Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit

by Henri Nouwen, Michael Christensen & Rebecca Laird

Reviewed by Darcon Shaw

The nature of Spiritual Formation is at the core of Christian ministry, both for leaders and the people they serve. A common way of understanding spiritual formation is with progressive development stages wherein a person as they mature spiritually goes from one level to the next (or not) over a lifetime. Traditional Catholic mystical theology uses this approach with distinct passages—of a journey toward God—by those who practice modern-day spirituality writers such as James Fowler. An alternative approach that Henri Nouwen develops is of dynamic movements, seeing development as more as cycles over a lifetime than as gradations from one level to another leading to perfection. The movements Nouwen outlines help readers towards are from things that enslave towards things that bring liberation and life.

Nouwen was a pastor, professor, pastoral psychologist, and widely read writer of over 40 books including The Wounded Healer. After two decades of teaching, with appointments including Yale and Harvard, he worked as pastor with mentally challenged people at Daybreak L’Arche community in Canada. In his teachings he drew on Catholic mystical theology and a psychodynamic understanding of the soul, as well as broad experience at academic and pastoral ministry, to develop Spiritual Formation. Like the previous volume Spiritual Direction (2008) and the following Spiritual Friendship (forthcoming) that form a trilogy, this book is a compelling work that is compiled from his notes and manuscripts by his Yale student Michael Christensen and Rebecca Laird, while they were teaching spirituality and spiritual formation at Drew University.

The spiritual formation of the book is to descend from the mind to the heart to be shaped by God’s Spirit within. It asserts the importance of a well-formed heart as a foundation for a well-formed life, or the need to start with soul-work within and let that flow outward in community and to ministry. The key to spiritual formation, and ultimately to community building and ministry fruitfulness, is not mass organization and management skills but discernment of movements of the Spirit within. The basic task of the church, or any extension theological education, is to help people communicate with God as the source of life.

The book is structured around seven chapters of seven movements divided across early, middle and mature movements. (Maybe Nouwen is still influenced by, albeit not limited to, some life stages.) Each chapter includes a “Henri story” as a parable that can be read slowly with short devotions (daily or sacred readings). To get away from narrative on worlds, each chapter also offers a favorite “Henri icon” in an image — including Van Gogh paintings, Rublev’s icon and Aristokrator’s sculptural box of Human Dancing — that can be used for short discussions or sacred seeing. The aim is to move from didactic and utilitarian reading and viewing to lifes images as well as words, which help us connect with God and nurture and empty our minds and hearts. Journal and application sections provide the reader a basic for deeper contemplation and group work. Each chapter describes a condition of human experience and where that can lead us to descend from our hearts to our heads, and be formed and redeemed by God’s Spirit.

The first early movement is from openness to transparency, to unmask desire for control and possession-likeness that seeks nature. Now people as bodies to use, and instead see them as gifts to enjoy and learn from. The challenge is to be who really are, see others as they are, and help others see God and themselves as they really are. The second early movement is from illusion to prayer, a helpful reminder to move from the illusion of self-importance and preoccupation to make space to experience God. A divine life where identity depends on the illusion of achievements and possessions: an earthly life can be content to simply waste time and be alone with God. This movement helps teach that productivity does not define us and that our worth is not a reflection of our usefulness. This is a very practical book — outlining how to choose a time, place and partner for prayer, and advice on housing.

Reflecting on the middle movements was especially welcome for this 41-year-old reviewer: Movement from sorrow to joy comes as we dare to try and realize we are not alone in our loss; of lost friends, dreams or what might have been. Movement from resentment to gratitude occurs as we give up defending ourselves and judging others, and grateful for the little we can enjoy and enjoy where we are. Says Nouwen. ‘Let us not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now, receive it with gratitude, and see it in the light of having God who guides us day by day’ (ibid, p. 129). And movement from fear to love emerges as we stop trying to control the future by fearing and seeking, and instead open ourselves up to be loved and to love.

The mature movements are from exclusion to inclusion, letting go of the prejudice and irony that leaves little room for hospitality, to grow into radical hospitality and including everyone people who are very different. Nouwen explored this academically as a teacher both in life where he found his true home as a pastor at Daybreak, living and working with people with disabilities. The other mature movement is from defying to bearing death, acknowledging our finitude and the commonality of all. This is important as we grow older, and for someone like me (I am halfway through life at 41 hopefully not quite, but just as likely past halfway, I need to come to terms and ‘believe’ that reality).

Nouwen puts his finger on many of our weaknesses and sins, and the invitation to growth and maturity! He becomes aware of quiet times of solitude and reflection. Awareness occurs equally in times of conflict and challenge, which I learned as I wrote this review while traveling in a week of reflection about conflict with a shy friend, after I’d received a medical diagnosis and sorrow from disappointment if we’d been able to go, a process of opportunity to practice the movements.

Formation is a lifelong and ongoing journey to move along those arteries away from things that draw us toward that which is life-giving. This is a valuable book for personal use and for pastors, spiritual directors and counselors to understand growth paths of those they listen to.

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