

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Formal Critique: Spiritual Life, the Foundation for Preaching and Teaching

A Paper  
Submitted to Dr. John Bishop  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Course  
Spiritual Formation  
PLED520

By  
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## **Bibliographical Entry**

Westerhoff, John H. *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

## **Author Information**

The author of this work is Mr. John H. Westerhoff, a man who lives and breathes spiritual formation. He served for many years of his life as the chair of the Duke University School of Divinity where he taught some of the most popular spiritual courses available to the students – much of which was added to this book. Westerhoff taught at the College for Preachers in Washington DC, spent a few years as a part time associate of the monastic Society of St. John the Evangelist, served as a bishop for the archdiocese of Atlanta, GA in the Church of England and is currently the Director of Pastoral Studies at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Atlanta, GA.

## **Content Summary**

In his teaching career, John Westerhoff found that spiritual formation was a hot topic and a popular class on his Duke University Divinity School catalog but was disheartened that few books offered a concise guide for this topic. This drove him to create his work *Spiritual Formation: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* to provide a logical and sensible guide to the have-been, would-be, and need-to-be seeker of spiritual discipline. The book seeks to summarize and explain the gamut of the various classes he has taught and spiritual discipline he otherwise experienced throughout his career. Moreover, it provides a timeless and effective “ropes” course for all those who wish to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Westerhoff believes no one can be successful in this endeavor without a strong foundation (p. xi).

Despite the fact that the work was originally composed to reach out to teachers, the author has created this book for clergy and laity alike resulting in a well organized guide for the layperson and a wonderful reference for the teacher.

Westerhoff begins his work with a brief but informative preface and an even more concise acknowledgement foreword. In the preface, he seeks to provide the reader with a well-formulated mold into which he will pour what he feels are the most vital elements of spiritual discipline and their real-world application but is careful not to set the bar too high or the water too deep. This eases the reader into the next six chapters that cover everything from the basis for spiritual discipline all the way up to an informative 'how-to' guide for carrying out what has been learned.

In the first chapter, the author begins to paint a picture of a spiritual life by outlining real world examples of the fruits of the spirit as evidence of a vibrant spiritual life and identifying the spiritual life as a journey instead of a destination. As the second chapter begins, the reader is presented with the challenges faced in preaching and teaching in the newer, postmodern world and how the spiritual condition of the teacher/preacher can greatly impact overcoming those challenges. Building on the concerns of the previous chapters, the third chapter begins to change the delivery style of the book as Westerhoff chooses to focus on more tangible factors of the spiritual condition of the preacher and teacher including restlessness, learning to be still before God and spiritual maturity.

As the author begins to round out his work, the fourth chapter takes the concept of spirituality of the teacher and the student into three areas: one seeking teaching, a teacher allowing their life to be part of the lesson taught, and how the combination of both makes it possible for the truth to enter into the lives of both parties.

Taking a very different approach, the fifth chapter takes a very detailed look at the different ways one can live out their spiritual discipline and itemizes the spiritual approaches into four divisions: the ‘sacramental’ speculative-kataphatic (p.54), the ‘charismatic’ affective-kataphatic (p.55), the ‘mystical’ affective-apophatic (p.57), and the ‘apostolic’ speculative-apophatic (p.58) then closely links them to Carl Jung’s personality theory. The final numbered chapter, six, can be best described as the “how-to” section of the book in which Westerhoff collects all of the many things he has discussed in the entirety of this manuscript and provides a concise guide for the reader to create their own spiritual discipline while stressing the importance of flexibility in this discipline. At the end, the reader is presented with a ‘conclusion’ that stresses the importance of all spiritual leaders to submit themselves to constant spiritual growth in order to provide the best ‘example’ from which their students will truly learn.

### **Evaluation**

John Westerhoff is a man who is obviously very learned in the ways of a spiritual formation and he brings many years of experience as a preacher and teacher into a book that even he calls “small” (p. xi) but still is made quite informative. He aims to assemble his treasure trove of knowledge, life experience, and spiritual centeredness to aid the spiritual leader, be they laymen or clergy – a goal that the book accomplishes quite well. As a reader turns each page, Westerhoff builds a comprehensive structure on the pilgrimage that is a spiritual life and does so in a way that is sensible and applicable. The stylistic manner in which the topics are expressed makes his work an easy and fulfilling read and one from either of the aforementioned castes can enjoy the material without it feeling trite or forced.

At the moment the reader begins the first chapter, the personality of Westerhoff oozes through the printed word into the mind and heart of the reader which makes it comfortable to read even if one does not follow the rites of the Church of England (the church from which Westerhoff hails). The author infuses the reader with a tried and true series of building blocks that he, himself, has used and delivers them in a way that few would question his authority. His opinion of the lifelong devotion and dedication to a spiritual life and its luminescence for the teacher and preacher are on target and he supports the entire work with well founded and well stated truths. These items coupled with the casual and smooth delivery style used by the author make the book wonderfully soothing to the reader and offers little in the way of confusing or cantankerous verbiage.

While Westerhoff's work is undoubtedly a wonderful resource for anyone who is seeking to enhance their spiritual life, it is not without a few notable negative details. The most forward and obvious issue that the reader will find is that since Westerhoff has spent his life in the Episcopal Church, his Episcopalian beliefs and mannerisms seep into his work in many ways including a tendency to overemphasize ritualistic elements of faith as opposed to the moralistic bent of most Protestant movements. The examples he employs to define spiritual personalities, for instance, focus a great deal on notable people within his denomination which may be unknown to a majority of the audience of his work (p. 57). Even so, the reader cannot hold too much contempt for the author for this bias as even the most creative person must draw upon sources with which they are familiar else risk alienating themselves from their subject.

In addition to the Episcopalian leanings evident in his work, Westerhoff's writing does offer another hurdle to the reader which is his tendency to complicate some of the topics he discusses by using foreign elements or overly complex thought processes.

The shining example of this challenge is found throughout the entirety of chapter five in which Westerhoff uses overly colorful language (cf. apophatic and kataphatic) to define spiritual archetypes. Certainly, the words fit their context but without having some experience in systematic theology, the casual reader might find these words bewildering and the definition the author offers (aka 'indirect' as defining kataphatic) will sooner obscure the words than illuminate them. Even so, the explanation Westerhoff offers of the various disciplines serves to clarify enough that the reader can still follow what is being discussed and thusly can be overlooked with minimal effort.

John Westerhoff's *Spiritual Life: the Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* will offer the reader a thorough but succinct comprehension and execution of spiritual discipline that does not sacrifice quality due to brevity. The preacher and teacher alike will find this work a wonderful addition to their library and will undoubtedly find themselves reaching for it on many occasions for reference or a gentle reminder of the momentous task of spiritual formation. In fact, if a reader will truly take the concepts found within Westerhoff's work, and apply them directly to their own spiritual life, the result will be a much more grounded and centered teacher who is reminded daily of their mission.