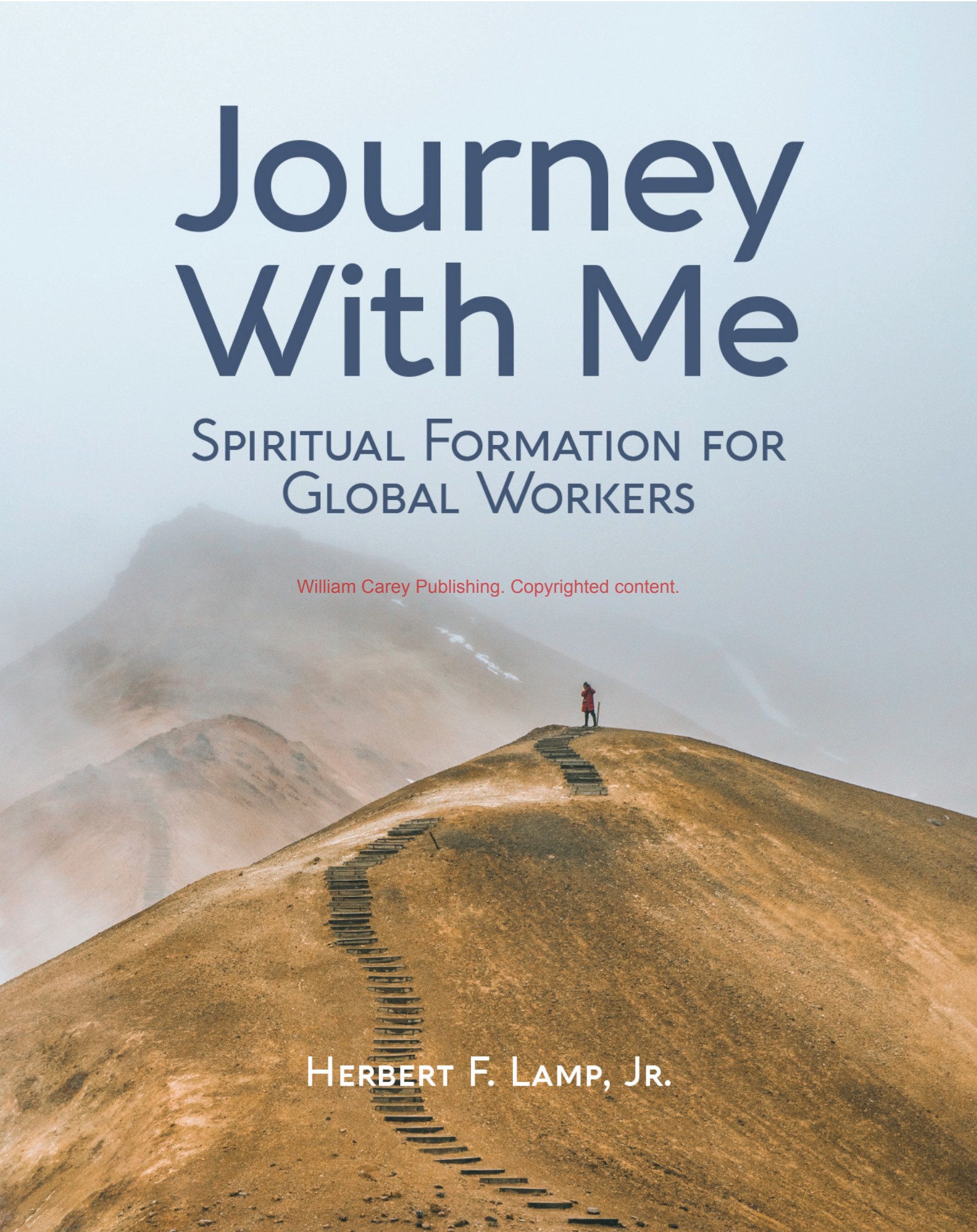
Journey With Me

Spiritual Formation for Global Workers

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Herbert F. Lamp, Jr.

Journey With Me: Spiritual Formation for Global Workers

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The Theology of Spirituality

The Ancient Pathways of Communion, Community, and Co-Mission

Before we look at the ancient pathways of spiritual formation for the global servant, I want to address the theological underpinnings that support and encourage our spiritual growth. This first chapter looks at the theology behind our intimacy with God, the spiritual community we are to live into, and our Spirit-empowered service. Within such a context, we practice our personal spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual Intimacy with God

The simple words of Jesus, "Follow me" (Mark 1:17), may be the earliest and best definition of Christian spirituality. The command reveals the two foundational truths behind all Christian growth: Jesus is the focus, and discipleship is the method. Following Jesus as his disciple is a lifelong process. This process of spiritual formation is the supreme task of the church. Early Christians described spiritual formation this way: To be a Christian is to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ.[7]

The order of knowing, loving, and serving is progressive. As in any relationship, knowledge comes before love. We cannot really love someone we only theoretically know. Love springs from experiencing someone relationally. Then out of our love flows service. The mature Christian, then, is someone who knows Jesus intimately through learning about him in his or her head (knowledge), heart (love), and hands (service).

What is true for the individual disciple is also true for the church as a whole. To be the church is to be a band of disciples who are a "learning community that seeks together in faith to know Jesus, to grow together in love for Jesus and to align our lives, mission, and way of being in the world to the in-breaking of the reign of Christ."[8]

7 For a discussion on these three aspects of Christian discipleship, see Gordon T. Smith, *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 38–48.

8 Smith, 39.

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What Is Spiritual Formation?

For the sake of clarity of terminology, "Christian spirituality" represents the believer's relationship with God and life in the Spirit as a member of the church of Jesus Christ—one's identity in Christ. "Spiritual formation" refers more to the process of sanctification, in which the believer grows into the righteousness of Christ through the active working of the Holy Spirit through means such as spiritual disciplines. Though there is congruency between the two terms, spirituality is the broader standing and spiritual formation is more the means.

One's Christian spirituality therefore revolves around the axis of knowing and loving Christ intimately and then serving him with passion. However, missionaries sometimes confuse the order of this process by placing hands (service) before heart (relationship with God). We can move too quickly into ministry, only giving lip service to our relationship with Christ. As I shared in my own story, this simply does not work. Heart always precedes hands in the economy of spiritual formation.

This priority of heart intimacy with God is affirmed by Andrew Brunson, a global servant who, in 2018, was detained, imprisoned, and then released by the Turkish government for proselytizing. He appeals to mission organizations to pay more attention to intimacy with Jesus ahead of ministry objectives for missionaries. He says that his closeness with Jesus was vital in getting him through his imprisonment.[9]

Isaiah 52:10–54:17 is one of the most powerful and visionary passages in the Bible. It reveals the heart of the loving Father for his creation. It speaks of the coming of the Suffering Servant, sent by the Father to redeem and save the world. It is fitting that the Moravians, the first great Protestant missionary movement (launched in 1732), made this passage the basis of their motto: "To win for the Lamb the reward for his suffering." William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement, also saw Isaiah's words as key to evangelizing the world when, on May 30, 1792, he preached one of the greatest and well-known missionary sermons of the church age. Speaking from Isaiah 54, his sermon had a major ripple effect across the Christian world.

What moved Carey and the early Moravians to follow the call of God just like the first Christians in the New Testament was the belief that God was still at work in the world, personally calling people to himself based upon the suffering of his Son on the cross. In Peter's words, these called people are "chosen by God

9 "Andrew and Norine Brunson Q & A at Mission Leaders Conference," YouTube video, 27:36, Missio Nexus, September 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jNYokjiV9c.

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and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:4–5). Through intimacy with God, missions is birthed. A. W. Tozer called this relationship the knowledge of the Holy.[10]

Spirituality Prioritized

To fulfill the Great Commission, we must go deeper than good guidelines and best practices. To properly meet the needs of global ministry, we must attend to our own hearts. In his classic book on revival, *The Dynamics of the Spiritual Life,* Richard Lovelace wrote that "virtually all of the problems of the church including bad theology issue from defective spirituality."[11] If so, then it is imperative to passionately promote our relationship with Jesus as of first importance. A personal relationship must exist between the living God and the global servant. Exploring, expressing, and engaging the longing that God has placed in our hearts for himself is the core of the cross-cultural worker. Such longing for God must be an integral part of the spiritual journey for the missionary because it is also a critical factor in shaping the vision of any mission activity.

While this may seem obvious, in my experience this is not always so evident. Christian mission boards spend a great deal of effort and resources in strategizing and promoting their work, but often neglect the hearts of their people. They assume the work of the Holy Spirit has already taken root and has been developed through the global servant's local church. They spend a great deal of time evaluating a new candidate's church involvement, but little on what their church has actually produced in the spirituality of the prospective missionary.

Yet, while organizations ignore spiritual formation in their staff, it is exactly this desire for intimacy with the Father that moved the heart of a global servant to respond to the Great Commission in the first place. A clear view of God enables us to unite around a God-focused center, out of which we can minister from a place of integrity and peace. Spiritual practices that help us welcome God's purposes with a humble and receptive posture do much good in us—but it has to come out of a desire for intimate relationship for these practices to bear real fruit.

God's love for us and ours for him is centered on his Son, Jesus. The medieval writer, Thomas à Kempis, says the believer's chief study is Christ:

> *"He who follows me, walks not in darkness says, the Lord" (Jn 8:12). By these words of Christ, we are advised to imitate his life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be the study of the life of Christ.*[12]

The heart of Christian spirituality must be a study of Christ, by patterning after and fully participating in Christ's abundant life. To do this well, we utilize the resources given by the Holy Spirit within a believing community. However,

10 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961).

11 Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of the Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 58.

12 Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 3.

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this must mean more than simple adherence to certain Christian doctrines or the practice of some Christian disciplines for practice's sake. Rather, genuine Christian spirituality is walking in truth and love by the power of the Spirit, in living interaction with Christ and his community for the Father's glory. It is Trinitarian and relational. It is alive. It is individual and yet corporal.

Spiritual life is found in *perichoresis*, a Greek term literally meaning "rotation," which the early church fathers used to describe the Trinitarian dance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are invited into this dance to experience true life before the Father, through the Son, and by the power of the Spirit. Whenever we find ourselves outside the dance of this divine life, we have lost touch with true spirituality. Out of the overflow of this connected life with the Father comes abundancy.[13] When we are spiritually empty, we can only take from others; but when we are abundantly full, we have much to give.

Spiritual Formation and Crossing Cultures

Jonathan Edwards, the great eighteenth-century Puritan pastor and theologian, describes spiritual formation practices as a means of grace. To illustrate, he talks about Jesus' miracle of turning the water into wine at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1–11). According to Edwards, our role in the Christian life is to "fill the water pots," and Jesus' role is to turn the water into wine. These means of grace, or spiritual disciplines, are ways to fill us with water; they establish the conditions of receiving from God.[14]

Christian spirituality is played out in different ways because we are uniquely created and gifted by God himself. This diversity is something to be celebrated and not criticized. No single spirituality can adequately reflect and satisfy everyone. As Paul says in Romans 12:4–6, God has endowed members of the body of Christ with different gifts and functions. The effective use of gifts (e.g., leadership, hospitality, preaching, teaching) in various cultures calls for various personalities and spiritual activities appropriate to both the particular culture and biblical truth.

The global servant is called to bring Jesus, not his or her Christian culture, to the mission field. Historically, this has been a struggle for missionaries as they try to determine what is biblical spirituality and what is cultural spirituality. A major issue for missionaries in the Muslim world concerns to what degree Muslim converts to Christ need to leave their Muslim cultures.

No matter how we view the various levels of cultural and religious engagement, one thing is clear: While Muslim-background believers may not identify with Christian culture, they do identify with Christ. "Our aim is that we will follow Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Christ), and we will teach them (new believers) that Isa

13 See John 10:10.

14 See Romans 6:13 and 12:1.

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al-Masih is the Savior and we will baptize them."[15] This Muslim-background Christ-follower has no desire to take on a new religion. "I will not be a Christian; I just want to follow Jesus," he says.[16] Jesus is at the center of his spirituality. This believer's spirituality is not based upon becoming a cultural Christian, but upon a desire simply to follow Jesus. Jesus is the center of his spirituality.

The point here is not to debate whether or not such believers are genuine Christians. The point is that the centrality of Jesus Christ is necessary for anyone to be a true follower in any culture. My guess is that many who keep their identity in the Muslim culture and yet follow Jesus as Savior are more genuine in their faith than some cultural Christians in the West who attend church but have no relationship with Jesus.

Spiritual Formation in Community

While it is true that each of us bears individual responsibility for our walk with Christ, we were never meant to journey alone. As believers, we have a commitment to relate both to Christ and to his church (1 Cor 12:12–27). God's clear intent is for us to be part of his body, growing together spiritually. Too much discipleship material is written only for individuals. Paul wouldn't approve of isolating spiritual growth apart from Christ's body (Eph 4:15–16). All of his letters (even the one to Philemon) were written to be shared with churches or groups of believers. For the New Testament Christians, learning and growing in their faith was done together, in community.

However, being in Christian community can be a challenge for the global servants who come from a worldview that places an emphasis on individuality over community. Workers who have left long-established communities back home, including close family and friends, can struggle with working on teams whose fellowship can sometimes appear shallow. Many carry burdens privately, afraid to share them with others. But this hiddenness hinders everyone's spiritual formation by denying one of the greatest resources God has given us to mature as Christians—the local Christian community.

As beings created in the image of God, we are relational creatures—created to model and express love within a community of fellow beings. We simply cannot love in isolation; to love we must have others to love. Paul says it this way: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil 2:1–2). The communal nature of God in which we are to grow spiritually together in love is the basis of Christian community.

15 David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGtake Resources, 2014), 119.

16 Garrison, 118.

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