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Living into the life of Jesus: The formation of Christian character. By Klaus Issler. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2012. 239 pp. \$16.00. paper.

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For those who recognize the complexity of Christian growth, Klaus Issler's multifaceted approach to spiritual formation will be a reliable guide. Issler points out conceptual observations about the divine-human relationship that lead to practical implications for inner life growth. *Living into the Life of Jesus* creates biblical categories to develop one's relational awareness of abiding in Christ, so that life transformation is the natural outworking of paradigm shifts in one's true belief system.

Part 1 develops a methodological framework for seeing Christian character formation holistically. Focusing on true heart change is necessary for one to live into the life of Jesus, for following Jesus is more than behavioral compliance to biblical commands. Issler asserts that Christian growth involves thinking like Jesus thought and seeing the world from his perspective. He

alerts the reader to five broad categories Jesus addressed in the Gospels that are telltale signs of gaps in formation: living in disconnection from the Vine, letting distrust override trust, being dismissive of truth, not seeing discrepancies between beliefs and behavior, and being distracted by unconscious values of the world. Giving attention to where one sees these gaps can be an important step to deep life change, which is an ongoing process in this life that prepares us for the life to come.

Part 2 focuses on theology which points to a relational Christianity. Issler encourages the reader to engage with a Person, not just a set of orthodox beliefs. But since one comes to a relationship with God with relational baggage, there is an inherent inability to internalize the truth of God's Word fully. Living into the life of Jesus, then, means to learn how to experience the depth of God the Father's unconditional love, just as Jesus did. The security of the Father's love allows one to be honest about the ongoing process of exposing the gaps and looking to the Holy Spirit for power to live differently. Issler masterfully exposes some of the errant thinking that creates barriers to living as Jesus did by addressing the need to see Jesus as the perfect example of how to live well in this life. He calls the reader to watch Jesus' life in the Gospels and to depend on the Holy Spirit in the same ways Jesus did while here on earth. This section also brings out the need to align one's worldview with ultimate reality, which is only gained from studying and integrating Scripture in one's life.

The last part addresses two key areas of life that are often overlooked in the spiritual formation literature: relationships and money/work. Having a Jesus-infused framework for life will require countercultural relational and financial dynamics. This includes the need to forgive others, become a peacemaker, and value close relationships enough to give of oneself more fully to others in relationships. On the financial end of things, Issler develops a theology of work, stewardship, and generosity that has a practical outworking in the everyday life experience of handling money. These two areas are signs of one's deep belief system and can provide helpful insight into where there is a formation gap.

The pinpointing of self-deception in a clear and honest way is probably the greatest gift this book brings to those seeking a deeper relationship with God. The section on the five formation gaps highlights the barriers to deep belief change. When a person is confronted with truth, the subtle lies that they believe end up deeply controlling their behavior. That is why it is so significant that Issler provides these important reality checks, so that Christians can become aware of blind spots that are affecting growth. The premise that formation gaps exist and need to be addressed in light of love and truth is woven throughout the rest of the book. Many Christian communities tend to avoid speaking in terms of the gaps, but Issler boldly addresses these

categories and gently models what it looks like to become aware of gaps in formation. In the process, he applies the contents of his book (namely God's love and one's need for truth) to the journey of self-awareness. The painful realization that one does not fully believe all that is doctrinally professed creates an ongoing need for a Savior. His method of promoting self-awareness leads the reader to a relational Christianity that stands in contrast to a performance-based model of Christian spirituality.

In this journey of living into the life of Jesus, Issler becomes a trail guide who has done the hard work of looking into these areas in his own life and shares the lessons he has learned along the way. The book engages the reader with a hospitality of the soul that cuts through one's natural defenses and allows God in to do major deconstruction and rebuilding of one's worldview. While being confronted with discrepancies between one's professed belief system and one's operant belief system can create defensiveness, Issler's authenticity creates an inviting atmosphere that facilitates holistic change.

Living into the Life of Jesus is a significant contribution to the broader field of Christian theology and the more specialized field of Christian formation. Issler consults the Gospels to highlight how Christian growth is not just behavioral change or cognitive assent to biblical truths. Instead, Christian growth is progress in relating to and depending on the Trinity for daily life and growth in godliness. In order to be formed spiritually, one must be aware of how he or she is "deformed." This truism seems to be a motivating factor behind Issler's writing, for he masterfully exposes readers to subtle gaps that significantly hinder spiritual formation. He does this not only with sound theoretical information, but also gives practical illustrations, reflection questions, and activities to guide further personal integration.

This work would be beneficial reading and discussion for advanced studies in Christian formation and spirituality, especially for learners who need to wrestle with belief formation that goes beyond cognitive development theory. Those who teach in the area of Christian formation would also benefit from reading this book, since it will provide foundational underpinnings and rationale for strategies and methodologies one might use in a teaching-learning setting. While it is not a "how-to" book, it will cause the reader to think differently about formation, so that one's approach to the process is informed, rational, relational, and thoughtful. It is a foundational book in the sense that it addresses presuppositions and categories that are often overlooked in other spiritual formation resources. Issler's approach provides strong biblical integration around the contours of Jesus' life and values. *Living into the Life of Jesus* bridges the delicate balance between rigorous scholarship and practical steps for application and life change.

