

James Emery White. *After I Believe: Everyday Practices for a Vibrant Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021. Pp. 240. ISBN:978-0-8010-9460-6. Paper cover, \$16.99/ eBook, \$12.99.

In this book, James White stresses the practicality of Christlikeness— “To truly engage the Christ *life*. To *grow* in that faith ... this book is designed to help those who have chosen Christianity as their faith to develop themselves spiritually” (13). White is the pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church (Charlotte, NC), and the former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Though practical, White understands that “spiritual exercises are *not* the same as *being* spiritual” (13) ... therefore the book’s aim is to investigate those “doings” for the sake of your being (34).

Chapter 1 (*Identities, Deceptions, and Myths*) begins with the truth of our identity in Christ, failure here means that one “will never be able to grow into who you have been called to be” (15). Next (*How to Bible*) White provides clarity on the inspiration and sacredness of God’s Word revealing ways people try to skirt its teachings: 1) the cosmic exception clause—in my case, it doesn’t apply, 2) the food bar—choose what you like, 3) the great compromise—watering it down through willful rebellion (52-54). Chapter 3 (*Talking to God*) is built around the disciple’s prayer (Matt 6:7-15). This guideline shows the believer that prayer should be 1) intimate, 2) expectant, 3) reverent, 4) submissive, 5) dependent, 6) honest, and 7) humble (60-68).

*Spending Time with God* (chapter 4) shows what it looked like for Jesus to spend time with the Father. It was a daily time, as well as one of quality and quantity. Because of this, Jesus became redirected, refueled, and resolved (83). Chapter 5 (*Experiencing Life in Community*) is about the true fellowship (*koinonia*), found in God’s church and is essential to a life in Christ (101). The church is critical in becoming Christlike and “the only pain worse than being hurt through a relationship is the pain of isolation and loneliness that comes from shutting yourself

off from relationships” (119). *Worshiping in Spirit and Truth* reveals that true worship centers on God as He *really* is (not some false idea of God or some God-substitute) ... and to do so, authentically with your *heart* (128-129).

Chapter 7 (*Becoming a Player*) deals with Christian service through His church. Knowing that God gifts believers, “A spiritual gift is not an instant ability, but a God-given capacity to *develop* an ability” (153). In *Positioning Your Heart* White tackles our stewardship of resources where he proposes a 10–10–80 plan (ten to God, ten to savings, eighty to live on) (181). Chapter 9 (*Achieving Maximum Impact*) is stellar, discussing sharing our faith. White hits hard at the reality of heaven and hell:

The driving force, the ultimate reality, of Jesus’s life was that he was sent on a mission. And that mission was singular in focus. It was to those who were far from God. Why? Because he knew something more clearly than anyone else who had ever lived or ever would: that heaven and hell are real, and real people go to one or the other (192).

Finally (*Keeping in Step*) may be the most important chapter for it dwells on the ramifications of the indwelling power of the Spirit (Eph 1:19-20; Rom 6:4). White bemoans the fact that on this subject “Christians know very little” (205).

Some positives worth noting. First, the emphasis on discipleship. As Christ’s disciples, we are to be “actively engaged in learning. It is *your* responsibility to take up the mantle of self-development” ... discipleship is something you receive ... something that must be owned personally by you (31). To become Christlike, you must take the instruction you receive and “the creative work God wants to perform and make the kind of investments necessary for that creative work to reach its maximum potential ... you must cooperate with God’s leading and direction in your life and make the necessary investments to position yourself for his ongoing work in your life” (33-34). Of note, “Jesus called people to follow him, and there was only one place he was going—a cross” (218). Second, the simple steps of application, answering “Is it okay for a

Christian to ...: 1) see what the Bible says (there will be clear permission, firm prohibition, or a set of principles to navigate the issue), 2) take the Bible's permissions and principles and link them to our freedom in Christ, 3) considering our freedom and biblical principles—what is the wisest thing for me to do?, and 4) consider one's responsibility as Christ's disciple to a lost world (49-50).

Just a few concerns. While talking about intimacy and prayer with the Father, White explores the meaning of *Abba* (Matt 6:9) stating, "Again, *Abba* was the most intimate family term there was, used between a very small child and their parent" (61). Only problem, the word used is *Pater*, not *Abba* (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6), and recent scholarship (Schelbert, Vermes, Barr, et al.) make a better case for *abba* not meaning "daddy," contra Joachim Jeremias (and White) who leads one to believe *abba* is synonymous with "daddy." Also, White states, "Nothing happens to you as a Christian that does not first pass through the hands of a God wildly in love with you" (73). While "wildly" can mean "to an extreme degree," it can also mean "in an uncontrolled way or in a way that lacks discipline or restraint." Perhaps, more precision is needed to describe our God, while He does sometimes act in an extreme manner (John 3:16; Rom 5:5), He does not act uncontrollably (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:4-5).

*After I Believe* serves as an excellent primer for discipleship and/or spiritual formation, especially for new believers or believers who are "stuck in neutral" in their pursuit to be more Christlike. In the end, White is correct in pointing us to the Word of God—our sole authority for faith and practice, "What matters is not how many times you've gone through the Bible, but how many times the Bible has gone through you" (53).

Tony A. Rogers, Senior Pastor  
Southside Baptist Church (Bowie, Texas)