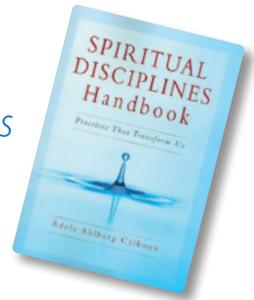




Book Review



Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us
by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (InterVarsity Press, 2005).



Once in a while you come across a book you wished you had known of earlier. The *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* is one such book for me.

Spiritual disciplines, according to Adele Calhoun, are not ends in themselves. They are the means that will bring us to a worshipful life with God. Calhoun sees worship as the main backdrop and foundation of a Christian's life; as she sees it, all life is worship (Romans 12:1-2). The practice of spiritual disciplines transforms us and is an ongoing process of this worshipful life.

As Christians, our ultimate desire is to be like Christ, to be guided by the Holy Spirit and to commune with God. However, along the way, the world's influence creeps in. We're wearied by trials and tribulations. Or we simply lose our first love. So Calhoun urges us to return to that desire. According to her, when there is a gap between our desire and where we are currently at, the intentional practice of the appropriate spiritual discipline(s) can lead to transformation, restoration and renewal. Spiritual disciplines are thus a way of allowing God to fill that gap.

Calhoun uses the acronym 'WORSHIP' as the framework for the book. Each letter points us to an area in our lives that needs to be opened to God's working:

W is for **worshipping** God and translates into practices like acknowledging God the Father, expressing gratitude to and having communion with him. The importance of Sabbath is reinforced.

O is for **opening** myself to God and involves contemplation and journaling toward being teachable, etc.

R is for **relinquishing** the false self through detachment, discernment, submission, etc.

S is for **sharing** myself with others through an accountability partner and being part of a community or covenant group. Spiritual friendships are encouraged.

H is for **hearing** God's Word through Bible study, devotional reading and Scripture memorisation.

I is for **incarnating** the love of Christ through caring for the earth and demonstrating compassion and stewardship, etc.

P is for **praying** as it is expressed through breath prayer, fasting, and undertaking fixed hour prayers, etc.

Calhoun attaches ten appendices which offer help to get us started. Appendix 1 (the Spiritual Health Planner) is great if we are unsure about our desire(s). It gives us an idea of where our soul is oriented and what is lacking. My favourite is Appendix 10 – the seasons, stages and ages of transformation. Calhoun discusses five seasons of the soul: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, and the Seasoned saint. With each season, she deals with the key questions which arise, as well as the primary longings and specific temptations experienced. She also recommends appropriate disciplines to help us along.

In my case, autumn is my current season. I'm in transition between the bounty of summer and the nakedness of winter. In this phase, slowing down and rest is important for me. The emphasis in this season should not be on doing but instead on practising *being in the Lord*. 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10) is an Scripture appropriate for autumn.

What I like about this book:

1. **One size does not fit all** – This book recognises that Christians are different. The spiritual disciplines that it recommends are tailored to Christians of various ages and generations. For a young Christian, the disciplines are a good starting point to allow one's faith to take root. For older Christians, they're a great opportunity to reflect and recalibrate.
2. **You determine your journey** - Calhoun recommends that our journey does not have to begin with Chapter One. We can start from anywhere in the book and work with the discipline that meets our current needs. There are different disciplines but they lead to the same outcome of being closer to God.
3. **Solitude and community** - The discipline of relinquishing (R) our false self requires the practice of solitude. Only we know what falsehood to let go. At the same time, we're encouraged to be part of a community through the disciplines of sharing (S) our lives with others and to incarnate (I) the love of Christ.
4. **There is no right formula** – Calhoun does not advocate a magic formula of spiritual disciplines. There is no right discipline to begin with. There is no right amount of time that we need to spend developing a particular discipline. Instead, she encourages time spent in each discipline to be intentional and without haste. In this way, we are never 'finished' with a discipline. The emphasis is being on our own journey, at our own pace. We are not Christians on a conveyor belt who are being mass produced.
5. **No answer grid provided** - Calhoun does not provide answers to our spiritual dilemmas. Instead, through the reflective questions and spiritual exercises included in the book, we're guided to find the answers ourselves. At the end of each chapter, there's a table summarising the desire and definition of each discipline, the appropriate Scriptures and the recommended practices. The fruit we bear is dependent on us and how much we desire to be with God.

There are also two things I would like to see in a future edition. First, I would change the title of the book to '*Spiritual Disciplines Guidebook*'. Having read the book various times, it has become more of a guide than a mere handbook to me; it is a new-found treasure. Second, I wish it is printed in a pocket size so that I could carry it everywhere I go 24/7! Clearly, these are minor qualms. More importantly, I encourage you to give this book a go. I think you will be blessed by it. ■

Pauline Tabalujan and her husband Benny and their four children are part of the Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne.

pipiben8@gmail.com