

# JYM | THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH MINISTRY

The academic journal of youth ministry educators

Volume 12, No. 1

Fall 2013

*Living into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character* by Issler, K., Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2012, \$16.00, 239 pp., paper.

Is real life change possible? Professor Klaus Issler believes that it is. That may not come as surprise to most of us. This is why Issler asks the tougher question, then why do so few experience significant life change? In *Living into the Life of Jesus*, Issler attempts to not only answer this question, but to practically guide his readers in how that process might come about more regularly in lives of those we minister to.

In his first book, *Wasting Time with God* (2001), Issler explored how our movement toward God may best be compared with the process of friendship. Then, in 2008, *In Search of a Confident Faith*, co-written with J. P. Moreland, he insightfully addressed the many

obstacles that affect our faith development. In this work, Issler wonders if the reason that we see such little change in our lives is because we have misdiagnosed the essential issues in the formation of our humanity.

To defend this thought, Issler states that formation will not become a regular part of our ministry until we make three major shifts. First, we must move from seeing formation as something based upon external willpower and begin seeing it as a natural result of God's perfection moving out from the depths of our hearts. Next, we need to understand that more rules will not produce more change. Instead, only through an ongoing relationship with the Triune God and reliance upon His gifts will change occur. Finally, he says that our greatest hindrance is that we regularly bypass the life of Jesus as an actual guide to the process of becoming like him. This he attaches to our proclivity to acknowledge the divine distance in Christ, while missing the nearness of his humanity.

Issler primarily defends this thesis in the first two parts of the book, chapters 1-3 and 4-6 respectively, through a balanced look at theology, scripture, social science and personal experience. The third section, chapters 7 and 8, provide practical guidance in the application of these points he has defended.

The first chapter begins the book by arguing that formation is only possible when we purposefully lay aside our rule-keeping emphasis in order to take up Jesus' emphasis on belief formation. Flowing from that thought, the second chapter unpacks the five key gaps that keep us from believing that merely a purposeful relationship with God is the sole means of transformation. These, using the parable of the sower and the seeds, Issler labels as disconnected, distressed, dismissive, discrepancy and distracted. He then lays out the four responses that he thinks best address these gaps: we must first awake to our shortcomings, admit our distinctive role in them, ask for divine grace and be willing to act in accordance with that grace. He then closes the third chapter presenting a model for the formation process while also presenting various practices to aid in the process. Interestingly he suggests that the schedule of our daily lives may be one of the greatest detriments to our process of formation. So if we, like Jesus, began taking regular time to connect with God, away from the distractions of this world, our movement to be like Him would be greatly affected.

In chapters 4-6, Issler focuses upon the divine resources that he believes were a necessity in the life of perfect, yet fully human, Jesus. He says that the gift of first importance was love. Issler argues that divine love was the essential support of Jesus' life and that he could not have lived the life he did without an ongoing relationship with the other members of the Trinity. The second gift was the Spirit.

By the Spirit's leading, Issler claims, that Jesus was divinely mentored in God's ways and by his constant obedience, enabled to stay on the perfect path. The last was the gift of Scripture. Issler asserts that it was divine revelation through the scriptures which opened up reality to Jesus and served as the foundation for his life. In conclusion, he claims that unless we learn to rely upon these same divine gifts, then we have no hope of experiencing the transformation of our lives to progressively become like Jesus.

In chapters 7 and 8, Issler attempts use the perfection from the life of Christ to guide us in the areas where we often experience the greatest failures. So, in chapter 7 he focuses on relationships, suggesting that by simply following Jesus' example in forgiveness, peacemaking in conflict and friendship development we could experience deeper levels of communal connection than we presently enjoy. The next, and final chapter continues by highlighting three example-worthy practices of Jesus that could greatly affect how we approach both money and work. To do this he shows how Jesus handled the family business, how he learned to trust God's provision and how he regularly practiced giving generously. The insights derived from these practices provide great guidance for most adults, but his discussion would need some tweaking to provide meaningful guidance in the lives of today's teens.

In the end, *Living into the Life of Jesus*, effectively supports the thesis that real life change is only possible through a relationship with God and dependence upon His divine gifts of grace. Yet, the book's greatest strength lies in the everyday examples it derives from looking deeply into the life of Jesus. Despite Issler's ability to unpack meaningful examples he takes his time to build his case. This is helpful when the time comes to build our formation practices, but like most good books, it requires some time and concerted reflection to appreciate all that this book has to offer in helping us to more regularly experience the kind of life change God offers.

Jason Lanker  
John Brown University, Siloam Spring, AR