

## Book Review

### *Spiritual Formation: A Concise Introduction and Guide*

Corneliu C. Simuț

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Corneliu Simuț is a Romanian theologian who has written and published extensively. His works cover much theological ground, including Richard Hooker, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Hans Küng. His latest offering follows this pattern of wide-ranging theological interests and provides the reader with a history of spiritual formation that spans from Origen to James I. Packer.

In his new book, *Spiritual Formation: A Concise Introduction and Guide*, Simuț attempts to outline spiritual formation from the view of twelve historical theologians. He covers twelve theologians and provides an overview of how each viewed spiritual formation. The twelve theologians are Origen, Evagrius, Augustine, Thomas à Kempis, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Blaise Pascal, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and James I. Packer. After an introductory chapter, each theologian receives one chapter in which Simuț gives a brief biographical sketch, explores their theological view of spiritual formation, and offers a short synopsis of what we can learn from their teaching on spiritual formation. Simuț then provides a conclusion that seeks to summarise the various views into a few critical points about spiritual formation.

In the opening chapter, Simuț argues that spiritual formation and sanctification are 'almost synonymous.' (p. 1) He then highlights definitions and connections from various scholars between the two concepts. The whistlestop tour provides well-rounded descriptions of spiritual formation and sanctification. Simuț makes it clear in his introduction that he is writing 'a history of spiritual formation,' (p. 5) and Simuț's introductory tour and the subsequent chapters aptly accomplish that task. He sees this work as a foundation upon which students of spiritual formation can build and live their spiritual formation. Simuț's introduction gives the reader several frameworks of spiritual formation. These frameworks come from several different theological thinkers and provide different ways to define and think about spiritual formation.



Several common threads run between the frameworks Simuț offers in the introduction and the subsequent twelve theological expositions. First is the view that spiritual formation is a journey that disciples take toward the heart of God. Another is understanding spiritual formation as a call to maturity or development in the Christian's life. A third sees spiritual formation as the tug-of-war, or battle, between sin and sanctification. The last of these themes is the view of spiritual formation as a set of practices in which the disciple must participate. Simuț's overview does not place one of these views as more important or more effective than another. Instead, like offerings in a dinner buffet, Simuț presents the various options and leaves it to the reader to determine which will satisfy their hunger for righteousness.

Each of the next twelve chapters follows the same format. They begin with a helpful abstract highlighting how the highlighted theologian viewed spiritual formation. After a brief biographical sketch, Simuț provides an overview of spiritual formation within the theologian's understanding. He then summarizes the chapter under the heading of 'What do we learn from' that theologian. This outline is a helpful and concise way to address the history of spiritual formation. However, as I read each chapter, I found myself wanting additional clarity about each of the theologian's thoughts. Additionally, I kept waiting for a statement showing how each theologian's view fits with the others or the introductory frameworks. I kept reminding myself of Simuț's disclaimer of his objective as providing a 'history of spiritual formation,' which he indeed does.

What the reader can take away from these twelve brief overviews of spiritual formation is the sense that spiritual formation has always been a critical part of the Christian life. Yet, even with that knowledge, there is no single formula or concept for understanding or applying spiritual formation. While Simuț provides a historical sampling of twelve significant figures, it is not a complete literature review of the topic. Yet, it does give the reader a helpful starting point for understanding how a sampling of theologians has thought about spiritual formation throughout church history. Even though Simuț capably deals with a complex and wide-ranging topic, I was often left wondering if he was trying to do too much in too little space. Each of the twelve theologians could carry a book-length tome on their own merits and summing that up in fifteen short pages is a daunting task.

Simuț concludes his work by attempting to bring the various thoughts into a single stream. This is a massive undertaking, given the broad spectrum of theological thought and backgrounds. Simuț picks up on one key theme from his historical progression—God's transformative power 'must be seen in our lives and in our actions' (p. 92). This is a crucial element and forms the basis of Simuț's conclusion. He calls on the church to 'take spiritual formation seriously' (p. 92) so that it becomes a visible representation of the Christian faith to the world. Simuț juxtaposes this with a background of an 'evil and sinful' world. In this way, Simuț sees spiritual formation as a means for 'understanding the world in a different light' (p. 93). Spiritual formation makes us more deeply aware of 'God's creation' and the inherent beauty within.

Simuț sees spiritual formation as a means for telling the world the story of God and God's love and grace for each of us. He keenly refers to spiritual formation as 'serving Christ in the secular culture despite the secular culture by witnessing to Christ through our transformed lives' (p. 93). For Simuț, spiritually formed people will congregate together into 'a church with a vibrant worship—not in terms of singing and music, but in terms of veracity and truth' (p. 94). In this way, the church becomes the truthful storyteller illustrating the love and grace of the Trinitarian God to the world. The church then becomes the exhibition of a people 'captivated by God's love' (p. 96), and living the reality of that love daily.

*Spiritual Formation: A Concise Introduction and Guide* would be a valuable resource for anyone beginning to explore spiritual formation as a theological concept. It would make a great small group study guide for introductory study of spiritual formation or an accessible source for a sermon series or undergraduate series on spiritual formation.