

Bingham, Matthew. *A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2025. 332pp. + 13pp. (front matter) + 20pp. (back matter).

A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation by Matthew Bingham is a comprehensive treatment of spiritual formation drawn from the heritage left to the church by the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Bingham's goal is to motivate within the current confessional evangelical Christian community a retrieval of "divinely appointed means that God has clearly given in Scripture and that the Reformed tradition has consistently commended as unambiguously biblical and therefore consistently edifying" (40). Bingham's work is also a warning shot to the church that much of what is written about spiritual formation from various evangelicals offers, at best, a muddled view of means and terminologies cobbled together from quasi-religious or even secular methodologies. At worst, this piecing together of various sources is not only confusing when attempting to understand spiritual formation but, as Bingham points out, it is dangerously heretical. To right the ship, Bingham focuses on the Reformers' understanding and practice of the means of grace as a guide to help the confessional evangelical church advance toward Christlikeness.

Matthew Bingham is vice president of academic affairs and associate professor of church history at Phoenix Seminary in Scottsdale, Arizona. He authored the book *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* and served as a pastor in the United States and Ireland. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and his research and writing focus primarily on the history and theology of post-Reformation England. Bingham's background and experience give him a well-earned voice to address the spiritual practices of the Reformers.

Just as surveyors measure and map areas of land, Bingham begins his work by measuring and mapping the landscape of spiritual-formation practices among the Reformers and that of the Roman Catholic Church to lay out a distinct boundary line that separates the two. The Reformers, having navigated the land from within Roman Catholicism, recognized that certain practices, particularly in late medieval Catholicism, were at odds with Scripture and ultimately stemmed from a theology that taught self-righteousness. As Bingham argues, the Reformers, alarmed by these practices and their intended destination, chose spiritual-formation practices defined by Scripture that would lead to conformity to Christ as the outcome. As he demonstrates, the Roman Catholics of today have continued in the tradition of their medieval counterparts and continue to posit that spiritual formation is a means of salvation. These two distinct destination points clearly defined the borderline between the land of the Reformers and that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Bingham warns that much modern scholarship on the topic of spiritual formation borrows from Roman Catholic practices and beliefs that the Reformers deliberately rejected. Central to these beliefs is the Catholic doctrine that merges justification and sanctification as means of salvation. The Reformers viewed this linkage as diminishing the believer's active role in sanctification—the process of becoming more like Christ—and further fueled a form of self-righteousness. In Catholicism, sanctification is viewed as a mystical, grace-infused process mediated through sacraments, minimizing personal transformation. The Reformers, by contrast, emphasized that justification leads to an active, heart-driven pursuit of Christlikeness (Prov 4:23), not mere ritual observance. Bingham cautions that

the mystical elements adopted by some evangelicals echo Catholic and Orthodox traditions, promoting self-righteousness over genuine spiritual growth.

Bingham defends the Reformers' view on spiritual formation, centered on three core disciplines: the Word, meditation, and prayer—what he calls the “Reformed Triangle.” Reformed spirituality emphasizes the sufficiency of Scripture for soul care, rejecting church traditions and extrabiblical practices that do not foster spiritual growth (81). This focus on Scripture is seen as a response to criticisms from some in the evangelical church who view it as spiritually shallow compared to the more liturgical Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. As Bingham notes, while seeking greater spiritual depth, some evangelicals have erroneously turned to Catholic rituals, such as “mass . . . confession . . . penances . . . relics . . . and pilgrimages” (81). In contrast, the Reformers upheld *sola Scriptura*, arguing that spiritual fulfillment is found in God's Word alone, not in human-made rites and rituals. Bingham writes, “For the psalmist, spiritual plenitude and fulness is found in God's word, and one need not look beyond it for an imagined spiritual ‘more’” (80).

In addition to the transformative work of the Word, Bingham highlights the invaluable means of meditation and prayer. Biblical meditation, as practiced by the Reformers, is rooted in “directing one's attention toward God and his promises as revealed in Scripture with the aim of stirring up God-honoring affections” (131). Bingham is primarily focused on the nature of meditation as Word-focused, as opposed to Eastern mystics who seek to clear the mind to achieve a state of zero-consciousness, thereby becoming one with the divine. The Reformers understood that the mind must be fully engaged on the Word in meditation if one hopes to reflect Christ in his life. As the Reformers would argue, it is the practice of meditation that “unlocks” happiness for the believer (133). This happiness produced by meditation is rooted in what it evokes: “praises, thanksgivings, lamentations, and supplications” (132). Meditation, as the Reformers saw it, was not a suggestion, but a biblical duty (Pss 1; 119:48) (133). John Ball (1585–1640) suggested that “the most holy” men “abounded in meditation” (134). Their understanding of the seriousness of meditation as a practice is best summed up in Ball's *Treatise of Divine Meditation*. Bingham explains, “Without meditation ‘a Christian life cannot stand’” (135). This is due in part to the fact that “thinking about divine truth” has an aim, as the Reformers maintained, of “kindling” or “stirring up” godly affections (136–37). As Bingham suggests earlier in his book, one objection among believers today toward Reformed Christianity is that it is doctrinally heady, dry, and wooden. Here Bingham points out that this was not the case among the Reformers. The Reformers' attention to Scripture was rooted in the belief that “ideas about God are transformed into love of God” (160).

Meditation fuels love, and prayer is the expression of that love. As the personal God leaps from the pages of Scripture to the heart of the believer through meditation, one is moved to speak to God in a straightforward natural way (171). Simply, the Reformers believed that “prayer is real communication with a God who is actually there and really does listen” (165). Medieval Catholicism's practice of prayer was rooted in the belief that the *words* being uttered produced power (177). Opposed to this, the Reformers saw God's power, through meditation on his Word, as producing affections in the heart and mind that provoked “an earnest talk with God” (171) that was “thoughtful, heartfelt, and rightly tethered to Scripture” (175).

In the third section of his work, Bingham builds on the Reformed triangle and widens his scope to address the practices of self-examination, the natural world, and Christian relationships. Bingham unpacks and explores these essential practices of the Reformers, clearly showing a line of practice that extends to the Puritans and early evangelicals. Bingham gives weight to the outside influences that can infect these three practices, robbing them of the grace found in spiritual formation. He notes that self-examination may lead to an overt preoccupation with the self (220). This preoccupation leads to selfishness rather than personal holiness, as intended. Additionally, reflecting on nature as a means toward understanding God and man can morph into a preoccupation with the environment where “managing nature is a ‘form of worship’ and environmentalism is ‘a kind of religion’” (227). Whereas nature is a means to point to God, the current thrust in culture is toward a view of “the natural world as sacred.” Elevating nature to the divine does not point man to God but ultimately replaces the Creator with creation. Lastly, Bingham notes that the Reformers emphasized the importance of forming strong Christian relationships: relationships both within the home and in the church. The stress, of course, is placed on relationships rooted in a common bond of fellowship with Christ—where fellowship meets the believer’s need of affirmation in Christ, encouragement, and the meeting of practical needs bounded within a covenant of love. Bingham is pointing out that the Reformers viewed biblical fellowship as distinct and of a richer value than relationships formed around temporal interests or activities. In other words, to the Reformers, forming a stronger bond with others rooted in something or someone outside of Christ would be sin (269).

In the final section, Bingham addresses two criticisms of the Reformed-Protestant view of spiritual formation: first, it neglects the body’s role (280), and second, it is disconnected from the experiences of ordinary Christians (311). He responds to the first by acknowledging that some view Reformed spirituality as overly cerebral, neglecting the senses and leading to shallow spiritual formation (282). Bingham wrestles with this critique, noting that the tradition is often accused of turning faith into a disembodied, intellectual exercise. To address this, he examines the Reformers’ view of biblical anthropology, arguing that their approach avoids unhelpful practices such as man-made liturgies that create an atmosphere of spirituality but fail to truly shape the heart. He further points to the spiritual practices of the Reformers, such as communion, baptism, worship, application in preaching, and the role of sanctuaries to house the worship of the church body, as evidence that the body’s participation in spiritual formation was not dismissed but integrated within their view of spiritual formation. The second criticism—that Reformed piety is out of touch with the common believer—is, according to Bingham, unfounded. Bingham quotes John Flavel: “To keep the heart from sinking in such a day as this, to enable it to maintain its own sincerity, is a matter of great difficulty” (311). Bingham argues that the Reformers did not dismiss melancholy or spiritual lethargy but instead spoke of how the human condition is at times weak in piety, emphasizing the great difficulty of keeping one’s heart close to the Word (311–12).

From a Protestant perspective, Bingham’s book is a bold, winsome, and scholarly work that clearly defines the differences between the Roman Catholic and Reformed/Protestant traditions of spiritual formation. As such, his work lays out a clear boundary line that, as he argues, is being blurred within the current evangelical church. At times Bingham is not shy about naming those in modern

evangelicalism who advocate for an admixture of mystical and Word-centric practices. Thus, this book could negatively arouse the sensitivities of those who feel their own personal walk with God has been shaped by these authors. As one humbly approaches Bingham's work, however, he will see that his warnings are meticulously defended and worthy of consideration. Overall, Bingham's book is a masterpiece. It is both a tool to help one better understand spiritual formation and a means to gain greater insight into the body of theology that undergirds the heart of the Reformers. Bingham is both unassuming and unpretentious, carefully guiding the reader to his salient conclusion that what the Reformers believed, practiced, and handed down to the evangelical church over the centuries is eroding into mysticism. Without intentional effort and practice, Bingham argues, the disciplines of grace may continue to fade away. Overall, his book is a must-read for anyone serious about his own personal piety and the impact that piety has on the church of Christ, as well as for those interested in safeguarding spiritual practices for future generations.

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