but in truth. The author sets out at the beginning of the book to clarify what Gospel-centered spiritual formation looks like (23-32). And the rest of the book ties back

to this concept. Time and again you'll find warnings against legalism and appropriate ways to apply the Gospel to particulars. (2) This book follows a simple paradigm. While I could fault Wilhoit's categories with a little overlap, he lays out four dimensions of spiritual formation that are necessary for the growth of the believer. These are Receiving, Responding, Remembering, and Relating. He fleshes out all four of these and shows their necessity and then how they can be implemented in the church. (3) This book remains church-oriented without becoming overly prescriptive. The author makes some specific suggestions from time to time, but overall Wilhoit gives a solid philosophy and biblical theology and gives some pointers on application. This book is not another program for church growth. It is a way of thinking -- a paradigm of how we should go about helping believers grow in Christ.

Spiritual formation has become a catchphrase in churches and is gathering as much attention as churches that are 'emerging.' Unfortunately, different people understand spiritual formation differently. To some, it is the practice of spiritual disciplines, to others the introduction of ancient spiritual practices, while in yet other churches, it is adding candles to the church service. James C. Wilhoit is the Scripture Press Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College. He explains that "Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit" (2008, 23). The key words of note are Christian, intentional, communal, process, Christ-likeness, and the Holy Spirit. Wilhoit proposes a 'curriculum for Christlikeness' which have the following dimensions (1) receiving, (2) remembering, (3) responding, and (4) relating. Each dimension has a few 'community practices' to achieve it. This curriculum is for community spiritual formation. Receiving is to be open to the grace of God and involve 'worship, confession, sacraments, and prayer' as community practices. Remembering means 'transformational teaching' leading to knowing that we are part of God's community. The community practices are 'teaching, preaching, evangelism, meditation, spiritual guidance, and small groups'. Responding is in service and involves 'discernment, honouring relational commitment, setting aside prejudices, ministries of compassion.' Relating is living in a faith community and involves 'hospitality, handling conflict well, honouring relationships, Sabbath observance, (and) attending to pace of life.' The community practices are similar to that of the Christian practices as suggested by Dykstra, Dorothy Bass and Diana Bass (Bass 1997; Bass 2004; Dykstra 2005). Wilhoit recognises that we are all being spiritually formed all the time and that formation through the work of the Holy Spirit occurs before conversion (2008, 27). He builds upon and interacts with Dallas Willard's work on spiritual formation (1988; 1998; 2002).

However he did not interact with Willard's psychosocial transformation of the soul as spiritual formation (2002,38-39).Instead, he uses the concept of the 'imitation of Christ' as the means and ends of spiritual formation (Meye 1994). Also, he did not expand on how different this is from discipleship. Growing in Christlikeness through community implied that community is the matrix in which spiritual formation takes place. However, aside from naming the community practices, Wilhoit did not explain how the community become the means of spiritual growth. Are the community practices the only means of spiritual formation? Are there any weightage to the community practices? Are any practices more important than others? Who is to practice these community practices? Does it involve only the pastors, leaders or everyone? It must be recognised that it is unrealistic to expect all the members of the church to practice all the community practices.Community practices are also spiritual disciplines practiced by individuals (Foster 1989; Whitney 1991; Tan and Gregg 1997). Whitney has shared on some ways how some of these disciplines can be used for both individual and the church (1996). However both Wilhoit and Whitney has not indicated whether there is a critical level of participation of members of a community before that community becomes a context for spiritual formation. What is this critical level? The weakness of this model based on community practices is the danger of legalism. The Pharisees in the bible epitome legalism in spiritual practices. Though theologian Roy Zuck has written in length on the role of the Holy Spirit and educator Parker Palmer of the importance of the teacher, the danger is real as the community practices become the end rather than the means (Zuck 1984; Palmer 1998). It may become another 'church activity.'It will have been useful if Wilhoit has explained how his community spiritual formation model can be sustained. Baptist Jeff Woods concludes from his meta-analysis of recent congregational studies done in the United States that there are five factors of influence in a congregation that is spiritually vital. They are (1) a willingness to change, (2) right theological thinking, (3) appropriate organisational metaphors, (4) clarity of purpose, and (4) missional leadership (2003). Wilhoit in his survey of the bible discovered that there are three families of images or metaphor for spiritual formation; nurture, journey and resurrection (2008, 24-25). These organisational metaphors are appropriate as church does matter in spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is not about a lone wanderer but a people journeying together.

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