

BOOK REVIEW

SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS

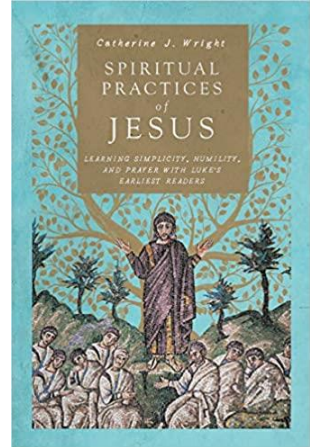
Catherine J. Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus: Learning Simplicity, Humility and Prayer with Luke's Earliest Readers*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020, pp. xxx + 210, £14.42/\$19.09 (ISBN: 978-0-8308-5226-0).

Spiritual formation has been on the heart of many theologians since the times of the church fathers. In this book, Wright attempts to unlock our understanding of Jesus' spiritual practices so that we can better emulate him.

Wright seems to assume that Luke wrote for a learned Roman audience, represented by Theophilus (the ostensible recipient of Luke's work). Consequently, she frames her analysis and reflections within the Greco-Roman cultural context and the teachings of philosophers of the time. It is presumed that Luke's audience was seeking positive role models of virtue to emulate (xix). Wright identifies the desirable person to emulate as a philosopher-king' (in modern-day parlance, we might refer to a 'teacher-leader') and demonstrates in her introduction that the core values of that philosopher-king are what first-century readers were looking for.

Although she is not very clear on Luke's intended audience, Wright assumes that it is the first-century Mediterranean church, living under Roman domination. She chooses three values—simplicity, humility, and prayer—as focal points of Jesus' expression of his relationship with God the Father (i.e., his spirituality). The book's three parts each examine one of these values. In each part, Wright first presents an exegetical discussion of core Lukan texts, followed by an explanation of how the Lukan audience might have understood that proposed value, and concludes with a proposed account of how the first-century church might have understood the Lukan texts under review. The book concludes with a brief invitation to the modern North American church to be open to learning from the first-century church.

The first part focuses on developing the *simplicity* of Christ's lifestyle in contrast to the many preoccupations of her readers



concerning the practicalities of western life. Developing practices of generosity towards close social circles, but also towards the most deprived is a spiritual discipline. The second part features *humility* as Christ's spiritual discipline and as a rule of life in whatever position we might be. Humility may not be a characteristic trait of western societies and Wright challenges the western church, in North America especially, to emulate Christ's servanthood. The third part develops the importance of prayer in Christ's life in the gospel of Luke. Although this is a topic that has been written on abundantly, the discipline of prayer cannot ever be emphasized enough as one of the non-negotiable disciplines of Christian life, individually and collectively. To conclude her book, Wright invites Christians individually and as a church to place themselves under the authority of Christ's instruction and the power of his life (192).

This book provides a reminder to all Christian scholars that their work must be deeply rooted in the life of Christ as their utmost model. It does not follow a denominational or other framework of spirituality; instead, it turns directly to Christ for guidance on how to live out our faith.

Notably, Wright addresses the applicability of Christ's spiritual practices to the 21st-century church from the perspective of a female and a mother. Her work will be well received by female scholars within a western context, and several of her examples involve women (30 and 88). Unlike many other writings on similar topics, we feel that she seeks to integrate her thinking in her daily life as a woman. She also integrates a number of stories and parables that include women, which contrasts with the numerous quotes of first-century male writers and philosophers. Her guidance on developing humility (120) and her critique of the contemporary church's desire for immediate gratification (174) are fairly brief, but deeply grounded in examples of the first-century church fathers' writings.

At the same time, Wright also demonstrates a close correlation between how the early church would implement these teachings and the prior Greco-Roman philosophers' perspectives on simplicity, humility, and even prayer. It is surprising to discover that these values were also part of the

thinking and practice of these philosophers. One could wonder, then, how Wright's depiction of Christ as an ideal 'hero' (183) transcends all the models that Greco-Roman philosophers offered to the first-century audience. She provides the answer at the very end of her reflections when she refers to the 'power of his life' (192), which allows the reader to muse further in that direction.

Though this work contains extremely rich content regarding Greco-Roman and first-century church fathers' reflections, it does not provide a specific framework for individual or church-wide development of spirituality. Wright leaves it to the readers to reflect on the implications of her research for their lives. To that end, she offers reflection questions at the end of each chapter.

Although this omission is understandable given the emphasis on a Greco-Roman perspective, Wright unfortunately does not consider Christ's Jewish heritage and its impact on his spirituality, nor does it take into account the Hebrew and other non-Greco-Roman cultural factors that Christ's teaching and practices may have expressed and addressed. Christ was culturally Jewish, and the first-century Christian churches grew out of Judaism. Perhaps a more cross-cultural approach to analysing how Wright's three spiritual practices are congruent with Jewish or Ancient Near Eastern traditions could deliver greater richness and encourage more global engagement in these practices.

Nevertheless, Wright offers effective guidance on integrating Christ's spiritual practices into our busy modern lives. She provides a panoply of philosophical and theological support to help us fully embrace the spiritual practices of simplicity, humility, and prayer.

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