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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL THEME
ISSUE: DALLAS WILLARD AND
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

When we first informed Dallas that we were doing a special issue on his work in spiritual formation, we made it clear that it was not meant to be primarily honorific. Dallas said he was pleased to hear that and he hoped we would give preference to submissions that “blow my stuff out of the water.” While we had trouble locating any submissions that had this torpedo-like effect, we did receive dozens of quality papers from which we gathered (with the help of a team of blind reviewers) what we took to be the best of the lot. Throughout the process we attempted to stay true to our commitment to keep the personal accolades to a dull roar. But why?

Without a doubt Dallas deserves the affirmations of his fellow colleagues and, like all of us, Dallas needs such encouragement. But there is equally no doubt that one of the best compliments that can be paid a scholar is to have his or her carefully presented ideas thoughtfully and critically engaged. The articles and reflections which follow attempt to take Dallas’ work as seriously as he took it, and in that we trust Dallas will be encouraged.

But even more importantly is the realization that to praise Dallas for the quality and impact of his writing in spiritual formation is to quite literally miss the point of Dallas’ work. Anyone familiar with Dallas’ writing and speaking on formation is familiar with his definition of grace: “Grace is God acting in our lives to bring about what we do not deserve and cannot accomplish on our own.” We know God is graciously at work in and through us when what is accomplished cannot be explained by human effort alone. Now, make no mistake, we are quite sure that Dallas on his own could make a significant splash. But the quality and outcome of Dallas’ character, thinking, writing, and teaching makes it abundantly clear that God’s grace is at work in and through him. What has been accomplished both in and through this man defies a purely naturalistic explanation. Dallas is not, at the end of the day, the one to be honored and praised. Once again, if we take the views Dallas has done so much to proliferate seriously, then what we can do is thank Dallas for continuing to do what he can to offer his body to God as an instrument of righteousness (cf. Rom 6:13). In doing this, Dallas exemplifies what he teaches, harnessing a power beyond himself to accomplish great and eternal good in millions of lives. So, Dallas,
we do thank you for doing enough of your part that God, in his grace, was able to do “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph 3:20 NKJV). May the Lord see fit to use the writings contained herein in a similar manner.

This special issue is organized into two main parts. First, we have seven featured articles. These articles span New Testament studies (Bock and Copan), systematic theology (Issler), the history of Christian spirituality (Looker), and philosophy (Preston and Ten Elshof). The final article (Porter) offers an analytical retrospective of Willard’s five main monographs in spiritual formation. These articles are followed by three reflection essays (Moon, Hull, and Meyer). Since Dallas’ influence comes not only through his writings but often through his embodied life and personal presence, it seemed important to select three essays which discussed Dallas’ personal impact.

By God’s grace, we hope you benefit from this special issue.

Gary W. Moon and Steve L. Porter
Special Issue Editors
Embracing Jesus in a First Century Context: What Can It Teach Us about Spiritual Commitment?

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Abstract. It is appropriate to open an essay in honor of someone by commemorating that person. When I think of Dallas Willard I think of someone who has not been afraid to point to Jesus and spiritual commitment in an age when most people are committed to themselves. Dallas has been very clear in all of his writings that knowing Jesus is not a hobby, a business transaction one makes and forgets, nor an add-on to life; it is an entry into a journey God is to direct in the context of the uniqueness of His person and the enablement of His rule and presence. The Father leads, Jesus mediates and exemplifies, and the Spirit enables. This commitment to Jesus is the goal of this article. It deals with unique claims about Jesus within the Second Temple Judaism of the first century, as well as looking at what religious life was like in the first century Greco-Roman world. Such background might seem distant in a journal on spiritual formation, but let me warn you that is not the case. To understand the world in which “decisions” for Jesus were made is to appreciate what it took to receive Jesus and begin the journey with Him. The study hopes to show that Willard’s emphasis that genuine faith in Jesus is life-changing came with the first century territory. I proceed in three parts: the Jewish context, the Greco-Roman context, and then the application.

The Jewish Context

Those who study Jesus know that he emphasized the coming of the kingdom of God, the reestablishment of a rule among His people lost by Adam and sought for in Israel. The failure of this rule to gain a consistent response among God’s people led to the promise of the prophets that one day God would do a work in the hearts of people. Whether this was called the New Covenant (as in Jeremiah), the Eternal Covenant (as in Isaiah), or simply described (as in Ezekiel), the point was that God would cleanse His people and bring them enablement from within so His rule could now be
visible. This inner reading of the Law stands at the core of Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus measures integrity not by the Law’s letter but by the heart. This is a text Dallas Willard developed so well in his key work, The Divine Conspiracy. So murder is not the issue, anger is. Adultery is not the issue, lust is. Divorce is not the issue, a commitment before God and His design are. The presence of an oath is not the point, having your word be true is. An eye for an eye in revenge is not the point, but vulnerability in the seeking to serve peace is. Hating your enemy is not the call, loving your enemy is. In all of this Jesus pushes for human responses that are hardly instinctive, as He argues that disciples are to have a living standard greater than the world.

The pursuit of morality is not what made Jesus controversial. Jesus teaching that we should do unto others what we wish would be done to us was not a new idea. The “golden rule,” a name that became attached to this teaching centuries later is actually echoed in many ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish teachers. His offering of the kingdom in itself was not offensive. It was quite Jewish, even if Jesus’ articulation and model of that rule lacked the coercive political power Jews had hoped would come with the new era.

What made Jesus controversial in a Jewish context were his claims of authority. He said the Son of man had authority to forgive sin (Mk 2:1–12). He called himself Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28). He showed his authority in the temple precincts (Mk 11:15–19). He ruled the wind and the waves (Mk 4:35–41). He changed liturgy to refer not to Passover but Himself (Mk 14:22–25). He did not teach like the rabbis. He claimed God would vindicate Him and give Him a seat at the right hand of God (Mk 14:61–62). These are not the claims of a mere prophet. There is more to Jesus’ teaching than heralding the promise of God. In proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus also showed himself to be the one who had the authority to bring in the promise. This is why Peter’s declaration of Jesus as Messiah and not prophet is a key turning point in the story in the synoptic gospels (Mk 8:26–30). Jesus was central to what God was doing, so central that one could not talk about God’s program without mentioning Jesus’ role in it.

This feature is what made Jesus’ ministry so maddening to many, more traditional Jews. They were focused monotheists reacting to a polytheistic world that surrounded them. To be faithful Jews meant living in a peculiar way, following His Law and its practices out of faithfulness and devotion to the One God and His covenant. This included distinctive and unusual practices in the ancient world like circumcision, Sabbath, dietary practices, and issues associated with purity, as well as limiting worship of God to only one temple. Jews focused on the one God, a stumbling block to Greeks and Romans who acknowledged multiple gods.

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When Jesus presented and enacted His authority in the midst of declaring the kingdom and performed acts that pointed to divine prerogative, this caused many Jews to step back. Actions, like forgiving sin or ruling over the Sabbath as if He had written the commandment, caused offense. By the time we get to the early church, Paul is indicating to us that Jesus and God are part of the same confession of the one God! Nothing says this as clearly as 1 Corinthians 8:4–6 or the hymn in Philippians 2.2

In the Corinthian text, Paul alters the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4. He takes the confession that Israel is to hear and live in the light of understanding that God is One and is Lord and splits those titles, so that God the Father causes the creation and Jesus mediates it. Both the Father and the Son are creators, another divine prerogative.

I will lay out the Greek text so the point is clear.

> Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὗ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων,
> οἴδαμεν
> ὅτι συνέχει εἰδωλὼν ἐν κόσμῳ
> καὶ ὅτι συνεχεῖ θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἶ.
> καὶ γὰρ εἶπεν εἰσίν λεγόμενοι θεοὶ
> ἐίτε ἐν οὐρανῷ εἶτε ἐπὶ γῆς.
> ὃσπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοί καὶ κύριοι πολλοί,
> ἀλλὰ ἡμῖν
> εἰς θεὸς ὁ πατήρ
> ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν,
> καὶ εἰς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
> δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι’ αὐτοῦ.

> “Now concerning meat offered to idols,
> We know
> That there is no idol in the world
> and there is no God but one.
> For since there are many so-called gods
> Whether in heaven or on earth
> Just as there are many gods and lords,
> But to us,
> [there is] one God the Father
> from whom are all things and we are for him.
> And one Lord Jesus Christ
> Through whom are all things and we are through him.”

There is no doubt Paul alludes to ideas tied to the *Shema* here. The idea that there is one God is distinctive to Judaism in this time. This belief stands in contrast to the many gods of the Greco-Roman world. Yet in this confession of the one God, there is the confession of the Father and Jesus Christ in

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2 Translations are the author’s.
the same breath. More importantly, Jesus Christ is tied to the creation as creator, not as creature. What is more, in the LXX, the statement in Deut. 6:4 about the one God used the title Lord to describe God. That text reads, “‘Ακούε, Ἰσραήλ, κύριος ὁ θεός ἡμῶν κύριος εἰς ἔστιν.’ (“Hear, Israel, The lord our God is one Lord.”) This title Paul has split to bring in Jesus Christ. Paul is not adding Jesus to a statement about God as a separate figure. That would be ditheism, something Deuteronomy 6 denies. This is what Richard Bauckham rightfully has called “Paul’s Christology of Divine Identity.”3 Be-
lievers in God’s promise through Jesus worship one God, but that God and Lord as Creator entails Father and Jesus Christ. As Bauckham says, “The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to un-
derstand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God af-

In Philippians 2:6–11, the hymn ends with a declaration that every knee shall bow and every tongue in creation will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God. Such worship was reserved in the old era for Israel’s God. Even more the language used of Jesus comes from Isaiah 45:23. This Isaianic text comes from a context in which it is the one God of Israel who is set forth as the only true God. This text from Isaiah is one of the clearest declarations of God’s uniqueness and sovereignty in the Hebrew Bible. God declares that allegiance will one day be uniquely His. There is no other God, nor is there any other savior or judge. The indication of this divine position is the fact that one day everyone will acknowledge this. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that God is the Lord and a powerful deliverer. The name given above every name is that which affirms the sover-
eignty of the Creator God over those whom He rules. There is no other place to go. There is no other one to whom to turn. One day all creation will know and affirm this. That is Isaiah’s teaching.

Now Paul was a rabbi. He surely knows this background as he cites this hymn about Jesus with its intentional allusion to Isaiah 45. In the hymn, the bowing of the knee and the confessing of the tongue include giving such honor to the Lord Jesus. His work of emptying and death is so in conjunction with the Father, and so rooted in a heavenly origin, that the honor due the God of Israel will come to be given to the one through whom God worked. We see that substituting Jesus in the place of the God of Israel is kosher, justified by the calling and activity of Jesus at God’s behest. Note how the hymn makes it clear that God is the one gifting Jesus with this name and role. Jesus does not act, nor does he claim to act, independently of the Father. But they are like a double helix in a piece of DNA, a package deal, operating as an inseparable team to deliver and save with a mighty

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3 Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2008), 212.
4 Bauckham, Jesus and the One God, 213. He goes on to say Jesus is the Lord whom the Shema affirms to be one.
hand stretched out, ironically, through the death of a frail human who once had been in the presence of God and who afterward was vindicated back to that original position. To see and speak of one is inevitably to speak of and see the other. So the hymn of Philippians 2 summarizes a core confession of who the saving Jesus is.

It is these kinds of understandings that stand behind what it means to acknowledge Jesus as God’s promised one. Understanding and trusting Jesus began with how Jesus presented his role in the kingdom in His ministry and extended to the response of worship in the early church for all He had done. To believe in Him was not only to acknowledge His work; it was entry into a spiritual walk of faith that appreciated who had done the saving. Spiritual commitment and relationship to God was the product of such faith, something God solidifies by giving His Spirit to seal that identity. The key role of the Spirit is something Romans 6–8 makes clear.

So what is the significance of this Jewish background? It means that to embrace Jesus and His message was to distinguish yourself from Jews who did not see Jesus as sent from God and vindicated by Him so that Jesus sat at God’s right hand. This view of kingdom and kingship, as Jesus taught, divided families and led to believers being persecuted. The earliest persecutions were led by Jews, such as Saul, who saw the early Jesus followers as people who had made too much of Jesus and not enough of Israel’s God.

My point is simply that to “come to Jesus” in the first century was to come to Him in terms of who He said He was as he performed His work on behalf of God. It was to see Jesus as God’s promised One who stood at the center of the arrival of God’s deliverance. It also was to declare as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection that one knew not only that Jesus was alive but that he was seated with God at His right hand, sharing in the divine work as an equal to God.

This appreciation of a living, exalted Jesus is clear from Peter’s speech about the saving Lord and Christ in Acts 2, no matter how one reads the rest of the speech. Peter in Acts 2:32–36 says it this way,

This Jesus God raised, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore, exalted to the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he has poured out what you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” [Psalm 110:1] Therefore let all the house of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified.

Salvation now comes through Jesus. The Father works His promise through the One seated with Him. The Father delivers the Spirit through the One at His right hand. In all of this, the uniqueness of Jesus is embraced. To many Jews used to God possessing unique glory, such a position for Jesus spoke volumes and challenged much about their common belief.
My point is simple. Someone responding to Peter’s portrait of the Jesus who delivers embraces a model of kingdom rule that altered how one saw God, even the God of Israel. Such a decision, if we are to use that term, meant a shift of worldviews and led to the charge that followers of Jesus had distorted the Law (Lk 23:2–3). This charge came from leading Jews who could not embrace Jesus’ claims of divine prerogative authority nor the idea that a plurality existed within God. In sum, to come to Jesus in a Jewish context was to embrace the fact that God had exalted Him and enabled Jesus to become the beneficiary for those who called out in the name of Jesus Christ and received baptism through this name and authority. In Acts 2, we no longer call out to the God of Israel alone, but rather by getting baptized in Jesus Christ’s name we understand that God works God’s promise inseparably through Jesus as God distributes the gift of the Spirit through the now exalted One. In sum, to believe in Jesus was to believe in this act and what it entailed. Salvation was not merely a transaction; it was a belief that embraced this portrait of Jesus. This saving faith set the stage for the walk of discipleship and commitment to follow out of gratitude for what God had done by His grace.

The Greco-Roman Context

The issue in the Greco-Roman context for someone considering Jesus was completely different. Here the issue was not the exclusivity of God, but a life lived in the context of a pantheon of gods. Whether one thought of the “Big Twelve” Olympian gods led by Zeus (to the Greeks) and Jupiter (to the Romans) or a plethora of lesser deities, the Greco-Roman world lived in a highly religious context where gods were everywhere and so were the temples honoring them. For example, if one goes to Pompeii today and walks through the Forum area which was frozen in time by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, one will see on the program that four temples are found to surround this central locale of the city. In that forum one finds temples to Vespasian (the emperor), the public lares, Jupiter, and Apollo. The temple of Jupiter stands at the head of the forum. Behind it loomed not too far in the distance Mount Vesuvius (see Picture 1). If one walks further away, even a temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis can be found in Pompeii. A house dedicated to a mystery religion also could be found down the street. The ancient world was not like the secular West. The creation was seen as alive

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3 The twelve tied to Mount Olympus were Zeus/ Jupiter, Hera/Juno, Poseidon/Neptune, Athena/Minerva, Apollo, Artemis/Diana, Aphrodite/Venus, Hermes/Mercury, Hephaistos/Vulcan, Ares/Mars, Demeter/Ceres, and Dionysius/Bacchus. The first name in the pairing is the Greek name, while the second is the Roman name for the god. Lesser gods included figures like Pan and the satyrs, not to mention the great emperors whom the culture deified.
and animated with gods and spirits. In the Greco-Roman view, it was best to keep as many of these gods happy as possible. Religion in this world was not about doctrine but about bargaining, honoring the gods so they would not become displeased with you. Each god had his realm and the need was to be sure as many of them were honored as was possible. Sacrifices were offered in a spirit of what in Latin was called *do et dies* (“I give so you might give”). The attitude was that one should conduct rites before the gods carefully and with respect lest they be offended and act against you. A rite undertaken in a wrong way was to be repeated.

But there is more. These gods were not only related to individuals, they were seen as paying attention to affairs of state. So there were civic cults as well, designed to make sure the gods were honored and the state was protected. Generals did not go to war without offering sacrifices and checking portents in order to be sure the gods favored their cause. Livy (56 BC–AD 17) in his *History* 19.10–14 tells of the story about how the goddess Cybele/Attis was brought from what is Modern Turkey to Rome in 204 BC because hail and other portents of evil had led the city to look for an answer to reverse the sequence of disasters. He notes, “So they began seriously to consider the best means of transferring the image of the goddess to Rome, in order to enjoy as soon as possible the victory which so many omens and oracles portended—from Delphi, from the Sybilline books, and from the in-
explicable confidence of Scipio." Her arrival into Rome led to a citywide celebration. The religious calendar, known as the *Fasti*, noted the observance of some 150 religious holidays for the public. That is a religious holiday every three days! The expectation was that faithful citizens would show their respect to the gods on these days. The fate of the city was seen to be associated with participation.

Beyond this there were family gods, known as lars (see picture 2 for a lar). These little idols occupied a niche in the house that served very much like a family altar. These niches either were carved out in the wall or were wooden cupboards hung there. One can see these niches preserved in Pompeii as well (See picture 3 for a niche). This part of a house formed a little house chapel, sometimes called the *aedicule*. Every day sacrifices of grain or other simple offerings were made to be sure the gods were honored. Plautus (254–184 BC) in *Aulularia* 1–25 describes the role of the household God in one of his plays as follows,
THE HOUSEHOLD GOD [emerging from Euclius’ house]: So that no one may wonder who I am, I will put it briefly: I am the *Lar familiaris* of the house out of which you see me come. I have possessed and watched over this house for years now, already for the father and grandfather of the man who lives in it now . . . He [i.e. the present owner] has only one daughter. She sacrifices incense or wine to me every day, or prays in some way to me again and again, decorating me with garlands.

In the *Fasti*, a work about the annual calendar, Ovid (43 BC–c AD 17) describes one ancient practice and its rationale, “In older days it was the custom to sit on long benches before the hearth, and it was believed that the gods were present at the meal . . . Even into our own days, a trace of this old custom has survived: a clean vessel bears the food that is sacrificed to Vesta.” (6.305–310). A text describing a private cult in Philadelphia in the first century BC notes in lines 12–15 an oath made to the gods about various aspects of one’s behavior.⁶

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Life in the Greco-Roman world was saturated with religious belief and practice. One could not escape it. Observance and the gods were everywhere. With it was bound up a sense of loyalty to one's state and so to one's neighbor. Religion involving the gods was not a private affair, but a corporate act of identity.

I teach a class at Dallas on Greco-Roman backgrounds and when we finish covering Greco-Roman religion I have a discussion class on what they have learned and how it impacts how they read the Scripture. In that discussion the reactions are consistent. “I had no idea how pervasive religion was then.” Another will say, “I thought only the Jews had involved religious ritual to make vivid their relationship to God.” Still another common response is, “I had no idea that the gods were tied up in the religion of the state to the degree they were.” They are describing the impact of seeing and sensing from the photos we view in class and the ancient texts we read during the semester how religion in the first century was not a tagalong enterprise. It impacted every area of life daily.

So what does this mean for the Greek, Roman, or other non-Jews who began to consider Jesus? It meant to confess the one God and Jesus entailed leaving all of this other practice behind. It was to opt out of all the social activity that involved the gods. That included leaving activity at the religious temple, in public civic rites, at home before the lars, and including associations with ancestors that were tied to some of the gods of the home. It led to Christians burning their magic books in Ephesus (Acts 19), as well as outsiders calling them “atheists” since they no longer believed in the gods of their neighbors. It meant Paul taught that even though in one sense Christians knew idols were nothing, one should not go to the temple and participate there (1 Cor 8–10). It involved a confessed break and a comprehensive social separation from their former religious practices. Once again the mere decision to embrace Jesus and His work as unique meant that one made more than an instant act or a momentary decision.

This act of faith involved a statement about the divine. It affirmed the singularity of believing in the One Creator God and the One Judge He had appointed. Both Peter and Paul say as much in Acts 10 and 17 respectively. Peter in Acts 10:42–43 says, “He [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to warn them that this is the one [Jesus] appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. About this one all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.” Note once again how saving authority comes through the Name of this exalted One Jesus. Paul in Acts 17:30b–31 declares, “He [God] now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day on which He is going to judge the inhabited world in righteousness, by a man whom He designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising Him from the dead.” My point is that to believe in Jesus in this context was to “turn from idols to the true God” (1 Thes 1:9–10). This turning was a social act that not only identified with what God had done through Jesus, but also that one had broken all their former divine relationships. One did not
make this move lightly. A decision for Jesus in the first century came with huge ramifications. In a real sense, it was to embrace a reorientation in one’s life and walk a new path in rebirth.

Application

As a New Testament scholar and believer, I often hear debates today about whether one is to come to faith and believe that Jesus is Lord or Savior. This bifurcation was not distinguished in the New Testament texts I read about faith in coming to God’s grace in Jesus. Even more, the context of this confession shows that such a bifurcation was almost culturally impossible for the first century. So this look at the larger context of the first century is instructive, no matter which culture is in view, Jewish or Greco-Roman. You can take your pick. Either way the act of believing in Jesus meant leaving an older way of thinking about God. This faith had Jesus firmly entrenched as the One at God’s right hand through whom salvation, judgment and even worship came. It was because Jesus is Lord, and exalted by God to show it, that salvation can be preached in His name and faith in Him launches forgiveness and a new life—what the New Testament intentionally calls rebirth. The New Testament never intends us to separate forgiveness from new life. Rather forgiveness leads into new life. God and His grace lead to spiritual commitment in a response of faith. I cannot get there myself. Jesus must give me the forgiveness I so desperately need. He also must enable me by His Spirit to walk the walk. New life is not only about obtaining forgiveness; it is about entering into God’s presence as His enabled child. In fact that entry into new life is the core of the gospel.

So Ephesians 2:8–10, teaches us not only that salvation is by grace through faith, as vv 8–9 teach, but that salvation teaches that we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that God designed that we might walk in them. The point in this passage is that God saved us so we would live differently in the experience of His grace. It was part of the divine design for transformation. In fact, Titus 2:11–14 says it most clearly,

For the grace of God bringing salvation to all people has appeared. It [i.e., that grace] trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, righteous, and godly lives in the present age, as we wait for the happy completion of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for

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7 I have detailed this emphasis on forgiveness and new life in defining the gospel in Rediscovering the Real Lost Gospel: Rediscovering the Gospel as Good News (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010). This book is a biblical theology of the gospel, showing how transformed life is at the gospel’s core.
us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good.

The points of Jesus’ death were to (1) offer himself for sin and (2) to purify a people to Himself who desire to honor God. God’s grace gives the enablement that makes this transformation possible. Faith believes God for it.

This hope in the gospel is what Paul called in Romans 1:16–17, “the power of God unto salvation.” The gospel is about more than salvation; it is about enablement. This power is the reason Paul said he was not ashamed of the gospel. That power is the enablement to be and live like a child of God. God gives that power through the Son in the Spirit. Jesus discussed the sending of the Spirit in the Upper Room (Jn 14–16). Peter preached about this gift of the Spirit in Acts 2. Paul summarized this enablement as the core of his gospel in Romans. In Romans 4:16–5:5, what did Abraham believe? It was that God could bring life out of two old dead bodies. So in the gospel, God gives life to a spiritually dead body that he not only declares righteous, but also gives enabling life to through the Spirit. So the saving faith of Romans 4 leads into the story of the Spirit’s work in Romans 5–8 (see especially 5:5).

Salvation is about a new journey that does not wait on eternity. Rather, eternity comes to us. For when we know the Father and the Son He sent, we have eternal life, not merely a life of duration, but a life rooted in and sent from eternity, a life of quality. Dallas Willard has spent his life writing about this life of quality in his many works urging us to the spiritual commitment that stands at the core of believing in Jesus. May we walk in that newness of life enabled in our commitment by the very Spirit God, by His grace, gave us through Jesus Christ.

In sum, may we believe God for His grace and receive the power to be who He made us to be. For faith is not a decision of a moment, but an abiding virtue turning to God for a transforming life.

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Spiritual Formation and St. Paul as Spiritual Director: Determining the Primary Aims.

Victor Copan
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Abstract. Dallas Willard makes the claim that spiritual formation “refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹ Can this claim be substantiated and stand up to close scrutiny, or is Dallas Willard selecting an idea of his own fancy and making this the cornerstone of his understanding of spiritual formation? How can this claim be tested and anchored?

In this article we will seek to answer these questions by looking at the Apostle Paul in his function as spiritual director. Although it is patently anachronistic to speak of Paul as spiritual director, can we legitimately understand him in this role? We will propose a generative understanding of spiritual direction and then proceed to examine the Apostle Paul and his aims based on that generative understanding. We will also argue that at the core of Paul’s functioning as a spiritual director lies a strong appeal to examine and imitate his life and character and to follow his ways. This appeal by Paul for others to imitate him is anchored in Paul’s own imitation of Christ himself. Paul’s call to imitation thus provides a window into discovering how Paul understood his role as spiritual director and also provides us the means to discern his goals in spiritual direction.

The Impact of Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard’s writings have had a profound effect on my life in two ways. First, they helped me overcome personal and spiritual blockages in my life that had plagued and debilitated me for years. Second, and as a result, it shaped in part my choice of dissertation topic. My copy of the book, Renovation of the Heart, has been underlined, highlighted, and marked

up—with notes, questions, and comments lining many of the pages of this book. Over the past six years, I have introduced scores of students to this book in my classes on spiritual formation. It has been gratifying to see the lights come on and students begin to grasp and apply the concepts of spiritual formation laid out in the book. It is with deep gratitude that I offer this article as a contribution to this special issue.

**INTRODUCTION**

This article seeks to accomplish four things. First, it explores certain challenges regarding defining spiritual direction and proposes a resolution to it. Second, it argues that the power and effectiveness of Paul’s functioning as spiritual director was rooted in his personal *ethos*—the power of an authentic, integrated life that was exclusively christocentrically oriented—and it is this that he called others to imitate. Third, it presents Paul’s call to imitation as a window into discovering how Paul understood his role as spiritual director, thereby allowing us to discern Paul’s goals in spiritual direction. Finally, implications of this study are drawn out for the practice of spiritual direction today.

The subtext of this article, however, has to do with Dallas Willard’s claim that spiritual formation “refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”\(^2\) This claim of Dallas Willard’s is not so much argued as it is asserted in *Renovation of the Heart*. This article seeks to substantiate, corroborate, and confirm this claim and to place it on a methodologically solid footing.

1) **Challenges regarding Defining Spiritual Direction**

The well documented explosion of interest in spiritual direction has resulted in two developments.\(^3\) First, it has led to an inflation of competing terminology surrounding the concept of spiritual direction. In a review of the literature, the following terms are used as rough, imprecise synonyms with overlapping meaning: “spiritual guide,” “spiritual friend,” “spiritual


\(^3\) “If publishers’ lists are anything to go by, spiritual direction is a fashionable growth industry” [Gordon Jeff, *Spiritual Direction for Every Christian* (London: SPCK, 1987), 1]. Numerous books published since then note this upsurge in interest. For a substantial listing, see chapter one in Victor Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director: An Analysis of the Imitation of Paul with Implications and Applications to the Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).
companion,” “soul friend,” “discipler,” and “spiritual mentor.” An example of such imprecision is found in the foreword of Timothy Jones’s delightful and helpful little book, Mentor and Friend:

great spiritual directors are ones who understand that, as their disciples progress and mature, the teacher-learner relationship will evolve. . . . [The] best phrase is ‘mutual mentoring.’ It is the proverbial “iron sharpening iron” principle . . . by which both director and directee become indistinguishable in their needs.4

This needs some critique. Throughout Jones’s book, all the terms noted above are used interchangeably with virtually no differentiation in meaning. This leaves the understanding of spiritual direction rather vague and amorphous.

The second development is that this explosion of interest has led to a broad spectrum of competing (and sometimes contradictory) understandings of the nature and purpose of spiritual direction. For example, Gordon Jeff understands spiritual direction simply and directly as “two people sitting down together in an attitude of prayer to try to discern where the Holy Spirit is directing.”5 This understanding limits spiritual direction to an individualized, privatized undertaking, overlooking the communal and social dimension of the spiritual life.

John Yungblut, in contrast, understands a spiritual director as

being an instrument by which the divine course can find its way in this other solitary individual so that the crucial inward journey of this child of God may become creatively aligned with the immense journey of evolution itself, moving through the human species to the unknown ultimate destination of fully raised consciousness. We do not and cannot see the distant scene. One step is enough for us: a step in the direction of Christ-consciousness, individuation, wholeness.6

With startling dogmatism, Yungblut weds his understanding of spiritual direction to Carl Jung’s myth of the psyche and to Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of evolution. Yungblut apparently owes most of his thought regarding the soul and its development less to the Christian tradition and more to evolutionary science and Jungian psychology.

Beside the challenges mentioned above, three additional challenges confront the person in the study of Christian spiritual direction: (1) wide variance in the understanding of the practice of spiritual direction within the literature of the past twenty years; (2) no agreed upon methodological controls to determine the validity of a model of a spiritual direction that is

5 Jeff, Spiritual Direction, 10.
truly Christian in nature; and (3) the more fundamental problem of the term “spiritual direction” not being anchored in Scripture. Because “spiritual direction” is not in Scripture, there is thus no universally agreed upon basis from which the study of spiritual direction can proceed. The field is thus prone toward the subjective predilections of each practitioner and results in “everyone doing that which is right in their own eyes.”

2) Escaping the Definitional Quagmire: Generative Questions

Is there a way to deal with this set of challenges? The strategy I suggest is to pose specific generative questions to biblical texts, which can (1) avoid imposing illegitimate categories on the text, (2) give us a “lens” by which to gain an understanding of how Paul functioned as a spiritual director and what his goals were, and thereby (3) make possible comparison, contrast, analysis—and also critique—of modern conceptions of spiritual direction.

A) Generative Questions, Set I: Exploring the Relationship Between Paul and Recipients

Below is an initial catalogue of generative questions specifically applied to the nature of the relationship between the Apostle Paul and those to whom he ministered (for our purposes, the recipients of his letters). These questions provide transparent criteria, which would facilitate the legitimate comparison and contrast between the Pauline model of spiritual direction and other models.

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Although these generative questions provide a solid base to compare Pauline spiritual direction with other models, something critical is still missing: the spiritual director as person along with his motivation, convictions, and aims/goals show up only marginally in this list of questions.

B) Missing Components in Spiritual Direction: The Person and Ethos of the Spiritual Director

In reading through the letters of the Apostle Paul, one is struck by his relatively frequent and bold appeal to examine his life and character, and to follow his ways. It seems this was one of his key strategies for the development of the spiritual maturity of members of the communities he founded.

Yet, curiously, when one reads the contemporary literature on spiritual direction, there are virtually no references to this notion of imitation or patterning oneself after another. Parallel to this, one factor that does not receive adequate discussion in the literature is the impact that the total shape of the director’s life has on the directee—that is, his or her personal life and praxis, work/ministry, emotional, intellectual life, and (of primary significance) the shape of his or her godward-directed life. In contemporary literature on spiritual formation, technique is at the forefront of the discussions on spiritual direction, whereas the life of the director is given short shrift.

After considerable analysis, it is my contention that the total shape of the life of the director is a fundamental factor—if not the key factor—in the effectiveness of spiritual direction. In other words, effectiveness in spiritual direction is not to be found primarily in technique, but in the character and lifestyle of the one providing direction.

This observation builds on what classical rhetoricians called ethos, a term used to describe the impact that the totality of the speaker’s life has on the audience even before he opens his mouth. Ethos, in its written variation, is an author’s appeal to his own moral character and other aspects of his life.

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7 1 Thess 1:5–7, 1 Cor 4:16, 1 Cor 11:1, Phil 3:17, and Phil 4:9. (All Scripture quotations are taken from the NRS unless otherwise noted.)
8 See the documentation for this in Saint Paul as Spiritual Director.
9 Part of the reason for this surely comes from the contemporary and post-modern turn that eschews all apparent claims to authority. Whereas Evangelicals consider Paul’s appeal to imitation as benign, Elizabeth Castelli argues the opposite: “Paul’s discourse of mimesis uses rhetoric to rationalize and shore up a particular set of social relations or power relations within the early Christian movement. His use of the notion of mimesis, with all of its nuances, reinforces both Paul’s own privileged position and the power relations of the early Christian communities as somehow ‘natural’.” [Elizabeth A. Castelli, Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1991), 116]. See my critique of her work in chapter seven of Saint Paul as Spiritual Director.
10 This is a contention argued in some detail in St. Paul as Spiritual Director.
life, which enhance his credibility—whether this is a conscious rhetorical strategy or not. It is, as John Marshall writes,

the relationship built up within the speech between the rhetor and the auditor which induces the auditor to believe the person speaking. Such a relationship is built up by means of identification between the rhetor and auditor, through participation in the world that exists between them.\(^\text{11}\)

Aristotle’s discussion of ethos in *Rhetoric* is the first extant theoretical discussion of ethos as an artistic proof:

Now the proofs furnished by the speech are of three kinds. The first depends upon the moral character [\(\text{ethos}\)] of the speaker. . . . The orator persuades by moral character when the speech is delivered in such a manner as to render them worthy of confidence, for we feel confidence in a greater degree and more readily in persons of worth in regard to everything in general. . . . For it is not the case, as some writers of rhetorical treatises lay down in their “Art”, that the worth of the orator in no way contributes to the orator’s powers of persuasion; on the contrary, moral character, so to say, constitutes the most effective means of proof.\(^\text{12}\)

It is this factor of ethos with respect to the life of St. Paul that has special relevance for the practice of spiritual direction: The Apostle Paul sets himself up intentionally and boldly as a model for others. He functions as a model, a prototype, for the “directees”—the members of the churches he addressed in his letters. In Paul’s day, both in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world, the concept of imitation functioned as the basic pedagogical tool of all branches of education. It was the fundamental purpose of human imitation to improve the virtue, character, or specific skills of an individual through orienting himself on a “virtuous” model, or *exemplar*. Based on this exemplar, one could observe with all the senses how a virtuous person lived, and thereby have a pattern for one’s own life.

C) Generative Questions, Set 2: Person and Ethos of Paul

And so, to the previous generative questions regarding spiritual direction, it would be important to add the following that focus on the person and ethos of Paul:


\(^{12}\) Aristotle, “Rhetorica,” 5.76 (Freese, LCL). (Noted in Marshall, “Paul’s Ethical Appeal,” 358.)
Paul as individual. Analyzing texts for descriptions of how Paul characterizes his life.

**Ethos:** What is it about the person of Paul that evokes persuasion? What elements of his character are explicit in the text?

**Goals/Desires:** How does Paul express his desires for his own life? In what way? Is there a hierarchy of desires? What textual indications do we have for what motivated, inspired, and drove him on a personal level? How do these relate to one another (Hierarchy of goals? Co-equal? In tension)?

**Lifestyle:** What are the textual indications of how Paul lives his life? In which activities does Paul engage that leads him to achieve the desires he expresses? What things in Paul’s life should others imitate?

Now, it would be a massive undertaking to develop a full-scale study covering all of Paul’s life and writings using these two sets of generative questions. Our intention with this question catalogue is simply to indicate the lines along which a transparent and full comparison could be made between Paul as spiritual director and contemporary practitioners of spiritual direction. In this way, the presuppositions and methodology of both could be exposed and analyzed. In *St. Paul as Spiritual Director*, these questions guided our analysis of the Pauline imitation texts, the results of which are presented below. One further point, however, before we proceed to this.

**D) Establishing a Base-Line Understanding/Working Definition of Spiritual Direction**

This set of generative questions, however, need also to be grounded in a common, base-line understanding of spiritual direction that is sufficiently broad to encompass both what Paul and what contemporary spiritual directors are doing in their practice of spiritual direction. This definition would function as the means of comparison. Based on a review of the definitions that leading practitioners of spiritual direction have put forward, I would suggest the following working definition of spiritual direction:

Spiritual direction is the (variegated) means by which one person intentionally influences another person or persons in the development of his or her life as a Christian with the goal of developing his or her relationship to God and His purposes for that person in the world.13

13 I am aware that this working definition does not include Christlikeness as being the goal. This was done intentionally. This definition functions as a working baseline that would encompass an understanding of spiritual direction that all or most contemporary practitioners of spiritual direction would agree on and within which Paul’s understanding would also fit.
3) St. Paul, Imitation, and Spiritual Direction

Paul’s call for the churches he founded to imitate him is completely in line with the understanding and practice of imitation in the ancient Mediterranean world. In his person, Paul unites all the societal roles in which imitation was normally operative: as (fictive) parent, teacher, and leader. In his embodiment of these roles, Paul’s call to imitate him simply “went with the territory” those roles would have entailed.

I would argue that these five imitation passages provide us with a methodologically solid “porthole” through which we view Paul functioning as spiritual director. These texts give us access to Paul’s person, his motivations, his ultimate concerns, his goals, and the means by which he helped them attain those goals.

In *St. Paul as Spiritual Director*, these texts are examined in detail using the following question as a guide for exegesis and analysis, and the generative questions above are distilled down to three: (1) How does Paul present and describe himself in these contexts? (2) What specifically does Paul want the recipients to imitate, and (2) What do these imitation texts reveal to us about Paul that carries relevance for the practice of spiritual direction? In the remainder of this article, I will focus on distilling the results of this research.

This summary is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the self-designations Paul uses in these contexts. The second section analyzes the orientation and content (i.e., aims and goals) of Pauline imitation. The third section looks at the means and methods of imitation. The concluding section extracts the implications of these findings for the practice of spiritual direction today.

A) Paul as Model: Self-Designation and Description

With respect to his being a model, Paul presents himself with five self-designations (the first and last two pairs will be treated together).

1+2) *Without a self-designation, and the designation, “brother.”* In some of the imitation texts, Paul presents himself without a self-designation or with the designation, “brother.” With these self-designations, Paul intentionally emphasizes commonality with the recipients.14 This focus on commonality is also seen through Paul’s use of the term *adelphos* (brother). This term highlights and reinforces to the readers that there is, before God, no ultimate distinction between Paul and his recipients and no hierarchical

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understanding that places Paul over the recipients of his letters (1 Thess 1:1, 4; Phil 3:17; 4:8; 1 Cor 4:16).  

It is of more than passing interest and significance that Paul’s reference to imitation in 1 Thess 1:6 refers to the Thessalonian believers imitating not just Paul himself. Rather, Paul emphasizes that the Thessalonians became “imitators of us,” referring to Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (v. 1). This indicates that imitation is understood by Paul to be non-exclusive and that there is a corporate dimension to it. Although this corporate dimension is not the focus of this paper, it is significant to acknowledge this dimension of imitation.

(3) Spiritual father. Having said that, Paul also understands himself as a “spiritual father” to his “spiritual children” in 1 Cor 4:15–17. But, does this not stand in tension or contradiction to Paul presenting himself as “brother”? A more careful look at the context of 1 Cor 4 reveals that Paul is using this self-designation to emphasize the emotive bond between himself and the recipients. Context is critical here. In this passage, Paul deliberately sets up a contrast between the notion of paidagōgos (tutor), and pater (father). He clearly uses the term paidagōgos to emphasize an emotionally detached, uncaring, and disciplinarian relationship—which Paul clearly rejects. Instead, when Paul uses the designation pater, the context clearly indicates he is doing this to emphasize the relational bond of caring concern that a loving father has toward his children. This is expressed most clearly in verse 21, when Paul foregrounds his desires to come to them “with love, in a spirit of gentleness.”

(4+5) Servant and steward. The last two self-designations Paul uses in association with imitation are found in the 1 Cor 4:1, in which Paul presents himself “as servant of Christ and steward of God’s mysteries.” The terms hupeρetas (servant) and oikonomos (steward) are intended as a deliberate, rhetorically potent rejection of and contrast to the mind-set of the power and status conscious Corinthians (4:6). Paul’s sole focus is to be at the service of Christ, and he rejects all claim or appeal to status or power as means of persuasion.

It is noteworthy that Paul nowhere explicitly calls for imitation of himself with an appeal to his apostolic authority—or any other authority; in 1 Cor 4:15–17, the inherently authoritative dimension of his role as “spiritual father” is downplayed even as the nurturing, caring aspects are accentuated.

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15 See Andrew D. Clarke, Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 223, 51; Clarke, “Equality or Mutuality,” 152–64.

16 See v. 21. Note Andrew Clarke’s thorough discussion of the “Paul as Father,” where he counters claims of the term “father” as being a repressive claim to authority: Clarke, Serve the Community, 218–32.
B) Orientation and Content of Pauline Imitation (Aims and Goals of Imitation)

Toward what does Pauline imitation orient itself, and what is the specific content that is to be imitated? Both of these dimensions are inextricably intertwined for Paul. We are speaking here about the ultimate aims and goals Paul expresses for himself and his recipients.

i) Orientation of Imitation: Christ and the Gospel

In our analysis of these imitation texts, the pervasiveness of references to Christ and the gospel in every reference to imitation are striking. Without exception, all of Paul’s references to imitation of himself focus directly on and are oriented toward Christ and his gospel. It is clear that these function for Paul as the radiating center around which all of Paul’s life, thought, and ministry orbited.

It is explicitly at this point that Dallas Willard’s claim that Christian spiritual formation “refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” finds its methodological verification and substantiation. When Paul is his most autobiographical, his christocentric focus manifests itself with clarity and decisiveness. Similarly, Michael Gorman identifies “cruciformity” or “conformity to Christ” as the ultimate goal of Paul for himself and for his recipients.

One of the chief hallmarks . . . of Paul’s spirituality is this life of “mutual indwelling” between Christ and believers that results in conformity to Christ. . . . We may refer to this conformity to Christ crucified as cruciformity. . . . [T]his is not a onetime experience but an ongoing reality. It begins at the first moment of faith, expressed in baptism, and continues throughout life. Believers both die and rise with Christ in baptism (Rom 6:1–11); the paradox is that the new or “resurrection” life to which they rise is a life of ongoing “death”—ongoing conformity to the death of Jesus.

If this christocentric focus is neglected, marginalized, or if we displace this by positing some other center, it will distort not only Paul’s conception of imitation but will also skew the heart of Pauline theology as well.

Philippians 3:4–14 provides probably the most autobiographically revealing, as well as the most gripping and emotionally descriptive under-

17 Willard, Renovation, 22.

18 Michael J. Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 120–1 (author’s emphasis). This emphasis is further strengthened in Michael J. Gorman, Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
standing of Paul’s core motivation for his life and ministry. Here, the exclusive focus around which Paul orients his life and ministry is “knowing Christ” (3:7–9; cf. Phil 1:21), the meaning of which he unfolds in these verses. Paul holds experiential, holistic knowledge of and union with Christ to be the ultimate value and goal in life that leads Paul to reject those elements which society considers of value that are not in alignment with Christ and his gospel (3:3–6). Everything Paul does and thinks is controlled and informed by this way of knowing Christ, and it is for this reason that personal glory, prestige, and honor are considered valueless.

ii) Content of Imitation

When we turn to look at the content of Pauline imitation—what it was specifically that Paul wanted his recipients to imitate—we observe two general categories: “global/holistic imitation” and “imitation of christocentric virtues.”

(A) GLOBAL/HOLISTIC IMITATION

There are a number of references to Pauline imitation, which can be described as “global” or “holistic” imitation, two of which we will highlight here.19 “Global” or “holistic” imitation refers to the imitation of the totality of Paul’s life.

None of the English translations capture the rich nuances of the Greek in 1 Thess 1:5.20 An admittedly awkward translation that brings out some of the nuances is, “just as you know what kind of persons we were when we were with/among you.” The emphasis of this text as well as the bulk of 1 Thess 2 indicates that Paul and his companions embodied the truths, values, and lifestyle of the gospel they proclaimed to the Thessalonian believers in such a compelling way that they then imitated what they saw in Paul and his companions.

In Phil 4:9, imitation is presented as encompassing all that Paul did and said: “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me” (NRS).21 The global pronoun in v. 9, “the things” (ha), along with the four elements the Philippians obtained from Paul (“the things you learned... received... heard... saw”) indicates that the totality of Paul’s teaching and the way in which he embodied that teaching were to be objects of imitation: both in his formal teaching (first two verbs) and in the example of his life (last two verbs). Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are seen to go hand-in-hand for Paul, and imitation here encompasses both. No artificial distinction was made between Paul’s “public” and “private” life or between what he taught and how he lived.

19 1 Thess 1:6, 1 Cor 4:16–7, and Phil 4:9.
20 kathōs oĩdate hoioi egenethēmen [en] humin di’ humas.
21 Again, this would be understood through the orientation-point Paul mentioned earlier of “knowing Christ” (3:10).
(b) IMITATION OF PAULINE (CHRISTOCENTRIC) VIRTUES

In addition to the call to global imitation, Paul also indicates specific virtues that the recipients are to imitate. What is significant about these “Pauline virtues” in these imitation texts is that they are all exclusively oriented to Christ and the gospel and reflect a cruciform way of living. Paul does not, for example, simply call them to imitate his virtue of “humility” or “discipline.” Paul calls them to imitate the virtues of humility and discipline “that was also in Christ,” “because of Christ,” or “for the sake of the gospel.” Paul spends no time on theoretical discussions of virtues or ideals as universal abstractions. On the contrary, the virtues Paul references are to be understood with respect to their Christocentric nature.

In the Pauline imitation texts, there are three groupings of virtues that Paul called his recipients to imitate. This is not to imply that the items in this list are the only Pauline virtues that one could or should imitate. It is only to say that these are the ones Paul expressly mentions in connection with imitation. Other Pauline virtues can legitimately be extrapolated from his writings on the basis of his call to global/holistic imitation discussed above. Further, I would argue that the determinative factor for legitimately adding to this list—going beyond what Paul explicitly discusses in his writings—would be the anchoring of these additional virtues in the life of Christ and the nature of the gospel.

(i) 1 Cor 4:16. Willfully (a) rejecting the world’s definition of wisdom, strength, and honor; (b) accepting hardship; and (c) choosing humble, selfless service to God on behalf of others because of the message of the cross of Christ. Paul intentionally uses the images of a servant and a steward to emphasize not working for selfish goals, but volitionally placing oneself in the service of God. He discards the Corinthian society’s perspective of that which is considered wise, strong, and honorable in light of the “message of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18–31). His life is focused on preaching the message of the cross of Christ and living in line with the implications of that cross.

(ii) 1 Cor 11:1. (a) Disciplining oneself for the sake of the gospel; (b) avoidance of causing others to stumble in their relationship with God; (c) seeking the good of others; (d) giving up individual rights so the gospel is unhindered; (e) making oneself a “slave to everyone” in order to win them to Christ. This passage contains a perspective similar to 1 Cor 4:16: selfless service for the sake of the advance of the gospel. Pauline imitation is focused (negatively) on not wishing to cause anyone to falter in their relationship with God and (positively) on intentionally seeking the good of the many so that they may be ultimately saved. This entails willful surrender of legitimate rights and freedoms for the higher good of the advance of the gospel. Further, this entails becoming like or adapting to those to whom one ministers in order to “win them for the gospel.” All these elements are included in actively “disciplining oneself” for the sake of an eternal prize (9:27). The athletic imagery in this context—of going into rigorous conditioning in order to win a race—provides a general outlook and approach to life that characterizes Paul and should characterize his recipients.
(iii) Phil 3:16. (a) Singularly focusing, as would an athlete, on the surpassing value of knowing Christ to the exclusion of all other competing values; (b) humbly acknowledging imperfection; and (iii) relentlessly pursuing the future prize. This passage contains similar themes to the passages in 1 Corinthians: the gospel orientation and its surpassing value, the element of disciplining oneself for the sake of a higher goal and subordinating one’s own desires and values for the sake of others and the gospel. Pauline imitation is here oriented to the “surpassing value of knowing Christ,” which rejects all competing claims to that which is highest value. This orientation is described in terms of an intense pursuit of experientially knowing (a) Christ, (b) his resurrection power, and (c) the fellowship of his sufferings for the purpose of attaining the resurrection from the dead. This pursuit is undertaken, on the one hand, in humble acknowledgment of not yet having attained, and on the other hand, with the dogged determination of an athlete focusing all his powers on the ultimate prize (skopos). Thus, by very nature of this “athletic contest” in which Paul understands himself to be, there is an intentional orientation to the future prize and a letting-go of the past insofar as it hinders him in this “competition.”

4) Implications for Spiritual Direction

Paul’s call to imitation functions as a window that reveals how he interacted with his recipients and reveals the aims he himself pursued in life and, correspondingly, to which he called his recipients to pursue. These observations carry significant implications for the practice of spiritual direction today. Five implications stand out as particularly relevant.

A) Ethos trumps technique. First, ethos trumps technique when it comes to spiritual direction. The power of a life well-lived supersedes any methodology, and makes methodology of secondary importance. Who the spiritual director is becomes the primary message and vehicle of spiritual direction.

B) Personal presence as of primary importance. Second, and going hand-in-hand with the first point, Pauline spiritual direction sees personal presence as being of primary importance. The nature of what one does is less important than being with another—and opening up all of your life to them. It is through being with the spiritual director that the life and thought and action of the directee are shaped.

C) Relationship based on genuine love and concern. Third, the spiritual direction relationship needs to be understood as based on a relationship marked by deep and genuine love and concern. Sterile, clinical detachment and fear of transference needs to be replaced by self-giving love and concern. Adopting a “counselor-client relationship” marked by clinical professionalism is not the model that shines through in these texts. Loving engagement in the life of the other is the hallmark of effective spiritual direction.
D) Christocentric focus. Pauline spiritual direction is christocentrically oriented. Everything orbits around Christ. Everything in life points toward Christ.

This is a particularly critical anchor point for spiritual direction that calls into question many modern approaches to spiritual direction. Since Pauline spiritual direction was radically christocentrically oriented, I would argue that Paul would reject spiritual direction that has a narcissistic focus—even though this narcissism may come in a spiritual guise. What I am speaking of has strong parallels to Paul Vitz’s book, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship.* The primary aim of Pauline spiritual direction, in fact, does not have inner harmony, and mystical experiences, and a sense of oneness with God as the ultimate goal. Much of what is going on in modern spiritual direction is, seems, in fact, to be a subtle form of spiritual narcissism that speaks of God, yet does not have as its aim the development of a cruciform life.

Yes, prayer is vital. Yes, inner harmony is laudable. Yes, there is certainly nothing inherently wrong with exploring ways to experience God. But if the primary goal and focus on orienting our lives toward Christ is supplanted by desires for spiritual experience for ego-purposes, then that type of spiritual direction would receive a negative critique from Paul.

E) Developing Christocentric virtues. Pauline spiritual direction focuses on the development of christocentric virtues—virtues that Christ himself embodied. The comments in the previous point are relevant here. Pauline spiritual direction focuses on conforming our lives to Christ in every aspect of our being and developing those virtues that are embodied in Christ. This may mean that direct confrontation may be in order in spiritual direction. Pauline spiritual direction is not afraid to call a spade, a spade: where thoughts, ideas, values, and lifestyle are not conforming to Christ, these need to be challenged and confronted.

F) Acknowledging the corporate dimension of Spiritual Formation. Finally, the observation that Paul’s practice of imitation was not bound exclusively to himself but incorporated other exemplars indicates a corporate dimension to the practice of imitation. In light of that, it follows that spiritual direction is not something that is to be narrowly conceived as taking place exclusively between two individuals, in a privatized and individualized way. There is a corporate dimension that must be acknowledged and incorporated into the practice of spiritual direction.

These then, I would suggest, are some of the key implications for the practice of spiritual direction today based on a careful analysis of Pauline imitation texts. These implications provide the biblically anchored contours

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23 As Paul would say, “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).
for spiritual direction that help others take on “the inner being of Christ himself.”

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Learning from Jesus to Live in the Manner Jesus Would If He Were I: Biblical Grounding for Willard’s Proposal Regarding Jesus’ Humanity

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Abstract. “How would Jesus live your life, with your personality, with your talents, with your life experiences, within your life context, if he were you?” is a question posed by Dallas Willard in The Divine Conspiracy. How is it possible for Jesus Christ, Second Person of the Trinity, to know about living a really human life with all of its heartache and struggles? The article presents the biblical teaching for Jesus’ authentic human experience, that Jesus is our genuine example and is the unique one who can show us the way into Kingdom living. After addressing concerns that have been raised about emphasizing the example of Jesus, the NT data affirming Jesus’ authentic human experience are presented, along with some potential objections. The main claim defended: Jesus lived normally within his own human power, relying predominantly on the divine resources of the Father and the Holy Spirit, while using his own divine power infrequently. The article concludes with a few implications for practice, living within our personal human condition as Jesus did, and living beyond our human limitations as Jesus did.

The invitation for each of Jesus’ apprentices, according to Dallas Willard, is “learning from Jesus to live my life as if he would live my life if he were I.” But how is that possible since Jesus is God? Can Jesus really know what it is like to live as a human? Did Jesus genuinely struggle against the challenges of life just like us? Or, in Jesus’ common life with us, did Jesus have access to a power unique to him and unavailable to believers today? The article responds negatively to this last question and presents the biblical teaching for Jesus’ authentic human experience, that Jesus is our genuine example for how to live the Christian life. Willard clarifies, “I am

not necessarily learning to do everything [Jesus] did, but I am learning how
to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did. . . . My dis-
cipleship to Jesus is, within clearly definable limits, not a matter of what I
do, but of how I do it.”2

The main point of the article is to provide the specific biblical basis
supporting this claim by Willard. At a few points in the article, more partic-
ular comments by Willard will be included where relevant to the discussion.
After addressing concerns that have been raised about emphasizing the ex-
ample of Jesus, I clarify the importance of Jesus’ humanity and then present
the NT data affirming Jesus’ authentic human experience. The article con-
cludes with some practical implications. Willard asserts, “Concretely, we
intend to live in the kingdom of God by intending to obey the precise ex-
ample and teachings of Jesus.”3

The Importance of the Humanity of Jesus

At a general level it is difficult to deny Jesus’ humanity at the obvious
points: he was embodied (e.g., he was thirsty, Mt 25:35, hungry, Mt 4:2,
weary, Jn 4:6, and he died, Jn 19:30–34).4 He experienced a full range of
emotions (e.g., weeping, Lk 19:41; compassion, Mk 6:34; righteous anger,
Mk 3:5; frustration, Mt 17:17; being troubled in spirit, Mt 26:37). Many
who encountered him, especially the religious leaders, regarded Jesus as
nothing more than human, not as some kind of alien or superhero from
outer space. To paraphrase the Nazareth folk with whom he grew up, “It’s
just Jesus, no one special” (Mk 6:3). Furthermore, Jesus was tempted (Mt
4: 1–11)—a characteristic which Scripture denies of God (Jas 1:13)—yet
without sinning (Heb 4:15).

Orthodoxy affirms that Jesus’ humanity was a critical factor for our
salvation. Millard Erickson notes, “If, however, Jesus was not really one of
us, humanity has not been united with deity, and we cannot be saved. For
the validity of the work accomplished in Christ’s death, or at least its appli-
cability to us as human beings, depends upon the reality of his humanity,
just as the efficacy of it depends upon the genuineness of his deity.”5 Regarding God’s design of human nature, Bernard Ramm clarifies, “In the
very act of the creation the possibility of a future incarnation was made
possible. If humankind is produced in the image of God then there is some

2 Ibid., 284.
3 Dallas Willard, Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ
(Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 87.
4 I use the past tense to refer to Jesus’ life on earth, although Jesus still lives to-
day with both divine and human natures. All Scripture references are to TNIV unless
otherwise noted.
5 Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 706.
of that image in God. Hence God can become incarnate.” Furthermore, Paul’s comparison between Adam and Christ bears testimony to the humanity of Jesus (Rom 5:12–21, 1 Cor 15:20–22 and 45–49). Through his experiences and suffering as a human, Jesus became our sympathetic high priest (Heb 2:10–17, 4:15–16, 5:8–10), one who now intercedes for us (Rom 8:34). Thus, Jesus is like us.

In becoming incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ—as one person—is both fully divine and fully human. Although this study emphasizes what is commonly shared between Jesus Christ and all believers, there is no denial that Jesus is also unique and different from us; he is not merely human. The thrust of the current project is to draw out implications of an orthodox Christology for practical Christian living. The purpose is not to diminish the doctrine of Christ’s deity but rather to enrich our doctrine of sanctification and Christian living. By offering a refinement of our understanding of Jesus Christ we can then benefit from the Bible’s teaching that Jesus is our genuine example. Yet, as we delve into this mystery—to honor our Lord’s full humanity—we must do so cautiously so as not to diminish his full deity.

Is Jesus Our Example?

A clear understanding that Jesus lived a genuinely human life does not seem to be a common practical article of faith among Christians. Despite the popular appeal for the “What Would Jesus Do?” slogan, down deep believers tend to let Jesus’ deity trump his humanity. For example, how do you think most believers would answer the following questions?

“How could Jesus know the thoughts of others?” “Because he was God.”

“How could Jesus resist temptation and live without sin?” “Because he was God.”

“How could Jesus perform miracles?” “Because he was God.”

“How could Jesus forgive his enemies while being tortured on the cross?” “Because he was God.”

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6 Bernard Ramm, An Evangelical Christology (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 53. Furthermore, Ramm explains, “In the humanity of Jesus Christ God has revealed what it is to be a true person. Hence a Christian anthropology can be constructed only from a Christology.” 77.

7 Did Jesus fulfill a moral obligation by defeating Satan in his humanity as the Second Adam, since the First Adam surrendered his rightful role (e.g., Heb 2:14–15)?

8 The study works with the canonical New Testament texts and within the basic boundary conditions for orthodox theological inquiry as set down by the Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451).
It is obvious that if Jesus normally relied on his own divine power in living his life and engaging in ministry while on earth, then humans cannot emulate Jesus’ normal example.

**Scholarly Reluctance About Jesus’ Human Example**

Some biblical scholars are not convinced that the NT writers actually present Jesus’ life on earth as an example for believers, and argue that instead of imitation the NT always stresses allegiance and obedience to the risen Lord. For example, Wilhelm Michaelis claimed of the verb “to imitate”: “There is thus no thought of an imitation, whether outward or inward, of the earthly life of Jesus in either individual features or total impress. The call for an *imitatio Christi* finds no support in the statements of Paul.” Others claim that Jesus’ command to follow him (e.g., Jn 8:12, 10:27) cannot be a call to imitation, but rather a call to be a loyal disciple of the Lord Jesus. To propose such a claim an alleged distinction must be made between the word “to follow” (*akoloutheo*), which occurs only in the Gospels and Acts, and “to imitate” (*mimeomai*), occurring only in the epistles. Yet, Kevin Giles notes, “The contrast between the Gospels and the Epistles in relation to imitating Christ is therefore, in essence, not one of emphasis or theme but only one of terminology.”

Marguerite Shuster raises legitimate concerns about studying Jesus as our example, “My fundamental point is that what we need, and what the NT offers us, is first and foremost, not an example, but a Savior. My major caveat with respect to imitation themes is that they tend to obscure that fundamental point.” Of course any exclusive focus on the example of Jesus effectively truncates the genuine gospel. Sanctification must never be reduced to our own moral effort. It is a process in which God the Spirit

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works, and in which we cooperate, attending to what is in our power to do, sustained by God’s power (e.g., Eph 4:17–24; Phil 2:12–13). Yet, once Jesus is affirmed as our Savior and our High Priest, can Jesus also serve as our example to imitate?¹²

Ralph Martin, in his often-cited study on Philippians 2:5–11, claims that the exaltation of Christ is the focus of Paul’s exhortation not his life on earth.

The Apostolic summons is not: Follow Jesus by doing as He did—an impossible feat in any case, for who can be a “second Christ” who quits His heavenly glory and dies in shame and is taken up into the throne of the universe? The appeal and injunction to the Philippians in their pride and selfishness are rather: Become in your conduct and church relationships the type of persons who, by that kenosis, death and exaltation of the Lord of glory, have a place in His body, the Church.¹³

Martin seems to confuse the tasks of Jesus’ vocation, which are unique, with the manner in which he lived to carry out his vocation. We do not emulate his mission, and our missional tasks will vary among us, but we can emulate Jesus’ manner of living.

Moreover, Joseph Hellerman has argued that Paul intentionally turns upside down the normal Roman honor motif in Philippi, which highlighted a continuing upward movement of the career ladder of external success.

I maintain that Paul, in his portrayal of Jesus in [Phil 2] verses 6–8, has taken Rome’s cursus ideology and turned it on its head, so to speak, as he presents Christ descending a cursus pudorum (“a succession or race of ignominies”) from equality with God, to the status of a slave, to the physical and social death of public crucifixion. . . . The presentation, I suggest, was intended by Paul . . . to encourage persons in the church who possessed some degree of honor or status in the broader social world of the colony to utilize their status, after the analogy of Jesus, in the service of others.¹⁴

¹² Marguerite Shuster also raises two other helpful points to consider for our study (1) the misuse of the concept of imitation, particularly the selectivity of what is considered for imitation and what is ignored, and (2) that we exclude from consideration the distinctive cultural forms of that day that Jesus practiced. “Use,” 74


Jesus’ human life accomplished much more than being our example, yet his example for believers cannot be ignored. As long as such ambiguity and ambivalence remains about this critical teaching of Jesus’ human example, it will be difficult for believers to make much progress in responding to Jesus’ invitation to “learn from me” (Mt 11:29) that Willard proposes. Consider Alan Spence’s explanation for such scholarly reluctance:

The difficulty seems to lie in an inability to conceive of the incarnate Christ as “normative man.” Although those who hold to his divine sonship are usually quick to affirm his true humanity, there has, nevertheless, been in the past an unwillingness to give due weight to the Gospel testimony to his growth in grace, wisdom and knowledge; to his continual need of divine comfort and empowering through the Holy Spirit; and consequently to the implication that as man he stood just as we do, a creature totally dependent on his God.15

### Table 1. Selected Lines of Evidence for Jesus as our Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Jesus’ Own Words</th>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>General Epistles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>As our Example</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 13:12–17</td>
<td>Phil 2:4–11;</td>
<td>Heb 12:1–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 10:42–45,</td>
<td>1 Cor 11:1; 2 Cor 1:5;</td>
<td>1 Pet 4:1, (1 Pet 5:2–3) 1 Jn 2:5–6, 13:3, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 13:34–35;</td>
<td>Col 3:13;</td>
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<tr>
<td>John 15:12–13</td>
<td>Implicit 1</td>
<td>Implicit:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt 11:29</td>
<td>Thes 1:6</td>
<td>Heb 4:15</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Biblical Evidence for Jesus’ Example

In searching the biblical data for Jesus’ example, first we look at the Gospels, and then the rest of the NT (see Table 1). The most direct comment from Jesus’ own words occurs when he washed the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:12–17), “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done

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for you” (Jn 13:15). In this declaration, note also the comparison “as I have done for you.” This remarkable “just as” pattern can be observed in other passages, in which the disciples (then and now) are encouraged to live as Jesus did. For example, Matthew 20:26–28: “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (emphasis added). Discussing the parallel passage in Mark 10:45, R. T. France states, “But we must not forget that this crucial verse, however great its soteriological implications, occurs in the context as a model for Jesus’ disciples to follow. . . . They, too, must serve rather than be served.” 16 In the Gospels, two particular topics surface using this “just as” pattern: servanthood (Mt 20:26–28; Lk 22:24–27; Jn 13:13–15) and love (Jn 13:34–35; Jn 15:12–13). In addition, Jesus uses the phrase, “learn from me” in his invitation to weary disciples in Matthew 11:29.

The key passages on Jesus’ example in the Epistles are Philippians 2:4–11, Hebrews 12: 1–11 and 1 Peter 2:18–25. The previously noted “just as” pattern in which believers are encouraged to live as Jesus did also is used in the rest of the New Testament (Rom 6:11, 15:3,7; 2 Cor 1:5; Eph 5:2, 25, 29; Phil 2:5; Col 3:13; 1 Thes 1:6; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 4:1; 1 Jn 2:6, 3:3, 3:16). For example, Philippians 2:5: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” 1 John 2:6: “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” Furthermore, Paul urged believers to imitate his own example (1 Cor 4:16–17, 11:1, Phil 3:17; 1 Thes 1:6; 2 Thes 3:7–9 and 1 Tim 1:16) just as he imitated the example of Jesus (1 Cor 11:1, cf. 1 Thes 1:6).

Likewise, the apostle Peter exhorted elders to serve as examples: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pt 5:2–3, emphasis added). Peter alludes to Jesus’ own teaching and example of servanthood, using the same phrase Jesus did, “lord it over,” as recorded in the synoptic Gospels (Mt 20:25, Mk 10:42, Lk. 22:25).

The biblical evidence is fairly clear that Jesus, particularly in his earthly life, is an example for us. Another related issue concerns to what extent did Jesus live within his humanity, to which we turn next.

BY WHAT DIVINE POWER DID JESUS LIVE AND MINISTER?

Some might wonder, why worry about the source of Jesus’ supernatural power? Does it really matter? If we hold to supernatural theism, then Jesus’ supernatural life and his ministry of miracles actually occurred and touched the lives of many in his day, regardless of whether he used his own divine

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power or relied on the supernatural power of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Yet the critical issue raised in this article is whether Jesus can be our example, including his supernaturally-oriented lifestyle. William Barry admits, “If Jesus is superhuman, then I can admire him, but I do not have to take seriously his call to emulate him. I can never be a superhuman being.”

Possible Options

Jesus had access to two possible sources of divine power: either (a) his own divine power, or (b) the divine resources of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Four logical positions are possible along this spectrum:

#1. Never dependent on the divine resources of the Father and Holy Spirit and exclusively using his own divine power,
#2. Infrequently dependent on the divine resources of the Father and Holy Spirit and predominantly using his own divine power,
#3. Predominantly dependent on divine resources of the Father and Holy Spirit and infrequently using his own divine power, or
#4. Exclusively dependent on divine resources of the Father and Holy Spirit, and never using his own divine power.

The Scripture provides clear evidence of some form of dependence on the divine resources of the Father and Holy Spirit so option #1 is eliminated. The question is to what extent did Jesus rely on the Father and the Spirit, so the main choices are among options #2, #3, or #4.

The main divide on this point whether Jesus’ dependency was infrequent and basically unnecessary (Option #2) or was Jesus’ dependence the norm of his life on earth (either Option #3 or Option #4). I suspect Willard would opt for the latter case of the essential role of dependence on divine resources throughout Jesus’ life, with which I agree.

Between the latter two options, it will be easier to present an argument for the weaker claim of Option #3 (predominantly dependent) than the stronger claim of Option #4 (exclusively dependent). Specifically, Jesus lived normally within his own human power, relying predominantly on the divine resources of the Father and the Holy Spirit, while using his own divine power infrequently.

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18 Defending the exclusively dependent thesis requires some sort of accounting for the occasions on which Jesus apparently did make use of his own divine power. These occasions are infrequent (e.g., forgiving sins, the transfiguration), but are part of the evidence pool and cannot be simply disregarded. I think reasonable answers can be supplied for these occasions, but since I am presenting evidence for the predominantly thesis, this additional discussion is beyond the scope of this article.
This claim regarding Jesus’ predominant dependence on God, especially the Holy Spirit, is not new. According to Alan Spence, Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683) “regarded [Jesus’] life as man among us as the prototype of Christian existence, and as continually empowered, comforted and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”\(^{19}\) R. A. Torrey (1856–1928), likewise attempting to articulate only *What the Bible Teaches*, claimed that “[Jesus] lived, thought, worked, taught, conquered sin and won victories for God in the power of that same Spirit whom we all may have.”\(^{20}\) In 1991, Gerald Hawthorne published the sole academic monograph given wholly to discussing the relationship of the Spirit in the life of Jesus.

Without denying the reality of the incarnation, or that God became a man, it is the purpose of this book, nevertheless, to argue for the reality of Jesus’ humanness and that as such he was not aided to rise above and conquer temptations as God, but rather as a man whose will was set to do the will of God. His sinlessness was nothing other than the continued obedience to the Father and to the Father’s will.\(^{21}\)

Yet in light of the scholarly reluctance and the continuing popular confusion regarding Jesus living as a genuine human, there seems to be a contemporary need for a new hearing of the biblical witness to Jesus’ humanity and example for us in living the Christian life.

The argument for Jesus predominantly living within his humanity while depending on God, is developed from biblical evidence within three categories indicating that (a) Jesus depended on the Father, (b) Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit, and (c) Jesus exercised his own faith and trust in God. Table 2 gives an overview of the selected passages that will be cited in the discussion so one can see how these align with the three categories. We will move from the Gospels to the Epistles, and begin with *explicit* biblical support, followed by implicit evidence supplementing the main explicit argument. A few Scripture references from the Gospel of John seem to be a less explicit indication of Jesus’ reliance on the Father. Otherwise, verses in the implicit category assume the principle that Jesus practiced what he

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\(^{19}\) Spence, “John Owen,” 75.


\(^{21}\) Gerald Hawthorne. *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock), p. 96, n. 94. Hawthorne’s book was the stimulating inspiration that launched me toward my own continuing investigation of Jesus’ humanity and example. Hawthorne appears to defend option #4. Others devote only a portion of their book on this topic, such as James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1975). For a recent proposal to develop a Trinitarian “Spirit Christology” in which the Spirit is presented as having a more prominent role within the Trinity, see Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010).
preached. That is, in any teaching to his disciples to rely on available divine resources Jesus is sharing the results of his own personal dependence pattern while living in his humanity. These teachings confirm the explicit support. Willard explains, “If we are to exercise the word and rule of God in ways regarded as spectacular by human beings, Jesus is our model, as always. . . . [God] will do this in a way that is suitable to our lives and his calling for us.” 22 Now we turn to what the New Testament teaches about Jesus as our example.

Table 2. Selected Lines of Evidence for Jesus’ Dependence on God (listed in order of presentation in the article)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depend on the Father</th>
<th>From Jesus’ Own Words</th>
<th>Gospels-Acts Authors</th>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>General Epistles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John 5:19, 30;</td>
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<td>8:28–29, 42;</td>
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<td>12:27–28, 49–50;</td>
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<td>14:10, 31; 15:9–10;</td>
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<td>16:32; 17:7–8;</td>
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<td>Matt 26:52–54;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implicit: John</td>
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<td>7:28–29; 14:24;</td>
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<td>17:18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matt 12:28</td>
<td>Mark 1:12;</td>
<td>Luke 4:1, 14; Luke</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Lk 11:20)</td>
<td>10:21; Acts 1:2,</td>
<td>10:38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implicit: John</td>
<td>7:37–38; Mk 13:11 (Lk 12:15)</td>
<td>Implicit: parallel</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mt 10:19–10; Lk 12:11–12</td>
<td>Matt Lk 1:15, 80 &amp;</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:31–32; Luke 12:10, Matt</td>
<td>Jesus Lk 1:33, 2:40; Baptism:</td>
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<tr>
<td>26:41; Mark 14:38; “power” 5:30; Luke</td>
<td>Matt 3:16, Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22;</td>
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Dependence on the Father

There are multiple occurrences of Jesus’ own declaration of his complete dependence on the Father in the Gospel of John.

“. . . for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).

“Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (Jn 5:19, emphasis added).

“So Jesus said, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him’” (Jn 8:28–29).

“Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (Jn 14:10, emphasis added).

Similar declarations appear also in John 5:30, 8:42, 12:49–50, 14:10, 31; 15:9–10, 16:32, 17:7–8, and 17: 8–8. Carson comments on John 17:7: “The strange way of putting the last point—that everything you have given me comes from you . . . carefully emphasizes Jesus’ dependence upon his Father.”

Later in the Gospel, Jesus develops a parallel between his dependency on the Father as the analogy for how his disciples will depend on him. For example we can compare John 5:19 quoted above with John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (emphasis added). Jesus depends on the Father, and then he desires that believers experience the same kind of dependence on himself.

Following Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane and during his arrest he offers a remark about his dependence on the Father. After Peter lops off an ear of a soldier, Jesus commands Peter to put his sword down and announces, “Do

24 Believers are to abide in Christ as subsequent NT teaching emphasizes (e.g., Col 3:15–17). Yet we still direct our prayer requests to the Father in the name of Jesus (e.g., Jn 15: 7, 16; 16:23, Jn 14:14; Mt 6:9; e.g., Eph 3:14).
you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt 26:53; cf. Jn 12:27). Implicit references of dependence on the Father include John 7:28–29, 14:24, and 17:18.

**Dependence on the Spirit—Explicit**

Willard affirms that “When we inwardly experience the heavenly sweetness and power of life—the love, joy, and peace—that Jesus knew, that is the work of the Spirit.”

1. **Explicit References from Jesus’ Own Words.** Only a few references from Jesus’ own lips offer explicit support, but these are profound. Near the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is the guest synagogue speaker in his hometown of Nazareth (Lk 4:16–21). He startles his hearers, after reading a prophetic passage from Isaiah 61:1–2 and states, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:17). He thus announces “himself to be the bearer of . . . God’s new age of salvation” being the one who has received the “anointing with God’s Spirit.”

Later in his ministry, Jesus makes an explicit declaration about relying on the Spirit for his exorcisms, from Matthew 12:28: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Mt 12:28; “finger of God” Lk 11:20). Beasley-Murray notes that this saying “gives Jesus’ own explanation of his exorcisms: they are performed not by his own power but by the power of God, i.e., by the Spirit of God, and since the defeat of the evil power is a feature of the end time, they show that the kingdom of God has appeared in his activity.” This is the initial evidence from Jesus’ own words. Later will be added implicit evidence from Jesus’ own words and teachings that can indicate a reference to his own life experience.

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27 Note that Jesus employs the plural “demons,” indicating this deliverance as well as others was done by the power of the Holy Spirit.
28 D. A. Carson states, “Luke 11:20 has ‘the finger of God’ instead of ‘the Spirit of God.’ Possibly the latter is original . . . , but the matter is of little consequence since they both refer to the same thing (cf. Exod 8:19; Deut 9:10; Ps 8:3).” “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 289.
2. Explicit Evidence From the Gospel Writers and Acts. John records Jesus as receiving the Spirit without measure (Jn 3:34). The various descriptions of Jesus’ wilderness temptation experience include specific mention of the Holy Spirit’s direct involvement (Mt 4:1, Mk 1:12, Lk 4:1, 14; cf. Rom 8:14, Gal 5:18). One time Luke describes Jesus as “full of joy through the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21).

In the book of Acts, we learn that Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples before his ascension was accomplished “through the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:2). Then, in a sermon to the Gentile Cornelius and his household, Peter offered a summary statement of the ministry of Jesus: “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

3. Explicit Evidence From The Epistles. One passage in this category, Hebrews 9:14, offers a distinctive comment regarding Jesus’ experience of the passion and his death: “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience....” Lane explains,

The fact that his offering was made dia pneumatos aiōnion, “through the eternal Spirit,” implies that he had been divinely empowered and sustained in his office. The formulation does not occur elsewhere in the NT or early Christian literature, but it may be understood as a designation for the Holy Spirit. A reference to the Spirit is appropriate in a section under the influence of Isaiah, where the Servant of the Lord is qualified for his task by the Spirit of God (Is 42:1, 61:1).

These are the explicit references in the NT. Now we turn to implicit references to Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Dependence on the Spirit—Implicit

1. Implicit Evidence From Jesus’ Own Words. In the Gospels and early in Acts, Jesus makes claims about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Can we infer that these claims are based on his own relational dependence on the

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31 Two other passages mention Jesus and the Spirit that seem to relate to his resurrection, but there are challenges in interpretation, so these will be passed over but noted here, 1 Timothy 3:16 and 1 Peter 3:18.
Spirit? In John 7: 37–38, Jesus cries out in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (emphasis added). Verse 39 identifies the Spirit as Jesus point of reference.

Another teaching is that the Spirit would help believers in tight spots. “Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit” (Mk 13:11). I. Howard Marshall comments that “the Spirit gives guidance regarding both the general form of a speech and the actual content.” It is likely that this particular teaching was based on Jesus’ own experience (e.g. Acts 1:2). Willard comments, “A major point of this book is that the still small voice—or the interior or inner voice, as it is also called—is the preferred and most valuable form of individualized communication for God’s purposes. God usually addresses individually those who walk with him in a mature, personal relationship using this inner voice, proclaiming and showing forth the reality of the kingdom of God.”

Jesus’ reference to the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31–32, Lk 12:10) indicates how important Jesus viewed the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Donald Hagner explains,

Given Matthew’s Christological interests and the unique and central position held by Jesus throughout the Gospel, one may understandably be surprised that Matthew has not said the reverse of what stands in the text, i.e., that blasphemy against the Spirit is forgivable but not that against the Son of Man. The gravity of the blasphemy against the Spirit, however, depends upon the Holy Spirit as the fundamental dynamic that stands behind and makes possible the entire messianic ministry of Jesus itself. . . . The failure to understand Jesus is yet forgivable but not the outright rejection of the saving power of God through the Spirit exhibited in the direct overthrow of the kingdom of Satan.

Finally, a saying that may be the most telling of Jesus’ relation to the Spirit is, “The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41; Mk


35 Willard, Hearing God, 89.

36 Donald Hagner, Matthew 1–13, WBC, 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993), 348.
14:38). The common view of Jesus’ statement to the three sleeping disciples in Gethsemane is about the continuing internal struggle within human nature, between the human spirit against the weak physical body. If this were so, Jesus’ preceding words (“Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial”) would then be a challenge to muster more human effort to override their bodily weakness so they could pray.

Another interpretation sees the contrast as one between relying on divine power of the Holy “Spirit,” rather than solely relying on human resources (“flesh”), which can never stand alone against the assaults of Satan. Jesus made similar contrasts between the divine sphere and human sphere elsewhere (Jn 3:6, 6:63), which have OT precedent in Isaiah 31:1, 3 contrasting an Egyptian alliance (“flesh”) against relying on the Lord God (“Spirit”; see also Ps 51:11–12). Is not Jesus giving the three disciples the secret to his own victory in the Garden? William Lane comments on Mark 14:38, “Spiritual wakefulness and prayer in full dependence upon divine help provide the only adequate preparation for crisis. . . . Jesus prepared for his own intense trial through vigilance and prayer, and thus gave to the disciples and to the Church the model for the proper resistance of eschatological temptation.”

Jesus’ comment here furnishes a fairly clear inference of his own dependence on the Holy Spirit and its implications as a teaching for all believers for all times.

2. Implicit Evidence From the Gospel Writers and Acts. James Dunn suggests a parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus implying that if John, the Forerunner was filled by the Spirit from birth (Lk 1:15, 17) would it not be correct to imply that this was the case for Jesus, the Spirit-Anointed One, whose very birth was miraculously accomplished by the Spirit” (Mt 1:20, Lk 1:35).

It is quite probable, though not certain, that Luke means us to understand that Jesus was every bit as full of the Holy Spirit as John was (1:15), and that Jesus’ growth in wisdom and grace was due to his possession of the Spirit (2.40, 52); the link between the Spirit and divine

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38 Hawthorne groups a number of additional implicit references to Jesus and the Spirit, *The Presence*, 115.

(a) Acting with authority (*exousia*): Mk 1:22/Mt 7:29/Lk 4:32; Mk 1:27/Lk 4:36; Mk 2:10/Mt 9:6/Lk 4:36; Mk 2:12/Mt 9:6/Lk 5:24; Mk 11:29–29, 33/Mt 21:23–34/27/Lk 20: 2, 8; (b) Being perceived by the people as a prophet: Mk 6:15–16/Lk 9:8–9; Mk 8:28/Mt 16:14/Lk 9:19; Mk 14:65/Mt 26:68; see also Mt 21:11, 46; Lk 7:16, 39, 24:19; (c) Perceiving himself as a prophet [and also more than a prophet]: Mk 6:4/Mt 13:57/Lk 4:24; 13:33; cf. Mt 23:31–38; Lk 11:47–51.
sonship (and filial consciousness) would also be a pointer in this direction (1.35; 2.49; 3.22; cf. Rom 8.15–16; Gal 4.6). 39

The important event of Jesus’ baptism and commissioning is a full Trinitarian event, with the Spirit resting on Jesus (Mt 3:16, Mk 1:10, Lk 3:22). There are also some key references using the term “power” and indicating Jesus as an agent of God’s power. Luke 4:14 specifically makes the connection between the Holy Spirit and power: “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.” In some verses, only the term “power” is used, for example Luke 5:17: “And the power of the Lord was with him to heal” (see also Lk 6:19, 8:46, Mk 5:30; comments by the crowd, Mt 14:12, Lk 4:36). Nolland explains,

The reference to “power” (dynamis) [in Lk 5:17] links back to [Lk] 4:14 and prepares the way for the coming references to tangible power proceeding from Jesus (6:19, 8:44 [8:46]): the power that flows out of Jesus and brings healing is the power of God himself . . . It is more likely that Luke is continuing to clarify what it means for Jesus to have become through the descent of the Spirit the repository of the power of God (3:22; 4:1, 14, 18–19; 6:19; 8:44).”40

Mark 5:30 clues us in to Jesus thoughts after the woman with the hemorrhage touched him: “Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’” (also Lk 8:46). Lane notes:

Jesus possesses the power of God as the representative of the Father. Nevertheless, the Father remains in control of his own power. The healing of the woman occurred through God’s free and gracious decision to bestow upon her the power that was active in Jesus. By an act of sovereign will God [the Father or the Spirit?] determined to honor the woman’s faith in spite of the fact that it was tinged with ideas which bordered on magic.41

Finally, Acts 10:38, mentioned earlier in the article, makes the comment “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and

power." Furthermore, is not Jesus’ familiar challenge to the disciples before his ascension an experience he also had of the Spirit at his baptism? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

**Jesus Exercised Faith/Trust in God—Explicit**

Having looked at dependence on the Father, and dependence on the Spirit, we now look at the third category of evidence to be explored. We learn that Jesus himself expressed faith and trust in God during his earthly sojourn by examining first explicit and then implicit references.

That Jesus experienced his own faith in God did not cross the minds of some translators of Hebrews 12:2, so they inserted an “our” in the text where there is none in the Greek manuscripts: “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of *our* faith” (NRSV; so also, KJV, NIV, and NET Bible). We can trace that view at least as far back as Aquinas, who believed Jesus had the full beatific vision of God in the cradle as a new infant, eliminating any need for faith in God. Gerald O’Collins notes,

Aquinas and the subsequent Catholic theological tradition held that in his human mind Jesus enjoyed the beatific vision and hence lived by sight, not by faith. Aquinas expressed classically this thesis: “When the divine reality is not hidden from sight, there is no point in faith. From the first moment of his conception Christ had the full vision of God in his essence . . . Therefore he could not have had faith” (*Summa theologiae*, 3a. 7. 3 resp.).

Commentators now approach Hebrews 12:2 with fresh eyes. William Lane explains Hebrews 12:2: “Fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith” (NASV):

The poignant description as a whole points to Jesus as the perfect embodiment of faith, who exercised faith heroically. By bringing faith to complete expression, he enabled others to follow his example. The phrase reiterates and makes explicit what was affirmed with a quotation from Scripture in [Hebrews] 2:13, that Jesus in his earthly life was the perfect exemplar of trust in God.

Donald Hagner adds, “[Jesus] is not only the basis, means, and fulfillment of faith, but in his life he also exemplifies the same principle of faith that we saw in the paragons of [Hebrews] chapter 11.”

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Jesus Exercised Faith/Trust in God—Implicit

1. Implicit Evidence From Jesus’ Own Words. In the Gospel account of the healing of the demonized son, some commentators suggest that Jesus’ reply to the father’s request in Mark 9:23 is both a challenge to the father, and also a testimony of his own life of faith, “And Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able?’ All things are possible to him who believes” (NASV). Sharyn Dowd explains, “Jesus is not merely an example to be imitated, but a leader to be followed. It is likely, then, that ‘the one who believes’ in 9:23 is deliberately ambiguous. Jesus has faith and he calls the father to have faith.”45 O’Collins agrees, “[Jesus] speaks about faith as an insider, one who knows personally what the life of faith is and wants to share it with others (see 2 Cor 4:13).”46

If Jesus was such an insider as a man of faith himself, then perhaps when he criticizes the disciples for their lack of faith (e.g., Mt 6:30 [cf. Lk 12:28], 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20; oligopistoi “little faiths”), he is actually speaking as one who experientially knows what he is talking about. Ian Wallis notes, “The disciples may have been ineffectual . . . owing to their oligopista (“little faith”), but Jesus was successful because he demonstrated that faith . . . a faith which all who intend to fulfill Christ’s commission must demonstrate.”47 Perhaps from his own early developmental experience of faith and trust in God Jesus learned that even small trust in God can accomplish great things, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can . . .” (Mt 17:20, Lk 17:6, cf. Mk 11:12, 1 Cor. 13:2).

2. Implicit Evidence From Paul’s Epistles. On the topic of Jesus’ faith, possible support also comes from a reconsideration of how the Greek phrase pistis Christou should be translated. The phrase appears seven times in Paul’s letters—Romans 3:22, 26, Galatians 2:16 [2x], 2:20, 3:22; Ephesians 3:12, and Philippians 3:9, as well as in Acts 3:16 and Revelation 14:12. The traditional translation has been as an objective genitive (“faith in Christ”). Note that there is general agreement that believers must place their faith in Jesus, as taught in other NT passages (e.g., Jn 3:16, Acts 20:21, Col 1:4, 1 Jn 3:23). The debate concerns whether the genitive noun (Jesus, or Son of God) is either objective or subjective. More commentators are recognizing the legitimacy of the phrase as a subjective genitive, that is, “faith [or faithfulness] of Jesus,” that Jesus himself experienced faith in

46 O’Collins, Christology, 261.

Wallis concludes his monograph on the faith of Jesus,

> It is the conviction of the present author that interest in Jesus’ faith was an unfortunate and unnecessary casualty of early Christological controversy, in which its significance was determined more in terms of what it conceded to rival positions rather than of what it contributed to our knowledge of God and humanity of Jesus Christ. . . . Certainly, Jesus’ faith does seem to provide a point of departure for Christology which is rooted in common human experience and which explores his theological significance through reflection upon his human being in relation to God.

> The explicit and implicit biblical data offer sufficient cumulative evidence of Jesus’ authentic human experience as he relied on divine resources to live a supernaturally empowered lifestyle. He thus offers to believers a genuine example in his common life to us. But is Jesus only like us, just human? To that issue we turn next.

**Differences Between Jesus and Us and Potential Objections**

Jesus shares a common humanity with us since believers, having been regenerated, now share the same human nature as Jesus does and as Adam and Eve did at creation. Let us consider some differences.

**Uniqueness of Jesus and the Spirit:**

Is the Holy Spirit’s ministry unique to Jesus as the Anointed One/Messiah, or does the Holy Spirit also empower Jesus to live his earthly life in a

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50 Ian Wallis, *The faith of Jesus Christ*, 221.
manner similar to how the Spirit works with believers as well? Although the same Spirit that indwelt Jesus indwells all believers, John 3:34 indicates that Jesus had a greater measure of the Spirit. This may have been due to Jesus’ unique role as the divine-human Messiah that required the full measure of the Spirit’s ministry (Jn 3:36). Or, this greater measure may also have been the consequence of Jesus’ complete dependence on the Father and his life of holiness, which permitted a full measure of the Spirit in Jesus’ life and ministry. Sadly, our faith and life in holiness are limited, being hindered by doubt and unbelief as we are still in the process of being conformed to the image of the Son. Our honest prayer can be that of the man in Mark 9: “I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). Jesus teaches that it is possible to grow in greater dependence on God so we can emulate more and more of his life and ministry (e.g., Mk 11: 22–25; Jn 13:12–17, 14:12–14).

**Supernatural Elements in Jesus’ life:**

Are not the supernatural elements of Jesus’ life sourced in his own divine power? Note that most of the supernaturally-oriented activities of Jesus were not unique to him alone, but were also performed by “mere” humans, which supplies additional evidence for the dependency proposal.

1. **Miracles:** Both the OT and NT record miracles done by mere humans—not in their own human power, but sourced in the power of God, that were similar to those Jesus performed, for example: (a) raising the dead (2 Kgs 4:8–37, Acts 9:36–42), (b) curing a leper (2 Kgs 5:1–15), (c) healing the lame (Acts 3:1–10), (d) making an axe head float on water (2 Kgs 6:4–7), (e) multiplying food (2 Kgs 4:42–44), (f) walking on water for a brief time (Mt 14:28–30), and (g) healing the sick and casting out demons by means of Paul’s handkerchief and clothes (cf. Acts 19:11–12).

2. **Jesus’ knowledge**—How did Jesus convey God’s authoritative message and have knowledge of the thoughts of others (e.g., Mt 12:25, Lk 11:17; Lk 6:8)? Daniel reported and interpreted the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar (Dn 2:1–49) and Peter knew the secret sin of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11).

3. **Jesus’ temptability and impeccability (sinlessness):** Jesus is human, but also uniquely divine. Scripture explicitly teaches that Jesus was tempted (didactic material: Heb 2:18, 4:15; life examples narrated in the Gospels,

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51 Oliver Crisp conveys the scholarly consensus in labeling the view that Jesus performed his miracles by the power of the Spirit—the view held by John Owen and what is being presented in this article—as the “non-conventional view on this matter.” Divinity and Humanity (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 25. Crisp’s recent insightful studies in Christology are worth consulting: Divinity and Humanity and God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009).
e.g., Mt 4:1–11, 16:23, 26:38–46). Yet James teaches that God cannot be tempted by evil (Jas 1:13). The teaching about Jesus’ sinlessness claims that either he could not sin (or that he would not sin; Scripture only explicitly teaches that Jesus did not sin).

Bruce Ware offers a helpful analogy to clarify that Jesus did not rely on his divine powers to resist temptation and be sinless. Imagine a man who wishes to swim across the English Channel from England to France. After much training, he hires a boat to go alongside to rescue him in case he is overcome with weariness or cramps. Being nearby, the crew in the boat would not permit him to drown. On the day of the swim, he launches out, perseveres against the cold water, the waves, the weather, and triumphantly reaches the other shore. So we ask: Why could the swimmer not have drowned? Because of the boat. But why did the swimmer not drown? Because he swam and finished his course. Accordingly, why could Jesus not have sinned? Because of his deity. But why did Jesus not sin? Because he resisted the temptations in his humanity, relying on God’s powerful grace. The answers to these two questions must be kept distinct.

Yet, we still need to give some explanation for Jesus’ inner psychological orientation and motivation. That Jesus fought against temptation is obvious, particularly in Gethsemane (even sweating blood, Lk 22:44; Heb 12:4). No matter which incarnational model one holds, all must address this seeming paradox: Jesus could not sin, yet Jesus felt the genuine struggle of being tempted. (I do not think anyone would view the struggle in Gethsemane as just an amazing dramatic performance worthy of an Academy Award). If Jesus knew he was God, which he did, why did he need to struggle against temptations? Resolving the temptability issue requires more space than can be allotted here, but suffice it to suggest one possible resolution. We can affirm that Jesus could not actually sin—that it was not a metaphysical possibility—if we also can affirm that it was an epistemic possibility. That is, within Jesus’ own understanding and perception of reality...

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53 Thomas Morris notes, “We have said that it seems to be a conceptual truth that, in some sense, temptation requires the possibility of sinning. On reflection, we can see that it is the epistemic possibility of sinning rather than a broadly logical, or metaphysical, or even physical possibility that is conceptually linked to temptation . . . Jesus could be tempted to sin just in case it was epistemically possible for him that he sin,” The Logic of God Incarnate (Cornell: Cornell University, 1986; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 147–148.
during his state of humiliation, it could be inferred that Jesus knew he was God but that he was *not certain* whether, as the theanthropic person (the God-man), it might be possible for him to sin. He could have inferred that as God, he could not sin. But the factor of also being human may have led to some uncertainty about that deduction.

Thus Jesus, with some uncertainty, chose to face the temptations as if he might be able to sin. Armchair theologians down through church history have wrestled with this issue and have had some disagreement about whether Jesus could have sinned or not, though the most common evangelical view is that Jesus could not have sinned. One could imagine that the Holy Spirit, his divine Tutor, may never have offered a definitive response to Jesus’ question on that particular theological matter. And Jesus did not have these learned tomes we have today to ponder the matter. Thus he struggled to resist temptation.

Furthermore, due to his formed heart of holiness, Jesus was much more painfully aware of the evil attacking him than we are. And he resisted every temptation, requiring greater intentionality in effort and reliance on divine help; believers are usually more clueless and less intentional (e.g., Heb 12:3–4).

(4) Jesus’ sinless life: Was this *solely* the result of his deity, or is it possible for a human person to live without sinning? First, human nature is not essentially corrupt or sinful (e.g. Gen 1:31). Sinful propensities are a feature added on since the Fall. For a brief period of time Adam and Eve lived without sinning. Also, the Bible promises that all believers in the future eternal state, although still being human, will live continuously without sin (Rom 8:17, 28–30, 1 Cor 15: 50–57, Rev 21:4, 27), sustained by the indwelling Spirit who indwells us forever (Jn 14:16). Being regenerated, believers now have a new heart (Ez 36: 25–27) and have been freed from the power of sin (Rom 6: 6–7, 11–12, 18). Yet believers take with them into their new life in God’s family all of their sinful habits and propensities, and sadly we may continue to maintain and learn new sin patterns even as Christians. But we are commanded to walk in Christlike ways through the power of God’s grace working in us—“ought” implies “can” in God’s grace. Jesus demonstrated the possibility for regenerated humans to live sinlessly, becoming another “Adam” of a new God-oriented human race (1 Cor 15:45–49).

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54 One important factor that may have contributed to Jesus being able to live fully in his humanity without having to run personal interference to restrain his divine attributes (especially omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence) was that the Holy Spirit, who indwelled and filled Jesus, acted as the dynamic “fire wall” to Jesus’ divine mind so that his divine knowledge remained dormant in Jesus’ “subconscious” mind, and so that other aspects of Jesus’ infinite divine nature could not encroach on his finite human nature. Thus, the Holy Spirit played a key active role to help sustain certain aspects of Jesus’ hypostatic union during the challenging earthly phase of his first coming.
Jesus’ life makes the point that living sinlessly is theoretically possible for regenerated humans through God’s power. The NT conveys an expectation and hope for believers that we can be transformed and sin less and less, as we rely on the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16, cf. 1 Cor 10:13, 1 Pet 2:21–23). Willard notes, “And that will enable us to walk increasingly in the wholeness, holiness, and power of the kingdom of the heavens. No one need live in spiritual and personal defeat. A life of victory over sin and circumstance is accessible to all.”

*Jesus’ Deity and Messianic Mission*

One may wonder if a predominantly depended thesis is affirmed, is there any Scriptural evidence in the Gospels to be marshaled to support Jesus’ deity? Although the proposal affirms that each miracle is done by the power of the Spirit, the cumulative effect of the miracles, in combination with the other evidences, still point to Jesus’ deity as well as his unique and distinctive Messianic mission (e.g., Mt 11:3–5). Various standard evidences can be cited for his deity, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: Jesus received worship (e.g., Mt 28:9, 16; Jn 20:28), his self-claims (e.g., Mt 22: 42–45; Jn 8:58–59), use of “Lord” (e.g., Lk 2:11, Jn 20:28), and the testimony of Gospel writers (Jn 1:1, 18). Also, evidence of Jesus’ messianic mission as the Christ proves that Jesus is more than just a prophet (e.g., Lk 4:16–21; Mt 16:16; Mk 10:45; Lk 4:41). Thus, despite the veiling of Jesus’ deity during the Incarnation, there is sufficient manifestation of his divine person that still shines through clearly, for, as Jesus teaches, “Whoever has seen me has has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

*Some Practical Implications*

That Jesus lived an authentic human existence is a weighty matter to ponder, for our theology, and especially for our daily life. Let us consider some implications along two trajectories and then suggest a few exercises.

*Living WITHIN Our Personal Human Context as Jesus Did.*

Busyness hinders a life with God. H. J. Cadbury notes, “We can hardly make a picture of Jesus’ life and that of his contemporaries that will be too casual for the facts.” What challenges me is the seemingly casual manner

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of Jesus’ own life as portrayed in the Gospels, yet my own lifestyle is much
too busy, as a recovering workaholic. Some Christian leaders tend toward
overcommitment of activities, which not only hinders our walk with God
but also sets a bad example for others. Not only do we need physical rest,
but our hearts also need space to listen to God. Willard suggests that soli-
tude is the foundational spiritual discipline. “Solitude frees us. . . . The
normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feel-
ing, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God.
Nothing but solitude can allow the development of freedom from the in-
grained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order.”

Living BEYOND Our Human Limitations as Jesus Did.

Yet Jesus also shows us the way to live a kingdom lifestyle, as Willard
has pointed out. “The eternal life that begins with confidence in Jesus is a
life in his present kingdom, now on earth and available to all.” And a key
divine resource is God the Holy Spirit who moves “within our souls and es-
pecially our minds. To present the person of Jesus and the reality of his
kingdom. . . . After we receive the new life, the Spirit continues to move
upon and within us to enable us to do the kinds of works Jesus did (through
‘gifts’ of the Spirit) and to grow the kind of inward character that manifests
itself in the ‘fruit’ or outcome of the Spirit in our outward life: love, joy,
peace, longsuffering, and similar traits of Christ (Gal 2:23–25).” As Jesus
depended on the divine resource of the Father and the Spirit, so must we if
we wish to live a Jesus-like life.

Suggested Exercises

Consider three exercises to ponder the key theme of Jesus’ dependence
on God:

#1. From Table 2 and in reference to the extended discussion, select a
Scripture passage that intrigued you. Perhaps take some time to
study the passage further in its context. Then meditate on the pas-
sage for a week or so and listen to the Spirit’s moving within.

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57 Willard, Disciplines, 160. For helpful guidance on developing a conversa-
tional relationship with God, see Willard’s Hearing God, and Klaus Issler, Wasting
Time with God: A Spirituality of Friendship with God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVar-
sity, 2001), chapter 6.
58 Willard, Conspiracy, xvii.
59 Ibid., 348.
60 As one means to stretch one’s God confidence, see In Search of a Confident
Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trust in God, by J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 2008.
#2. If you wish an experiential presentation of Jesus' authentic human experience, watch the movie, *Jesus*, starring Jeremy Sitso (1999, 174 minutes; a CBS mini-series). Invite some friends or family to join you. I was initially put off by the “humanness” of Jesus in the film. Yet I have since come to appreciate this as a distinctive contribution of the film. Not all in the film is theologically accurate—but no film can do that.

#3. Refer to Dallas Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy*, and read the section in which the invitation is posed: “. . . I am learning from Jesus to live my life as if he would live my life if he were I” (pages 283–285). Ponder, how would Jesus live my life, do my job, raise my kids, relate to my friends and family, if he were I? The point is not about how Jesus himself would work at a job like mine or be a parent. But, *if he were I*—being sensitive to my personality, to my talents and gifts, having had my experiential background with all the particular highs and lows—how would Jesus live my life, do my job, live within my life context? Dallas shares a bit of his own reflections on being a professor at a research university. What insights come to mind to try out this week?61

Jesus is my hero. Although fully God, the Second Person of the Trinity, he voluntarily came to earth adding on a human nature, just like you and me, willing to limit his earthly life and experience all the joys and the sorrows as a human, just like you and me. Jesus lived *within* his personal human context. And, Jesus lived *beyond* his human limitations, predominantly relying on the divine resources of the Father and the Holy Spirit, to show us how we can live as he did. Jesus raises the bar for what is possible when one lives in dependence on divine resources. Willard clarifies, “But what we can do with [mechanical, electrical, or atomic power] is still very small compared to what we could do acting in union with God himself, who created and ultimately controls all other forces.”62

One of my purposes has been to attend to the scholarly reluctance and the popular confusion about Jesus’ example. There is sufficient biblical evidence to support this claim that Jesus did predominantly live a human life, dependent on the divine resources of God.63 Perhaps we can now leave such challenges behind and give greater practical attention to Willard’s

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61 Willard suggests that “if [Jesus] were to come today as he did then, he could carry out his mission through most any decent and useful occupation. . . . In other words, if he were come today he could very well do what you do.” *Divine Conspiracy*, 14.


challenge: How would Jesus live your life, with your personality, with your talents, within your life context, if he were you?

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

—Jesus (Acts 1:8)
“Living with the Lord Always Before Them”: Considerations of Spiritual Guidance Offered by Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard

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Abstract. The centuries-old art of spiritual direction continues to be crafted by those who willingly serve as spiritual mentors for countless spiritual seekers who feel drawn by God’s grace to engage in the transformative process of spiritual formation. The work of this article offers an in-depth consideration of the spiritual guidance offered by two outstanding spiritual guides, Ignatius of Loyola in his 16th century spiritual manual, The Spiritual Exercises, and Dallas Willard in his recent spiritual book, Renovation of the Heart. After establishing the historical and contextual frameworks needed for getting to know each of our spiritual guides, significant attention will be then given to the exploration of five key spiritual movements that can effectively serve as unifying threads for our consideration of the work of our spiritual transformation into Christ-likeness.

Preliminary Reflections

Nestled in Chapter Six of his inspiring book, Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard emphasizes the importance of identifying and emulating the wisdom of true spiritual practitioners (e.g., Billy Graham, Teresa of Calcutta, William Law, Martin Luther, Ignatius of Loyola, as he names a few) who have “walked the walk” of following Christ as Willard asks the provocative question: “How did they come to be able to live with ‘the Lord always before them?’”¹ Willard goes on to assert in his response: “We learn from them how to do that by making them our close companions on the way.”² Inspired by Willard’s inclusion of Ignatius of Loyola, in particular,

² Ibid.
in his list of spiritual practitioners, the work of this essay seeks to explore the spiritual guidance offered by Dallas Willard in the company of Ignatius of Loyola with the assertion they both can serve as viable and relevant companions for contemporary spiritual seekers who desire to engage in the process of spiritual formation and transformation into Christ-likeness.3

As guides who are skilled in the art of spiritual formation, both Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard, although centuries apart, can invite us to ponder how God offers grace in abundance, not only as God did for each of them, but as God desires to do for each one of us. Furthermore, since Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard can effectively model for us a significant depth of personal authenticity, we can relate to them as real persons—especially since their writings give evidence that they have pondered life’s challenges in light of their evolving relationship with Christ. For “at the heart of Christianity, the Christian believer confidently expects to find religious experience: an existential encounter in faith with his [or her] God . . . Moreover, religious experience is not an esoteric event but a dimension of his [or her] ordinary living.”4

Since the writers in the Christian tradition generally offer their spiritual guidance primarily through the legacy of their classic spiritual texts, the work of this essay revolves around the textual settings offered by The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola and Renovation of the Heart by Dallas Willard as a way for us to tap into the rich legacies of both of these spiritual guides. The motivating questions of interest in working with excerpts from their selected texts in the context of spiritual formation can be formulated as follows: First, what is their main message regarding the essence of spiritual formation in each of their texts? Second, how might they offer guidance to contemporary spiritual seekers who desire spiritual formation in Christ? Third, what might be the experience of contemporary spiritual seekers who may look to Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard as spiritual guides through accessing their spiritual texts, The Spiritual Exercises and Renovation of the Heart, respectively? Each of their texts reveals a working document, not simply a text to be read and put aside, particularly since The Spiritual Exercises and Renovation of the Heart are both written in such a way as to invite the reader into a clear response filled with discernment flowing from a desire to embody the teachings of Christ. In particular, their texts have the potential for offering a significant blueprint

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1 Dallas Willard frequently clarifies the depth of his meaning regarding spiritual “formation” by adding the word “transformation” to his phrasing, as illustrated in the following example found on page 21 of Renovation of the Heart: “The quest for spiritual formation (really, as indicated, spiritual transformation) is in fact an age-old and worldwide one.”

for guiding spiritual seekers toward fuller and more explicit expression of their spiritual longings. Thus, it may be accurately asserted that Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard have the capacity to be relevant, applicable, inspirational, and devotional as they function as spiritual guides via their classic texts that are intended to be, as Willard effectively asserts, “intensely practical.”

In following the flow of this essay after these preliminary considerations, there will first be a brief, yet significantly foundational, look at Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard in a way that can help to establish some of the needed contextual understandings of their lives and selected works. However, the main work of this essay will attempt to respond to the three areas of interest highlighted above by a consistent focus on our two spiritual guides regarding their message, their guidance, and the experience of contemporary spiritual seekers who reflect on *The Spiritual Exercises* and *Renovation of the Heart*, respectively. In order to establish somewhat of an “orderly process” for reflecting on spiritual formation in Christ in the company of Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard, five key movements will be offered as unifying threads for our consideration of the work of spiritual transformation as follows: (1) building on graced foundations; (2) experiencing God’s healing love and reconciliation; (3) discerning the call of Christ Jesus; (4) taking up our cross with Christ Jesus; and (5) learning the ways of God’s love.

In the process of tracing these five spiritual movements through *The Spiritual Exercises* and *Renovation of the Heart*, it needs to be noted that there are some significant differences inherent in the paradigms of both medieval and evangelical piety, relevant to Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard, respectively. In an effective summary of such distinctions in the context of dynamics of the spiritual journey, theologian Timothy George makes the case that evangelical piety turns upside down the medieval paradigm of a pathway to God. There the journey of faith began with purgation, moved on to illumination, and finally, ended in unification, that is, union with God. In the evangelical understanding, we begin with union with Christ (the new birth) and move on through Word and Spirit to illumi-

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5 Willard, 25. Staying with his emphasis on the need for a hands-on approach to working with *Renovation of the Heart*, Willard continues: “[This book] aims to help those who are ‘seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness’ to find them and to fully live in them” (pp. 25–26). For a similar assertion regarding the practical use of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, see George E. Ganss in his introduction to *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and a Commentary* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), where he states: “The present translation is intended for practical use, especially by retreatants, directors” (p. 10).

6 Willard, 10.
nation and the process of sanctification until, at last, in heaven we see Christ face to face.\footnote{On these distinctions between medieval and evangelical piety, see Timothy George, introduction to \textit{For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality}, eds. Timothy George and Alister McGrath (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 4.}

While it is appropriate to acknowledge such key distinctive elements as found in the medieval and evangelical paradigms, the main task of this essay will be to explore the more unifying and fluid aspects of the above-named five key movements of the spiritual journey in the company of our two spiritual guides, Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard. Our explorations into the richness of \textit{The Spiritual Exercises} and \textit{Renovation of the Heart} can offer fruitful reflections and encouragement to contemporary spiritual seekers who find themselves earnestly on the pathways of their own spiritual transformation in whatever “order” they might be drawn to the commonly shared awareness, inherent in both forms of piety, that “we can never earn God’s favor and goodwill toward us—[for] that is what is so amazing about grace!”\footnote{Harvey Egan, \textit{An Anthology of Christian Mysticism} (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 421.}

\section*{Ignatius of Loyola as Spiritual Guide}

To say that Ignatius of Loyola [1491–1556] can be considered as a spiritual guide with experience would be to complement the way that Harvey Egan describes Ignatius in his \textit{Anthology of Christian Mysticism} as follows:

Ignatius of Loyola became known for his role as ascetic, spiritual director, champion of the poor and sick, reformer of the Church, a counter-reformer, advisor to popes, cardinals, bishops, kings, princes, and other heads of state, founder of the Society of Jesus, leader of men, and initiator of world-wide missionary activity. As educational innovator, his \textit{Spiritual Exercises} changed the course of the history of spirituality from the 16\textsuperscript{th} century to the present day.\footnotemark[9]

And yet, before the shattering of his leg by a cannonball while in battle during his days as a soldier, Ignatius “drove himself toward success, recognition, and esteem . . . [however,] neither gambling, womanizing, nor dueling filled the void within his heart.”\footnote{Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and Marie Schwan, \textit{Praying with Ignatius of Loyola}, Companions for the Journey Series (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1991), 30.} For it was during his time of recuperation from his wounds from the battle at Pamplona, that Ignatius was led by...
God's grace to the path of true conversion and formation in Christ that can be succinctly described as follows:

True conversion comes when we turn to God, acknowledging that only God can fill our emptiness and that God's love has already been poured out by Jesus. We cannot earn God's love because Jesus gives it to us freely and constantly—if we will open ourselves to it. Ignatius needed to let go and trust God. Only then could God fill the emptiness in his heart.11

It is important to note that in the process of his series of conversion experiences from his period of solitude and healing while at Loyola, Ignatius was in the early stages of developing his gift of discernment of spirits whereas he developed his capacity to stay with certain thoughts and desires and then afterwards he would notice where they led him interiorly. Gradually, the thoughts of serving Christ as his King brought him great interior joy and lasting peace, and “after his conversion, Ignatius strove to serve the greater glory of the one true ruler of the world: Christ”12 rather than dedicating himself to an earthly monarch. As George E. Ganss aptly points out in a quote from *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, containing the guiding principles for the Jesuits, the religious order of men later founded by Ignatius:

God was the center and preoccupation of Ignatius’ thoughts, and the object of his special love, and the beloved Person for whom he wanted to do all the little acts which make up daily living. He wanted to be bound irrevocably to God, with the bridges burnt which might lead back to another way of living in which he might have interests other than God—God and [all others] for whom Jesus Christ had shed His blood.13

Ignatius of Loyola spent the rest of his life desiring and seeking the greater glory of God in his inspired attempts “to reach a balance of prayer and action, realizing that one without the other puts our spirituality out of harmony.”14

It was during his time of his conversion, particularly while at Manresa, that Ignatius developed what came to be known as the first draft of *The Spiritual Exercises*, a spiritual manual that was to be frequently revised throughout his life. According to Ignatius’ intention, *The Spiritual Exercises* were

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11 Bergan and Schwan, 30.
12 Ibid., 69.
14 Bergan and Schwan, 86.
designed for working along with a spiritual guide. The four weeks into which The Spiritual Exercises are divided are “fixed and equal periods only by courtesy, like the days of creation. Each ‘week’ represents a stage—a true week being the optimum duration” with section numbers sequentially bracketed in order to designate the content for each of these weeks. For our purposes here, the main sections of The Spiritual Exercises under consideration in this essay can be adequately summarized as follows:

The First Principle and Foundation [SE 23]: Ignatius designed the First Principle and Foundation in order to awaken the spiritual desires of the spiritual seeker [or retreatant].

The First Week [SE 24–90]: It is likewise important to note that it is “the loved sinner [that] stands at the center of the First Week which really dwells on love, God’s love, which is greater than human sin.”

The Second Week [SE 91–189]: Given the extensive and Gospel-oriented content of the Second Week, the spiritual seeker is led through prayer and experience into the mysteries of the life of Christ while developing a keener sense of discernment of spirits.

The Third Week [SE 190–217]: The “entire paschal mystery grounds the Third Week. Followers, then and now, must choose their response to this encounter with mystery, an encounter that can lead to new depths of compassion, friendship, and love.”

The Fourth Week/Contemplatio [SE 218–237]: The nature of the grace of joy that Ignatius had in mind here can be described as follows: “We

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15 See H. Outram Evennett, The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation, 4th ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), and Evennett’s description of the personal approach needed by this “spiritual guide” while giving The Spiritual Exercises: “Flexibility, indeed, was to be the main concern of the giver, who was to adapt the technique and the general plan to the particular needs, state, psychology, character, intelligence, stamina, of each individual concerned, without, however, altering the actual of making what meditations were included: the composition of the mental scene, the application of the senses, the subsequent prayer and resolution. This recognition of the separateness and difference of each individual person is surely a high tribute to the perceptive humanity of Saint Ignatius” (pp. 50–51).

16 Evennett, 48.

17 For the sake of clarity and ease of navigating the material in each of the weeks of The Spiritual Exercises, the designation [SE #(s)] will be used throughout this essay for each of the referenced sections of the Ignatian text.


19 Dyckman et al., 217.
are concerned with paschal joy, the joy proper to Easter, the joy which springs from a still more fundamental grace, that of the faith and love that make the Risen Christ, though invisible, the very core of the believer’s existence.”

Thus, the “genius of The Spiritual Exercises is that they combined the accumulated spiritual wisdom of the Christian centuries with the direct lessons by [Ignatius] himself.” As George E. Ganss so effectively summarizes:

St. Ignatius [has] a dynamic spirituality which [is] ordered toward both personal spiritual growth and energetic apostolic endeavor. It [is] firmly based on the chief truths in God’s revelation, with a particular focus on God’s plan for the creation, redemption, and spiritual development of the human beings who use their freedom wisely—that plan of salvation which St. Paul calls “the mystery of Christ.”

**Dallas Willard as Spiritual Guide**

In her insightful article, “A Divine Conspirator,” Christine A. Scheller contends that Dallas Willard [1935– ] is most familiar to many Christians from his books, and it is philosophy that is “both his primary vocation and the foundation of his devotional writing.” As he continues his long tenure as a professor at the University of Southern California, Willard is known to his students and colleagues for his academic honesty, and he asserts that “while he doesn’t believe anyone will be saved except by Jesus, he adds: ‘How that works out, probably no one knows.’” And yet, with evidence inherent in Willard’s legacy of prolific writings, there is a palpable reassurance at work that Dallas Willard continues to make “the search for deeper spirituality and efforts to understand spiritual formation” accessible to contemporary seekers who desire “a renovation of the heart into Christ likeness.” For who could fail to be inspired by a spiritual guide who can say the following: “All scripture is inspired, but some of it is electric. The

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21 Evennett, 46.
24 Scheller, 46.
26 Ibid.
power of the Holy Spirit hums in the lines so thrillingly that you hardly
dare to touch them.” 27 Willard’s compelling message that there is a need for
a “thoroughgoing inner transformation through Christ” 28 is one that can
draw spiritual seekers who are “out of shape, spiritually speaking.” 29 A
possible remedy offered for some soul-shaping exercises designed for spiri-
tual fitness may be found in Dallas Willard’s book, Renovation of the
Heart.

Renovation of the Heart is clearly divided into two major parts with
the first part (chapters one through five) dealing with the right understand-
ing of the relationship between human existence and divine operation and
the second part (chapters six through thirteen) dealing with the essential di-
mensions of human personality and how they should be transformed. 30 All
through the book, Willard makes the significant claim that “the renovation
of the heart into Christ likeness is not something that concerns the heart
(spirit, will) alone.” 31 Therefore, “it is important for us to understand the
idea that we renovate the heart by changing it, but we can’t truly transform
the heart without changing the other essential parts of the human personal-
ity.” 32 It is this assertion that leads Willard to effectively develop his VIM
schema (Vision, Intention, and Means) as necessary for transformation. 33
Believing that the work of spiritual transformation by necessity involves a
community aspect, Willard offers a key clarification of the difference be-
tween vessel [traditions and denominations] and treasure [the Great Com-
mission] with a rightful caution to avoid making the vessel the treasure. 34

Since, according to Willard, the process of spiritual formation involves
“those who love and trust Jesus Christ [and] effectively take on his charac-
ter,” their “outward conformity to His example and His instructions rises
toward fullness as their inward sources of action take on the same character
as His. They come more and more to share His vision, love, hope, feelings,
and habits.” 35 Thus, through the work of his book, Renovation of the
Heart, Willard desires that through “spiritual formation in Christlikeness
as the sure outcome of well-directed activities that are under the personal
supervision of Christ and are sustained by all of the instrumentalities of his

27 Cornelius Plantinga, “Dr. Willard’s Diagnosis,” Christianity Today 50, no. 9
28 Willard cited by Plantinga, 50.
29 Plantinga, 50.
30 Burgula, 117.
31 Willard cited by Burgula, 117.
32 Burgula, 117.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 120.
35 Dallas Willard, “The Spirit is Willing: The Body as a Tool for Spiritual
Growth,” in The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation, ed. Ken-
grace,” the benefits offered to what Willard refers to as our “aching world” will be enormous. Given his assertion that “it is only spiritual formation in Christ that makes us at home on earth,” Willard then urges us as spiritual seekers to notice that “Christ brings me to the place where I am able to walk beside my neighbor, whoever he or she may be. I am not above them. I am beside them: their servant, living with them through the events common to all of us.”

Movement One: Building on Graced Foundations

God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever.

—Ignatius of Loyola

Genuine transformation of the whole person into the goodness and power seen in Jesus and his “Abba” Father—the only transformation adequate to the human self—remains the necessary goal of human life.

—Dallas Willard

In pondering the First Principle and Foundation at the beginning of The Spiritual Exercises, it seems evident that Ignatius simply and profoundly prioritizes his acknowledgement of the level of God’s desire for us. Here Ignatius creates a context of “the sense of creaturehood that underlies the First Principle and Foundation . . . For we are beings of love, created out of love . . . [and] a person must begin the Exercises with the awareness of being a creature of love.” This sense of creaturehood may seem as basic as “the answer to the catechism question, ‘Why did God create me?’” However, a “sense of creaturehood is not just an intellectual realization.”

Rather, creaturehood is a deep awareness. In some ways it comes from our human condition, and in some ways it comes from grace. Creature-

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36 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 255.
37 Ibid.
38 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [23], in David L. Fleming, Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1994), 27.
41 Ibid., 27.
42 Ibid.
hood contains a mixture of feelings involving a feeling of fear and at the same time a feeling of security. Christians know themselves as dependent beings who are surrounded by love. At the very least, Christians should be sure that they are safe in the arms of their Creator.43

Thus, in our growing awareness of ourselves as loved and created by a God, we may come to know our “desirableness” where “we come to know that [God’s] desire makes us desirable, makes us ‘the apple of [God’s] eye.’”44 For “such an experience of our creation is the affective first principle and foundation upon which not only the Ignatian Exercises rest, but upon which any development of a personal relationship with God must rest.”45 However, as we shall see, there is often difficulty in claiming this degree of “desirableness” since our life histories can hold countless examples of how others did not always see us as so desirable or lovable. As a result, significant interior conflicts can often occur in spiritual seekers who experience degrees of difficulty in believing in their graced identities.

Building on his foundational focus, Ignatius succinctly frames the retreatant’s response to the unconditional love of God, our Creator, as follows: “Our love response takes shape in our praise and honor and service of the God of our life.”46 For “the Foundation outlines a vision of life and the most basic criteria for making choices. It says that we live well and attain our ultimate purpose by loving just one thing, or rather some One . . . [For] according to the Foundation, serving God is what makes us happy.”47

Given that spiritual seekers may struggle with where to begin in pondering the deeper implications of Ignatius’ Principle and Foundation in their day-to-day living, some valuable questions48 for further prayer and reflection in light of Ignatius’ foundational premise may be considered:

(1) How would you describe your world and how it influences you?
(2) How do you imagine God?
(3) What is your relationship to others and all of God’s creation?
(4) What is your part in creation?

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43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [23], in Fleming, Draw Me Into Your Friendship, 27.
48 Dyckman et al., 99.
(5) What are the dominant influences on your sense of God, humans, heaven and earth?
(6) What does it mean to exist in this vast unfolding universe?49

In accompaniment with the focus on the wonder of our creation in the image and likeness of God as put forth by Ignatius of Loyola in his First Principle and Foundation [SE 23], spiritual seekers may also greatly profit from the spiritual guidance of Dallas Willard as they reflect and pray with various sections of his *Renovation of the Heart*. At this point in our consideration of our two spiritual guides, it can be instructive to note that where Ignatius offers four paragraphs of concise construction and exhortation at the outset of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Willard more extensively clarifies what he means by the orderly process of spiritual formation in Christ as creatively woven and reinforced all throughout his book. For example, Willard asserts: “Instead of focusing upon what God can do, we must humble ourselves to accept the ways he has chosen to work with us. [For] these are clearly laid out in the Bible, and especially in the words and person of Jesus.”50 For the goal is to

leave our burdensome ways of heavy labor—especially the ‘religious ones’—and step into the yoke of training with [Jesus]. This is a way of gentleness and lowliness, a way of soul rest. It is a way of inner transformation that proves pulling his load and carrying his burden with him to be a life that is easy and light (Matthew 11:28–30).51

Willard effectively offers what he deems to be essential reflections on each of the six dimensions of the human person in *Renovation of the Heart*, summarized here as follows:

1. *Thought*—brings before our minds in various ways (including perception and imagination) and enables us to consider them in various respects and trace out their relationships with one another.52

49 Regarding the importance of considering the evolving universe story in relation to the *Spiritual Exercises*, refer to *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed* where Katherine Dyckman et al., offer concise and relevant insights regarding the importance of the new cosmology in their Chapter Four, “Grounding in Truth” where they assert: “No longer can a human story be told apart from a universe story; the two are inextricably bound together . . . Human beings are radically interconnected with all other creatures” (p. 97).

50 Willard, 10.

51 Willard, 10. As acknowledged by Dallas Willard, all Scripture quotations referenced in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

52 Willard, 32.
2. Feeling—inclines us toward or away from things that come before our minds and thought.53
3. Will (Spirit, Heart)—volition or choice, is the exercise of the will the capacity of the person to originate things and events that would not otherwise be or occur.54
4. Body—the focal point of our presence in the physical and social world.55
5. Social Context—the human self requires rootedness in others.56
6. Soul—that dimension of the person that interrelates all of the other dimensions so that they form one life.57

In light of these six dimensions, Dallas Willard, similarly to Ignatius of Loyola, acknowledges the holistic nature of the process of spiritual transformation into Christ-likeness as the integration of these six areas requiring consistent attention. No small task for the spiritual seeker “who has been found by Christ” and who places oneself “at the disposal of God!”58

**Movement Two: Experiencing God’s Healing Love and Reconciliation**

*I raise my mind and think how God our Lord is looking at me.*59
—Ignatius of Loyola

*When God stands before us, we stand before him. Refusing to worship him is a way of trying to avoid his face and his eyes.*60
—Dallas Willard

For the spiritual seeker who has allowed Ignatius’ First Principle and Foundation to become essential in his or her life, it is important that there has been an “experience of God as the Creator who loves us into existence for community with God.”61 As Ignatius himself asserts: “Our love re-

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 33.
55 Ibid., 35.
56 Ibid., 36.
57 Ibid., 37.
58 Ibid., 94.
60 Willard, 108.
response takes shape in our praise and honor and service of the God of our life.”62 This awareness helps to lead the retreatant from pondering the Principle and Foundation into the spiritual work of the First Week of the Ignatian Exercises.

However, apparent progress in this First Week may be slow since “it is often difficult to let our experiences of God’s dream and creative love take root in our hearts.”63 What might be the cause of such difficulty? It is likely that a poor self-image can get in the way as well as distorted images of God can reveal themselves in people’s illusions that “God needs to be placated, and yet that God is really implacable . . . The illusion comes down to the belief that I am rotten to the core and unlovable.”64 For “the fact that we need reassurance about God’s love of us sinners indicates that at this stage of our spiritual journey we also labor under an illusion. It is difficult for us to believe in our bones that God loves sinners.”65 It is important to note that Ignatius is not as interested in a detailed list of past sins as much as clear attentiveness to areas of disorder that can serve as the backdrop for everyday decisions that can lead to darkness and desolation.

Thus, it is with a growing spirit of gratitude that we can allow ourselves to stand in the face of God’s tenderness and mercy where Ignatius exclaims: “This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life. The angels: How is it that, although they are the swords of God’s justice, they have borne with me, protected me, and prayed for me? The saints: How is it that they have interceded and prayed for me?”66 As Ignatian scholar, Michael Ivens, so well expresses: “In this final point, with its mood of wonder and ‘intense affection,’ the exercitant [retreatant] is already moving towards the concluding prayer of gratitude.”67

At the beginning of Chapter Three of his Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard makes the following astute observation: “One of the greatest obstacles to effective spiritual transformation in Christ today is simple failure to understand and acknowledge the reality of the human situation as it affects Christians and non-Christians alike. We must start from where we really are.”68 Similar to where Ignatius of Loyola can exhort me as a retreatant to “raise my mind and think how God our Lord is looking at me,”69 so too Dallas Willard reinforces that “when God stands before us,

62 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [23], in Fleming, Draw Me Into Your Friendship, 27.
63 Barry, Letting God Come Close, 72.
64 Ibid., 72–73.
65 Ibid., 76.
66 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [60], in Ganss, The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary, 44.
67 Ivens, 58.
68 Willard, 45.
69 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [75], in Ganss, 48.
we stand before him.”70 As Willard effectively emphasizes further while complementing the more concisely expressed spiritual guidance of Ignatius: “The tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong. The adult carries the same burden—but now so great as to be crushed by it. . . . The so-called ‘right to privacy’ of which so much is made in contemporary life is in very large measure merely a way of avoiding scrutiny in our wrongdoing.”71 To illustrate the need for accountability in our quest for transformation, Willard showcases the Twelve Steps used by Alcoholics Anonymous and other similar 12-Step programs that include “the personal and social arrangements in which they are concretely embodied, including a conscious involvement of God in the individual’s life.”72

In light of our need to bring God and others into our process of transformation that contains a plan that complements one’s good intentions, Dallas Willard offers what he calls the VIM pattern that includes the essential components of (1) vision; (2) intention; and (3) means. Since Willard rightfully acknowledges that “vim” is a “derivative of the Latin term ‘vis,’ meaning direction, strength, force, vigor, power, energy, or virtue,”73 it seems appropriate that this acronym contains the essential elements inherent in our process of being spiritually formed in Christ. The goal of this VIM process is not merely outward conformity to Gospel teachings, but rather a progression “to the point where what Jesus himself did and taught would be the natural outflow of who [we] really are ‘on the inside.’”74 More will be said about how the VIM process relates to the glimpse of the Kingdom of God that is necessary to proceed while considering Movement Three in the next section of this essay.

**Movement Three: Discerning the Call of Christ Jesus**

> I ask Jesus our Lord that I might not be deaf to his call in my life and that I might be ready and willing to do what he wants.75
> 
> —Ignatius of Loyola

> If we are concerned about our own spiritual formation or that of others, the vision of the kingdom is the place we must start.76
> 
> —Dallas Willard

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70 Willard, 108.
72 Ibid., 84.
73 Ibid., 85.
74 Ibid., 86.
75 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises* [91], in Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship*, 83.
76 Willard, 86.
As we become more aware of our desires in light of God’s desires, “we discover what we should do and what we should choose as we grow in our capacity to act and choose. As a result, we find that we are not making a choice after all; rather, the Spirit is constantly disposing us.”77 It seems that before spiritual seekers can authentically consider what more they might do for God, most people “want to experience the closeness and care of God, but hold little hope that God will actually be a felt presence. In other words, some people expect so little of God and have an image of God as being more niggardly than God actually is.”78 To further illustrate this point here, I remember one of my directees named “Carol” saying to me many years ago: “You know, I have come to believe that I have a spirituality of deprivation rather than abundance when it comes to my relationship with God. I often expect so little of God! I think that God wants me, rather, to have a spirituality of abundance where I can expect great and wonderful things of God!”

Perhaps it can be most helpful for us to remember in the company of Ignatius that “God always moves first, searching for us.”79 Awareness of our true dependence on God is of greatest importance to facilitate our understanding that “another prerequisite for the freedom that comes from knowing God’s love is prayer to the Holy Spirit. We seek what is solely a gift from God.”80 Jesuit John English so well captures the spirit of Ignatius as follows:

Jesus said, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you” (John 14:26). He also said, “The truth will make you free” (John 8:31). The basic truth that makes us free is that God loves us with an overwhelming love. It follows that our prayer . . . should ask the Holy Spirit to make us aware of God’s love, to help us so “abide in God’s love,” and to give us the trust to surrender in all freedom to God’s loving desire for us.81

As indicated, Ignatius’ own process of discernment began while he was recuperating at Loyola when he noticed “that two sets of daydreams led to different affective states, and he drew the conclusion that God was leading him toward a new way of life, away from the life of chivalry that gave him so much apparent pleasure.”82 As we, as contemporary spiritual seekers

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77 English, 35.
78 Barry, Letting God Come Close, 44.
79 English, 41.
80 English, 42.
81 English, 42. As acknowledged by John English, all Scripture quotations referenced in his book, Spiritual Freedom, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.
82 Barry, 116.
continue to plumb the depths of our own desires, we may be drawn to notice that “God desires that the actions of each of us be in tune with God’s one action; in our best moment, we too desire to be in tune with God’s action.” This metaphor of being “in tune” with God may be aptly described and enhanced as follows:

Have you ever experienced a time when you were “in the flow,” able to live with relative unambivalence and lack of fear in the “now,” attuned to the presence of God? Then you have an idea of what it might be like to be at one with the one action of God. In such a state you are a contemplative in action. You know that you are in the right place at the right time . . . To be attuned to the one action of God, to [God’s] will, is to be extraordinarily free, happy, and fulfilled even in the midst of a world of sorrow and pain.

To the spiritual guide walking with a discerning person, the following sound advice may be appropriate to recall: “When guides are discerning whether good or evil is at work, they should remember that ‘you will know them by their fruits’ (Matthew 7:20).”

As surprised as we may be that Christ would choose us, it is important to remember that the call “of Christ brings with it further gifts—a soul-expanding generosity; new burning desires for service; and a remarkable confidence in what Christ can do. Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten One, offers us the chance to work at his side. How can we refuse?” Christ offers personal love, but he offers it in a new way. Jesus is saying ‘Come and labor with me.’ He is offering companionship.” Thus, with the spiritual guidance of Ignatius of Loyola, we seek to understand how we can serve Jesus Christ. How can we be with Christ, working for the fulfillment of the world?”

As promised and as a fitting complement to Ignatius’ clear focus regarding our need to respond wholeheartedly to the call and mission of Christ, it is now that our discussion of Movement Three continues with a closer look at Dallas Willard’s VIM process including vision, intention and means, with an emphasis on the quality of discernment that involves our clear “intention to be a kingdom person.” One might ask: How do I know that I am following the call of Christ in my life? What reassurance do I have

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83 Ibid., 126.
85 English, 127.
86 Ibid., 97.
87 Ibid., 104–105.
88 Ibid., 150–151.
89 Willard, 87.
that I am not just listening to myself and doing what I want? In response to such concerns, Dallas Willard affirms that “in the clear and forceful vision of Jesus and his kingdom, as our personality becomes progressively more reorganized around God and his eternal life, self-denial moves beyond more or less frequent acts to settled disposition and character.”

As a practical guide to this progression toward complete identification of our will with God’s, Willard offers the following distinctions to be noted: (1) Surrender—a person’s consent to God’s supremacy in all things; (2) Abandonment—there is no part of oneself that holds back from God’s will; (3) Contentment—we are assured that God has done, and will always do, well by us—no matter what; and (4) Participation—the accomplishing of God’s will in our world. Given the thoroughness of these key four distinctions of complete identification of our will with God, Willard astutely asks what many others may be asking at this point: “Do we then lose ourselves?” While responding that it would be impossible for a fully functioning human person not to have a will, Willard reiterates what true spiritual transformation really means when he clarifies that “for the first time to have a will that is fully functional, not at war with itself, and capable of directing all of the parts of the self in harmony with one another under the direction of God.” The good news is that “for the first time we not only have a fully functioning will, but we also have a clear identity in the eternal kingdom of God and can day by day translate our time into an eternity embedded in our own life and in the lives of those near us. The will of God is not foreign to our will. It is sweetness, life, and strength to us. Our heart sings.”

**Movement Four: Taking Up Our Cross with Christ Jesus**

I continue to pray with the gift of being able to feel sorrow with Jesus in sorrow, to be anguished with Jesus’ anguish, and even to experience tears and deep grief because of all the afflictions which Jesus endured for me.

—Ignatius of Loyola

And then [Jesus] uses an absolutely shocking image—one all too familiar to his hearers, but rather hard for us to fully appreciate today. It was that of a man carrying on his back the lumber that...
would be used to kill him when he arrived at the place of execution. “Whoever does not come after me carrying his own cross cannot be my apprentice” (Luke 14:27, par). 96

—Dallas Willard

As spiritual seekers continue to travel with Jesus on the journey that takes him to Jerusalem, they often develop a deepening desire to stay with Jesus on this difficult road that eventually leads to Calvary. Even here the focus remains on the Lord. In asking for such a grace, retreatants “are not seeking to shoulder a heavy burden of guilt, but to ponder a mystery of love—that Jesus could love us enough to suffer and die for us.” 97

In moving more deeply into the contemplative exercises related to Jesus’ journey to Calvary as progressively detailed in Ignatius’ Third Week, it may be well to recall that these reflections are “intended to help us escape our narrow selves—we die to ourselves. This demands a deeply personal union with Jesus in suffering . . . [We] ask for the grace to be drawn beyond ourselves. In dying to ourselves through union with Christ suffering, we gain strength and courage, freedom and conviction—all those graces that are necessary to do the desire of God.” 98 In order to facilitate the depth of one’s heartfelt longing for this grace, Ignatius invites each spiritual seeker to “maintain a certain attitude of sorrow and anguish by calling to mind frequently the labors, fatigue, and suffering which Jesus our Lord endured from the time of his birth down to the particular mystery of the Passion which I am presently contemplating.” 99

In order to allow this level of desire of being with Jesus in his suffering to be increasingly connected to areas of suffering experienced by contemporary spiritual seekers, the following questions may prove to be helpful: “(1) What happens as a result of this suffering? (2) How can I learn to suffer for the right reasons and what are they? (3) How can I see meaning in this suffering, leading me to greater faith, hope, and love? (4) How do I identify the value of living with pain and how do I get out of pain that is destructive?” 100 As rightfully noted by the authors of The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: “Past interpretations of spirituality and theology uncritically accepted the value of suffering. Today, however, the insights of psychology and liberation theology demand the alleviation of demeaning and unjust suffering and expose the ways people and systems legitimate this kind of oppression.” 101

As an enhancement to what has been observed about the loving labor needed to be present to Jesus in his suffering both on the cross and in our

96 Willard, 66.
98 English, 219–220.
99 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [206], in Fleming, 155.
100 Dyckman et al., 223.
101 Ibid.
contemporary world, the following points effectively characterize the depths of compassion needed since “contemplating the passion draws us closer to Christ and deeper into the procession of suffering humanity . . . We discover the divinity hidden in weakness today. We share God’s grief over humanity and our wounded earth. We locate our own suffering in a larger context. Finally, we are strengthened for the persecution that befalls all who take the gospel, and life itself, seriously.”

While Dallas Willard does not try to mitigate Jesus’ words in Luke 14:27, he is also quick to point out that “one of the great dangers in the process of spiritual formation is that self-denial and death to self will be taken as but one more technique or ‘job’ for those who wish to save their life (soul).” A key point of emphasis that serves to clarify the meaning of the interior work entailed in the carrying of our cross with Jesus in our daily lives can be summed up by Willard as follows: “This dreary and deadly ‘self-denial,’ which is all too commonly associated with religion, can be avoided only if the primary fact of our inner being is a loving vision of Jesus and his kingdom. This is where correctly counting the cost comes in.”

It seems important to note at this point that while Ignatius of Loyola tends to render practices of penance or self-denial as “always seen in terms of my love response to God,” Dallas Willard offers an essential vigilance that can be instructive regarding such penitential practices where he asserts: “Practices of ‘mortification’ can become exercises in more self-righteousness. How often this has happened!” Willard extends his caution about how the phrase “death to self” can be interpreted when he makes the following observation: “Self-denial will then externalize itself in overt practices of group identity that may seem very sacrificial, but can leave the ‘mind of the flesh’ in full control. We see this, for example, in many who wear what they regard as plain clothing or who abstain from certain foods.” Likewise, the authors of The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed echo Willard’s rightful caution regarding ascetical practices as follows: “Paying close attention to his [Ignatius’] insight about inner conversion leading to outer asceticism can help keep penances in their rightful place as useful means to a significant goal: assuming one’s rightful freedom as called, graced, and missioned.”

Perhaps a viable reinterpretation for our times of what it means to “carry one’s cross” could rightfully include the following discernment question: “To what am I attached and therefore unconsciously substitute for the

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102 Brackley, 185.
103 Willard, 67.
104 Ibid., 67.
105 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [82], in Fleming, 71.
106 Willard, 67.
107 Ibid.
108 Dyckman et al., 75.
source of life?” \(^{109}\) Even beyond the individual reinterpretation of what it means to “come after Jesus while carrying my own cross” (Luke 14:27, par), it may also be helpful to engage in the communal process of “expanding Ignatius’ perspective to include cultural and social systems and the natural environment within which each individual dwells as an interdependent member [in order to uncover] new possibilities for reclaiming asceticism.” \(^{110}\)

The true spirit of such a giving up of one’s life as it has been understood before following Jesus can be made clear in the words of Saint Paul to the Philippians where Paul shares his compelling perspective on his desire to be formed into Christ Jesus: “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order to participate in the life of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10–11).” \(^{111}\) As Dallas Willard appropriately asks: “What are we to say of anyone who thinks they have something more important to do than that?” \(^{112}\)

**Movement Five: Learning the Ways of God’s Love**

_I beg for the grace of being able to enter into the joy and consolation of Jesus as he savors the victory of his risen life._ \(^{113}\)

—Ignatius of Loyola

Jesus’ resurrected presence with us, along with his teaching, assures us of God’s care for all who let him be God and let him care for them. “Do not be afraid, little flock,’ for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). \(^{114}\)

—Dallas Willard

Ignatius allows the retreatant to gently move from praying with Christ’s passion and death to praying for the grace to know Jesus’ joy and consolation in the fullness of his risen life. In order to assist the retreatant in praying for the grace of this intense joy with risen Jesus, Ignatius includes thirteen apparitions [SE 299–311] and this is “a beautiful way of showing how Jesus goes about bringing joy, hope, and confidence to people. All of the Resurrection appearances have the Immanuel theme—the continuation of the Incarnation today. God continues with us and is present to us.” \(^{115}\)

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 74.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 75.

\(^{111}\) Willard, 43.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Ignatius of Loyola, _The Spiritual Exercises_ [221], in Fleming, 169.

\(^{114}\) Willard, 70.

\(^{115}\) English, 230.
Another factor so common “to many of the appearance narratives [is] the importance of witness. The experience of the risen Jesus by one of his followers opens the way for his revelation to another.”116 As eloquently expressed by Neil Vaney in Christ in a Grain of Sand:

As dawn cast a livid scar across the sky
Mary hurried to the tomb through streets heavy with morning . . .
Racing back to tell Peter and John that the stone was gone
One thought held all: where had they hidden her love?
Tell me, gardener, where is my love?
Is hardly a sane question at six at a rock tomb.
His response, Mary, was an echo of past days
And an identity rediscovered at this feet . . .
That ageless moment of recognition “I have seen the Lord”
Now becomes a sign of witness and a call to all.117

It needs to be noted, however, that a significant number of spiritual seekers often experience unexpected difficulties in praying for this depth of joy with Jesus in “the office of consoler that Christ our Lord exercises.”118 In light of such concerns and challenges, the following reminder can be instructive: “Remember that you are asking for a grace, a personal revelation of Jesus, not something that is in your power to attain on your own. It may take some time before this grace is given . . . At any rate, be patient with yourself as you contemplate these resurrection scenes and keep insisting with Jesus that you want to share in his joy.”119 For, “to receive the grace of the joy of the resurrection we must accept the full reality of the horror of the crucifixion. Jesus, glorified, still bears the marks of that horror in his hands, feet, and side.”120

Toward the end of The Spiritual Exercises, a spiritual seeker can experience a growing sense of transformative completion by reflecting on Ignatius’ Contemplation to Attain Love [SE 230–237] as a way of inviting us to see God working in all creation to ‘make all things new’ and to respond in loving service.”121 It is important to consider that Ignatius skillfully lays the important groundwork for entering into this Contemplatio in “supplying two pre-notes: ‘The first is that love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words’ [SE 230], ‘The second is that love consists in a mutual

117 Ibid., 157–158.
120 Ibid., 112.
121 Brackley, 211.
sharing of goods, for example, the lover gives and shares with the beloved what he possesses’ [SE 231].”

As the spiritual seekers continue their sustained reflections on Ignatius’ \Contemplatio\, they are led into four distinct, yet related, “points” that can be simply summarized as follows: (1) \textit{First Point}: I will call back into my memory the gifts I have received—my creation, redemption, and other gifts particular to myself; (2) \textit{Second Point}: I will consider how God dwells in creatures; (3) \textit{Third Point}: I will consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth; that is, [God] acts in the manner of one who is laboring; and (4) \textit{Fourth Point}: I will consider how all good things and gifts descend from above.

Beginning with the First Point and after each of the subsequent three points, Ignatius suggests that retreatants “make an offering of themselves in terms of the ‘Take, Lord, and Receive’ prayer:” \cite{English2006, Ganss2006} “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me.” \cite{Ignatius2006}

If “this offering is approached in the biblical way of a covenant relationship with God, it is much more meaningful.” \cite{Willard2006}

Dallas Willard rightly observes the following: “In laying down my life I must experience much more than ‘my strength, my wealth, my power.’ . . . The necessary support for giving and forgiving is abundantly supplied by Jesus through the reality of the Kingdom of God that he brings into our lives . . . when we experience cross and tomb, but resurrection is not yet.” \cite{Willard2006} Thus, as one moves through the Paschal Mystery while reflecting on the implications of what it means to have Jesus’ resurrected presence with us, Dallas Willard asserts that “it is the love of God, admiration and confidence in his greatness and goodness, and the regular experience of his care that free us from the burden of ‘looking out for ourselves.’” \cite{Willard2006}

As a fitting complement to the four points of Ignatius’ \Contemplatio,\ Dallas Willard outlines what he calls “Four Movements Toward Perfect Love” which can be summarized as follows: (1) \textit{First Movement of Love}—the acknowledgement that no other source, whether inside or outside of re-

\begin{itemize}
\item This summary of the four points of Ignatius’ Contemplation to Attain Love is based on \textit{The Spiritual Exercises} [234–237], in Ganss, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary}, 94–95.
\item \cite{English2006} English, 237.
\item \cite{Ignatius2006} Ignatius of Loyola, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises} [234], in Ganss, 95.
\item \cite{English2006} English, 237.
\item \cite{Willard2006} Willard, 70.
\item \cite{Ibid} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
ligions, even comes close to what God in Christ shows of love, particularly exemplified in Christ’s laying down His life for us (1 John 3:16); (2) Second Movement of Love—the acknowledgement that the first great commandment, to love God with all our being, can be fulfilled because of the beauty of God given in Christ; (3) Third Movement of Love—the acknowledgement that the first great commandment makes it possible to fulfill the second: love of neighbor as oneself (1 John 4:12); (4) Fourth Movement of Love—the acknowledgement that the fellowship of Christ’s apprentices in kingdom living is a community of love (John 13:34–35). 129 Thus, Willard offers the articulation of these movements of love as a way for us to “live in the community of goodwill from a competent God” with an assurance that “those who live in the fulfillment of God’s redemptive love in human life will no longer experience fear and the [resulting] torment that is incompatible with living in the full cycle of love (1 John 4:18, par).” 130

However, love is inextricably bound to joy and peace, according to Willard’s reflections on living one’s life in the presence of the Risen Lord. Similar in tone to Ignatius of Loyola, Dallas Willard asserts that “joy is a basic element of inner transformation into Christlikeness and of the outer life that flows from it . . . [since] full joy is our first line of defense against weakness, failure, and disease of mind and body.” 131 Likewise, Willard describes “peace as the rest of will that results from assurance about ‘how things will turn out’ [since] when ‘I am at peace about it,’ we say, and this means I am no longer striving, inwardly or outwardly, to save some outcome dear to me or to avoid one that I reject.” 132 When Willard talks about peace with God, he is reflecting on the quality of peace that “comes only from acceptance of his gift of life in his Son (Romans 5:1–2). We are then assured of the outcome of our life and are no longer trying to justify ourselves before God or others.” 133

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Dallas Willard aptly reflects that “spiritual formation is not only formation of the spirit or inner being of the individual, though that is both the process and the outcome, it is formation by the Spirit of God and by the spiritual riches of Christ’s continuing incarnation in his people—including most prominently, the treasures of his written and spoken word and the
amazing personalities of those in whom he has most fully lived.”

The work of this essay has been to shed the spotlight on Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard as two viable spiritual guides for our contemporary times since they have indeed given evidence of having “walked the walk” of following Christ with “the Lord always before them.” Thus, “we learn from them how to do that by making them our close companions on the way” in our ongoing quest to engage in the process of spiritual formation and transformation into Christ-likeness. As a result, we can be filled with thanks for the lives of Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard who continue to give testimony to the essence of what it means to “take love itself—God’s kind of love—into the depths of our being through spiritual formation [that will] enable us to act lovingly to an extent that will be surprising even to ourselves, at first.”

In the process of giving thanks for the graces given for being drawn by God in this process of spiritual transformation, spiritual seekers soon realize that these desires “move beyond thanksgiving to thankfully giving ourselves in return—to serve, to love.” As Jesuit John English rightfully asserts: “We should move from an attitude of thanks to one of welcome, saying, ‘For all that has been, thank you, God. For all that will be, yes!’”

However, given the humanness of our efforts in our quest to “love God with the totality of our being, we know that we do not do it. God loves us, but how can we love God?” And yet, even with the deepening awareness of our own limits in loving God and others, Ignatius encourages that, “accordingly, the ‘Take, Lord, and Receive’ prayer starts from a recognition that God desires to share everything, including the persons of the Trinity,” with spiritual seekers. As rightfully articulated in the spirit of Ignatius, “this sharing should continue to grow until the Spirit stirs up in retreatants the longing to live in the present all God’s loving acts of the past and share all in Christ’s name: ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matthew 18:20).”

134 Ibid., 24.
135 Ibid., 114.
136 As already acknowledged earlier in this essay (see footnote #3), Dallas Willard frequently clarifies his meaning of spiritual “formation” in light of “transformation” in Renovation of the Heart by emphasizing that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (p. 22).
137 Willard, 24.
138 English, 236.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., 234.
141 English, 238.
142 Ibid.
Thus, the mutual love and intimacy experienced by spiritual seekers at this stage of transformation can be greatly enhanced by praying with Dallas Willard’s effective paraphrasing of Jesus’ Great Commission: “As you go through this world, make apprentices to me from all kinds of people, immerse them in Trinitarian reality, and teach them to do everything I have commanded you” (Mathew 28:19–20, par). As Willard continues to note: “These instructions are bookended by categorical statements about the plentiful resources for this undertaking: ‘I have been given say over everything in heaven and earth’ and ‘Look, I’m with you every moment, until the work is done’ (verses 18, 20, par).”

The assurance of “the great cloud of witnesses” who, having gone before us, can offer great reassurance as I desire to “see myself as standing before God our Lord, and also before the angels and saints, who are interceding for me.”

We are surely not alone in our “joining the mighty project” of God who “wants people like us to become fit enough to follow Jesus inside the ‘infinite rule of God,’ becoming searchers for his kingdom, agents within it, witnesses to it, and models of it.”

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143 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 240.
144 Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises [232], in Ganss, 94.
145 Plantinga, 50.

Abstract. This paper offers an interpretation of Dallas Willard’s views on the relation of morality to spirituality by way of a critique of a recent article by John Coe—or perhaps a critique of Coe by way of an interpretation of Willard. Coe has argued that a certain erroneous view of the relationship between moral and spiritual formation poses a serious threat to the latter by encouraging believers to hide spiritual and moral failures behind their moral successes. In this he is correct, but his own approach to the matter poses an equally serious threat by obscuring the fact that moral formation is integral to spiritual formation. In order to address the matter successfully, we need an adequate view of the positive relationship between moral and spiritual formation. Such a view is implicit in the work of Dallas Willard. My aim is to make this view explicit.

1. Coe on Moral and Spiritual Formation

In the inaugural issue of the Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care, John Coe argued that many Christians are hampered in their quest for spiritual growth by what he calls “the moral temptation,” the temptation to substitute moral formation for spiritual formation.¹ Coe has put his finger on a genuine problem. In fact, I think it amounts to nothing more or less than that familiar adversary of grace, legalism (a term he also uses to describe the problem). However, I think that his approach to it is flawed in two ways. First, using the label “moral formation” for legalism threatens to mislead. Genuine moral formation is not legalistic, and is an important dimension of spiritual formation, for Christians and non-Christians alike. But Coe’s presentation of spiritual and moral formation as opposed may cause

readers to miss both the important fact that, and the important ways in which, the two are united—a result ultimately as detrimental to spiritual formation as the legalism Coe sets out to address. Second, insofar as Coe has put his finger on a genuine problem (i.e., legalism) I fear the remedy he proposes can have only limited success; for it generates conditions favorable to the very problem of legalism that it is meant to solve. In this paper I will be able to address only the first of these flaws, leaving the second for future work.

Before making my case against Coe, I want to acknowledge that the distance between us may not be as great as the foregoing comments may suggest; for there is some evidence that his critique of “moral formation” applies to something that is “moral” only in a carefully qualified, and in fact an ironic, sense. In the opening pages of his article, Coe identifies “the moral temptation” as follows:

The moral temptation is the attempt to deal with our spiritual failure, guilt and shame by means of spiritual efforts, by attempting to perfect one’s self in the power of the self. It is the attempt of the well-intentioned believer to use spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, ministry, service, obedience—being good in general—as a way to relieve the burden of spiritual failure, lack of love and the guilt and shame that results. It is the temptation to try to relieve a burden that Christ alone can relieve.²

So it seems that by “moral formation” Coe means to indicate a misuse of what ordinarily would count as spiritual/religious or moral activities. And it is a misuse, I submit, precisely because it involves the mistaken idea (and attitude) that good deeds “make up for” misdeeds, whether before God or anyone else. It is a simple fact of personal relationships in specie (whether the persons are divine, human, or otherwise) that misdeeds can never be “made up for” by counterbalancing them with good deeds. They can only be repented of, apologized for, and forgiven. To think otherwise is to assume that acceptance, affection, and so on—the qualities of desirable personal relationships—can be “bought.” Such an assumption can be seen only as a manifestation of ignorance, foolishness or arrogance, and this renders the associated activities—the attempts to “buy” the relationship—neither genuinely spiritual, nor genuinely moral.

Thus, hot on the heels of this last statement, Coe rightly offers the following terminological proviso:

Throughout this paper, . . . I will be using the term[s] “moralism” and “moral” in a certain pejorative manner in order to make a point. What I mean by moralism [or moral formation] is any attempt on the part of

² Coe, 55–56.
the believer or unbeliever to deal with guilt and shame before God and others or to try to grow oneself by being good in the power of the self, to live the moral life in autonomy from the transformative power of the Spirit.3

Furthermore, he acknowledges that

the Christian has the possibility of being the most “moral” in the fullest and best sense of the term. That is, it is possible for the believer to be good and grow in virtue not as a way to deal with failure, guilt and shame in the Christian life but to do so in freedom, on the basis of the cross and in the Spirit.4

These two statements seem to imply that “moral formation” in Coe’s special sense is a narrowly restricted phenomenon that leaves room for a genuine type of moral formation that is at least not opposed to spiritual formation. (Whether it would be integral to spiritual formation is a further matter, and Coe’s paper gives no clear indication what his view on this might be.) Thus, perhaps the first of my criticisms is misguided: perhaps I am wrong to worry that his attack on “moral formation” threatens to mislead by obscuring the unity of spiritual and moral formation.

Perhaps. But I still worry. For there are also indications that Coe intends “moral formation” in his special sense to include everything normally recognized as morality, at least by those who have thought seriously about it. First among these indications are his claims about the persistence of morality in our fallen world. Coe comes to this issue because he anticipates that readers will see a paradox in his claim that humans are tempted to be moral rather than immoral. But it is difficult to see why anyone would find this claim paradoxical given that Coe is using “moral” (etc.) to name something other than genuine morality, something that is, in fact, a subtle form of moral failure. Thus, the “paradox” here is merely verbal, not substantive, and it should be easily avoided with a bit of terminological clarification such as Coe’s proviso. But instead of sending us back to his proviso to clear up the confusion, Coe begins to explain why we might be tempted to engage in morality as normally understood:

most humans throughout history have learned that a life of rampant immorality does not work in the long run [and for this reason they] have tended to congregate in social communities with some wisdom or moral codes for the sake of human flourishing.5

3 Coe, 56.
4 Coe, 56.
5 Coe, 60.
Although they understand the exact shape and texture of “flourishing” differently, no major ethical thinker has ever departed entirely from the idea that being good is worth the effort because of its relationship to human flourishing. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine (at his best), Aquinas and Butler all fit this model, as do the Epicureans, the Stoics, Hobbes and the classical Utilitarians. Even Kant, famous (or infamous) for defending a morality of “duty for duty’s sake” grounds his views in our nature as rational beings, and in what it means for such beings to attain their highest end (to flourish). So, by focusing on the connection between morality and flourishing as an explanation for humanity’s persisting interest in morality, Coe seems to be focusing on human morality as such, and not some narrower phenomenon. This is immediately confirmed when, at the end of the last passage cited, Coe identifies the universal human practice of organizing social life by means of moral codes or moral wisdom so as to facilitate flourishing as “a kind of encouraged moralism.” I take it that “moralism” here is to be understood in the pejorative sense stipulated in Coe’s proviso. If so, he is here identifying human morality as such with moralism in that pejorative sense.

This is also indicated by his assertion—for which he offers no argument—that humans are attracted to morality not only on account of its connection with human flourishing, but also, and even more so, by its usefulness in hiding from God:

more importantly [than the point about flourishing] . . . the reason why human beings have been tempted to be moral and why they have rejected a thoroughgoing immorality is that this is the most effective human strategy to hide from God.

That the connection between morality and human flourishing should be secondary to its usefulness in hiding from God as an explanation for morality’s persistence in our fallen world is contrary to the stated interests and motivations of every major ethical thinker in both Western and Eastern traditions, all of whom see morality as an attempt to live in cooperation with nature, and thereby with its Divine author insofar as they recognize one. Coe tacitly acknowledges this when he says that “natural morality . . . is at least partly in harmony with the way we are created,” but quickly qualifies his remark by saying that “even here, it [natural morality] is a violation of natural law insofar as we were created to do good works ‘in God.’” As a violation of the natural law, Coe goes so far as to identify natural morality as a form of sin:


7 Coe, 60.

8 Coe, 60.

9 Coe, 62.
Sin is both a violation of (a) one’s relationship with God, which is the essence of sin and with (b) how God intended for humans to live in accordance to his commands and the way he created their natures (natural law). The good works of the unbeliever are still sin, in fact they reflect the essence of sin, insofar as they are not done “in relationship to God” but in autonomy, pride and the absence of faith. . . . 10

Now in one sense it is trivially true that morality is genuinely moral only when it stands in its proper relationship to God: insofar as goodness is part of God’s essence, and insofar as morality is a matter of people and their acts being good, those people and acts must indeed stand in an appropriate relationship—perhaps resemblance or exemplification—to God (or His essence). But I think Coe sees the requisite relationship very differently, not as a merely ontological relationship, but as an existential relationship of faith in God as revealed historically in Jesus. For Coe seems to think that any attempt to be good apart from an explicit recognition of one’s moral corruption as revealed in (Coe’s understanding of) the cross of Christ, and one’s moral inability apart from the regenerative and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, necessarily counts as an attempt to ignore or deny one’s moral failures and to cover them up with good works.

This comes out most clearly in Coe’s proposed solution to the problem of moralism in Christians, which is to focus on the doctrines of justification and double imputation as understood by the Reformers. “We must learn,” says Coe,

to be open to the full justification by God and the unbelievable truth that I am not only fully pardoned but also fully acceptable to God on the basis of Christ’s merited righteousness that has been imputed to me and not on the basis of what I have done.11

This is what Coe is getting at when he identifies being moral “in the fullest and best sense of the term” as a matter of being good and growing in virtue “on the basis of the Cross and in the Spirit.”12 One can be moral “in the fullest and best sense,” and in what now appears to be the only genuine sense—since otherwise one’s good works count as sin rather than morality—when we accept, with the Spirit’s help, that “transformation is the result of the Spirit of God opening our hearts more deeply to Christ’s work on the cross and the judicial or forensic realities of justification in love,”13 and not the result of our own efforts. “Our actions work in synergy and participation with the Spirit,” says Coe, “but He is the agent of change.”14

10 Coe, 62.  
11 Coe, 75; cf. 73–77.  
12 Coe, 56.  
13 Coe, 76.  
14 Coe, 75.
Now, if conceptualizing and grounding one’s moral efforts in this way is alone capable of transforming “moralism” into genuine morality for Christians, it seems that it will also be the only way to transform “the good works of the unbeliever” from sin into genuine morality. This is why Coe thinks that, apart from an explicit recognition of the above theological “facts,” all moral efforts count as attempts at self-justification in relation to God, and why, in turn, he says that:

... what the secular moralists of all the ages have attempted to do from the Egyptian and the Babylonian sages, to Plato and Aristotle, to the Stoics, to Kant and Mill [is] to use morality as a defense against seeing their need for a savior.15

And:

From the ancient sages to Aristotle to the modern moralist, the project of morality and the claim that “I am good, I am moral” has been the most used defense as a way to hide from God and the need for a Savior.16

Thus, Coe identifies morality as normally understood, by thoughtful Christians and non-Christians alike, with “moralism” in his pejorative sense.

2. Willard on Moral and Spiritual Formation

We find a different perspective on these matters in the writings of Dallas Willard, one we can begin to see by bringing together some of his statements on “secular moralists,” especially Plato, with some of his statements about spiritual and moral formation.

In “A New Age of Ancient Christian Spirituality,”17 Willard makes a surprising remark. “When I began to study Philosophy,” he says, “I saw from the very beginning that Plato’s Republic is essentially a book on spiritual formation.” But how can this be, since the Republic is normally regarded as a work of moral philosophy? Part of the answer lies in Willard’s understanding of spiritual formation. In what is to my knowledge Willard’s most complete statement on the nature of spiritual formation,18

15 Coe, 56.
16 Coe, 60.
17 Dallas Willard, “A New Age of Ancient Christian Spirituality,” http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=95. (All URLs given in these notes were accessed March 15, 2010.)
he distinguishes “three different meanings” of the term “or moments” of the phenomenon. The first (hereafter, “spiritual formation,”) has to do with training in “special spiritual activities,” spiritual disciplines, relevant to a vocation in ministry or to the spiritual life in general. The third (hereafter, “spiritual formation,”) is “a shaping by the spirit or by the spiritual realm, and by the Holy Spirit and other spiritual agencies involved in the kingdom of God, especially the Word of God.” In between these falls the second meaning or moment (hereafter, “spiritual formation,”), which is the one most directly relevant to our present interest:

spiritual formation may be thought of as the shaping of the inner life, the spirit, or the spiritual side of the human being. The formation of the heart or will (which I believe is best taken as the “spirit”) of the individual, along with the emotions and intellect, is therefore the primary focus, regardless of what overt practices may or may not be involved. Here, what is formed is explicitly the spiritual dimension of the self. We speak of spiritual formation in this case precisely because that which is formed (the subject matter shaped) is the spiritual aspect of personality.

And it is in this sense, I believe, that Willard sees Plato’s Republic as a book about spiritual formation, for in this sense “spiritual formation” just is “moral formation.”

To see that this is so, one has to know a bit about Plato’s moral theory, so we must turn to Plato for the next page or two. In doing so, I will sometimes make remarks that assume some prior knowledge of Plato; but for the most part, and especially on those issues crucial to understanding how Platonic moral formation is the same as spiritual formation, I will assume no prior knowledge of Plato and give as complete an account as I can while maintaining brevity.

The central question of the Republic is what is justice? The word “justice” as we use it today has obvious legal overtones. To an extent, this was also true of Plato’s word for justice: dikaiosyne—which also shows up frequently in the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) that was in use during Jesus’ lifetime, where it is usually translated righteousness. On the basis of this connection to law, one might think that justice is simply a matter of acting in accordance with certain principles, rules, or laws. Such a view is defended by several of

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19 “Moments” is naturally taken to suggest sequential stages of a process; but Willard may be using “moment” in a sense borrowed from the philosophical sub-discipline of ontology, where it means something like “a dependent or inseparable part of a whole,” a part that is distinguishable in thought but not separable in reality (e.g., shape and size are “moments” of any spatial object).

Socrates' interlocutors in Book I of the *Republic*, including Cephalus, Polemarchus, and (in his own way) Thrasymachus. We can call this the *act-focused* theory of justice. It says that being a just person depends on doing what is just, i.e., performing just acts; and it usually involves the notion that the relevant acts can be nailed-down “in advance” by a set of prescriptive principles, rules, or laws.

Plato rejects this view. Through the character of Socrates, he argues that a person cannot qualify as just simply by acting according to laws or rules, for it is possible that a rule, perfectly useful under normal circumstances, might, in unusual circumstances, lead one to act unjustly (as when one returns a borrowed weapon to a friend who has gone insane). Moreover, it is possible to obey rules outwardly while remaining unjust inwardly (this is one lesson of the “invisibility ring” story in Book II). Plato’s alternative to act-focused justice is what we may call *character-focused* justice. For Plato, being a just person has to do primarily with the inner constitution or character of the person, and the ways in which this disposes a person to act (character is the root, action is the fruit). So, instead of starting with a notion of just actions and defining a just person in terms of them, Plato begins with a conception of a just person and defines just action in terms of him/her.

And what is his conception of a just person? It is the conception of a person whose soul is properly ordered: ordered according to its nature, and the nature of its parts, as indicated by their natural functions. As Plato sees it, every type of thing that exists, exists to serve some good purpose. There is some activity that things of a given kind alone can do, or can do better than any other kind of thing; for example, eyes alone can see, and pruning knives cut vines better than anything else. He calls such activities “functions.” And in order for anything to perform its function well, it must possess attributes that enable it to do so; for example, a pruning knife must be sharp in order to cut vines. These attributes, over and above those that make something the kind of thing it is, that enable it to perform its natural function well, Plato calls virtues. When something possesses the virtues relevant to its function, it is good.

For Plato, this general model for thinking about goodness applies to the human soul both as a whole and at the level of its individual parts. Plato tells us in Book I of the *Republic* that, as a whole, the soul’s function is living, and justice is the virtue that enables it to live well. But a more detailed account of justice in terms of the soul’s parts is given in Book IV. By this point in the dialogue, Plato has argued that the soul has three main components: *logos* (reason), *thumos* (heart, spirit, or emotion), and *epithumia* (desire, appetite). Reason’s function is ruling or directing, since it alone is suited by nature to grasp truth and reality. But in order to rule well, it needs the virtue of wisdom. The heart or spirit’s function is to enforce the wise dictates of reason, and to do this well it needs the virtue of courage. The various desires have no common function, but each of the naturally occurring desires has a function unique to itself, intended for some good purpose.
For instance, hunger drives us to eat even when, as babies, we do not know what eating is or why it is important. According to Plato, the desires lack not only a common function, but also a virtue of their own. Desires can get out of hand, and so need to be kept in check by the virtue of moderation or temperance; but this is not an attribute of any desire considered in itself. Rather, it is a matter of the way a person’s desires stand in relation to wise reason and courageous spirit. If one’s spirit is able to keep the desires within the boundaries established by wise reason, then the soul as a whole is moderate. Justice also, according to Plato, is a holistic virtue—i.e., applicable to the soul as a whole, rather than any of its parts considered in isolation. We may gloss Plato’s definition of justice ( dikaiosune ) by saying that it is a state of a complex whole—be it a soul or anything else—in which each part performs its own function, rather than trying to perform the function of another part. In other words, it is a state in which each part of a complex whole is as it ought to be, on account of which the whole is as it ought to be. So, the soul is just when the logos rules wisely and the thumos enforces its dictates courageously, and when the epithumia do whatever they are meant to do, but under the cooperative guidance and restraint of logos and thumos.

We are now in a position to see why spiritual formation 2 is the same thing as Platonic moral formation. Recalling Willard’s description of spiritual formation 2 as “the shaping of the inner life, the spirit, or the spiritual side of the human being . . . the formation of the heart or will . . . of the individual, along with the emotions and intellect,” we can now see that this is exactly the task of moral formation as Plato understands it (thus, henceforth the reader should keep in mind that “spiritual formation 2” and “moral formation” will sometimes be used interchangeably, to refer to this simultaneously spiritual and moral project of formation). This is why, in chapter 5 of The Divine Conspiracy, in a section subtitled “Dikaiosune,” Willard can argue for the confluence of the biblical and Athenian (i.e., Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) traditions. As noted above, dikaiosune is Plato’s word for “justice,” and the word in biblical Greek for “righteousness.” Willard makes much of this connection, arguing that, with the selection of dikaiosune to translate the Hebrew tsedawkwaw and tshehdek in the Septuagint, “the two greatest traditions of moral reflection in the ancient world are brought together in the term dikaiosune.” 21 In both the Old and New Testaments, as in Plato, Willard claims, dikaiosune has to do with “the character of the inner life when it is as it should be,” “what it is about a person that makes him or her really right or good” or “true inner goodness.”

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21 Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 146. There is an important question as to the legitimacy of assimilating the biblical meaning to the Greek meaning of dikaiosune, as Willard, and I following him, suggest should be done. However, I cannot address this issue here.
Thus here (and elsewhere\textsuperscript{22}) Willard presents Jesus’ take on \textit{dikaiosune} in terms of the same contrast between act-focused and character-focused views that we see in Plato. The righteousness that Jesus calls us to is a righteousness which surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 5:20).

But, whereas many have understood this as a demand for obedience to a higher and more stringent law, Willard’s view is that it is a call beyond any act-focused approach to righteousness and to a character-focused view. All the “\textit{you-have-heard-that . . . but-I-tell-you’s}” of the Sermon on the Mount are not, according to Willard, commands to perform particular kinds of acts, but illustrations of the kinds of things that come naturally to a person whose soul is just. Thus, what is required to surpass the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees is, first and foremost, simply to approach righteousness as a matter of the inner person rather than the outward act—not a very high bar at all, once you understand it. And in fact it is not really about “setting a bar.” When Jesus makes entrance into the Kingdom of God conditional upon surpassing legalistic righteousness, he is merely stating a tautology: one cannot enter something except by its entrance, and since to enter the Kingdom is to align oneself with God inwardly (“the Kingdom of God is within you,” Lk 17:21),\textsuperscript{23} one cannot enter it except through an inward approach to righteousness; so long as one retains the outward, act-focused approach to righteousness characteristic of legalism, one will \textit{inevitably} miss the entrance to God’s Kingdom. Accordingly, Jesus’ word in Matthew 5:20 is not so much “you’d better be less rotten than the Pharisees if you want God to accept you,” but more “your whole approach to righteousness must be very different than theirs if you are really going to interact with God.” And if this is what is meant there, then it is fair to say that, in seeing through the shallowness of act-focused \textit{dikaiosune} (legalism) and recognizing that genuine \textit{dikaiosune} is a matter of the inner person, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were “not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mk 12:34).\textsuperscript{24}

Of course, the \textit{locus} of \textit{dikaiosune} (inward rather than outward) is not the only thing that matters. The \textit{qualitative character} of \textit{dikaiosune} matters, too. For Jesus, \textit{dikaiosune} is not blind, cold and unrelenting, as purely legal justice is. Instead, the rightly ordered (just) soul is a loving soul. Thus, the qualitative character of Christian \textit{dikaiosune} is agape love (as described in 1 Cor 13, for instance). But this perspective is not wholly unique to Jesus. Willard says that:


\textsuperscript{23} All Scripture quotations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

\textsuperscript{24} See Charles Finney’s sermon, “Not Far from the Kingdom of God,” available here: http://www.gospeltruth.net/1849–51Penny_Pulpit/500909pp_not_far_frm_kngdm.htm. Finney argues that overcoming legalism and committing oneself to honesty are both ways in which one can be “not far from the Kingdom of God.” Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were clearly “not far” in these ways.
a really good person, as Jesus teaches, is anyone who is pervaded with love. . . . Agape love, perhaps the greatest contribution of Christ to human civilization, wills the good of whatever it is directed upon. It does not wish to consume it. The teaching about love that still permeates Western civilization at its better moments understands that. The highest calling of moral beings is to love. Long before the coming of Christ, this was obscurely understood. Socrates remarked, according to Plato, that “the good do their neighbors good and the bad do them evil.”25

And in fact Socrates’ insight into the nature of true morality went further than this, for he agreed with Jesus (who of course had not yet come in the flesh) that dikaiosune demands love, or at least goodwill, be extended even to enemies.26 On the other hand, it is true that this aspect of Socrates’ thought tends to be overshadowed by his emphasis on rationality, an emphasis which, if anything, grows stronger as we move from Socrates to Plato and then to Aristotle. This difference in emphasis between Jesus and the philosophers is significant, but not so significant as to render philosophical dikaiosune fundamentally opposed to Christian dikaiosune, as that of the Pharisees was. It is not for nothing that Nietzsche called Christianity “Platonism for the masses.”27

Readers of Willard will know his V-I-M framework for effective personal transformation: in order to change, a person must have a clear and compelling vision for change, form the intention to act on that vision, and have the appropriate means to act on it.28 The twin emphases on the inward locus and loving quality of dikaiosune are elements of the guiding “vision” for morality and moral formation in both the Athenian philosophical tradition and the Christian tradition; but not only in these two traditions.29 Willard observes:

What makes our lives go as they do? What could make them go as they ought? . . . Thoughtful people through the ages have tried to answer

26 Republic I, 331d-335.
27 In the Preface to Beyond Good and Evil.
29 And not only these two points, either. Willard observes that most cultures have had a sense of the eternal significance of this life’s moral development, as shown by their usually having some conception of life after death (see The Divine Conspiracy, ch. 10, esp. p. 397). He even presents Socrates as having achieved, via his insights into “the very nature of the human self,” a grasp of “the importance of our eternal future,” but minus any insight into “the purposes of God in human history and redemption that are unique to the Gospel of Jesus” (Ibid., 387). I focus on the two points indicated because of their greater centrality to spiritual formation, especially when understood as moral formation for life in this world.
these questions, and they have with one accord found . . . that what matters most for how life goes and ought to go is what we are on the “inside.” . . . This “within” is the arena of spiritual formation and, later, transformation.\(^{30}\)

And:

. . . the only hope of humanity lies in the fact that, as our spiritual dimension has been formed, so it also can be transformed. Now and throughout the ages this has been acknowledged by everyone who has thought deeply about our condition—from Moses, Solomon, Socrates, and Spinoza, to Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Oprah, and current feminists and environmentalists. . . . Disagreements have only to do with what in our spirit needs to be changed and how that change can be brought about.\(^{31}\)

So, there is significant overlap between Christianity and many other traditions of spiritual formation\(^2\) in recognizing the inward nature of dikaiosune. And as to love, Willard says:

It is not as if Christ alone knew or taught that love . . . is the center of what is right, obligatory, and good among human beings. It is indeed an “open secret”—something that everyone deep down knows, if they will but carefully consider it. [. . .] good and evil are by and large immediately sensed, and further reveal themselves to reflection and theoretical elaboration. This perception of good and evil is the fundamental intuition of the moral life, and it is given even to small children and unsophisticates at all levels, though they may be unable to articulate or defend it.\(^{32}\)

This is not to say, of course, that everyone does carefully consider what they know deep down, or even that those who do will know how to act on this fundamental moral intuition. Willard acknowledges that, despite having this knowledge deep down, “people are wary . . . of love, perhaps because they do not know how to meet . . . the demands of love in real life.”\(^{33}\) Nonetheless, these two points of vision—that the locus of dikaiosune is the inner person and that its fundamental quality is love—are sufficient to point a person beyond pharisaic “dikaiosune” with its focus on outward behavior and rigid rule-following. Given the widespread availability of these two insights in several of the major moral and religious traditions of

\(^{30}\) Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 16, my emphasis.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 14, first italics mine.

\(^{32}\) Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 86.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
humankind, it follows that there is the possibility within these traditions of surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

But what of means? In the Christian context, this is where Willard’s theory of asceticism, the practice of spiritual disciplines—and so spiritual formation—one comes into play. Thus we see that spiritual formation is a component of spiritual formation. It is training in the means by which effective spiritual formation is achieved. Willard’s thought on the role of spiritual disciplines in Christian spiritual formation is so well known I will not bother to rehash it here in any detail. Suffice it to say that Willard sees spiritual growth, like the acquisition of a skill, as something requiring training and practice, in the form of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study, solitude, silence, and fasting. Willard presented this view to the Evangelical world in 1988, in his justly famous book The Spirit of the Disciplines. He presented essentially the same theory to a scholarly audience three years earlier, in a 1985 paper on “An Essential but Neglected Element in the Christian Theory of the Moral Life” (his subtitle, my emphasis). From this we may infer that Willard sees Christian spiritual and moral formation united in means, just as in vision, thus reinforcing the fact that Christian spiritual formation is identical to Christian moral formation.

Moreover, as in the case of vision, Willard recognizes significant overlap in means between Christian and non-Christian traditions of spiritual formation:

    Thoughtful and religiously devout people of the classical and Hellenistic world, from the Ganges to the Tiber, knew that the mind and body of the human being had to be rigorously disciplined to achieve a decent individual and social existence. . . . This is . . . a wisdom gleaned from millennia of collective human experience. There is nothing especially religious about it, though every religion of historical significance has accepted and inculcated it in one way or another. It has a special importance in religion, but it is also just good sense about human nature.

Thus, Willard says, “whether or not we are religious, ascetic practices are relevant to the kinds of persons we become. Without them we can only drift, subject to whatever influences come our way. With them, on the other hand, we have the possibility of some significant control over our moral future.”

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34 See Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines (New York: Harper Collins, 1988) or almost any of Willard’s papers referenced in these footnotes, most of which contain sections on the role of spiritual disciplines in spiritual formation.


One might question whether it would occur to anyone outside of religious context to employ “ascetic practices” as means of moral formation. But Willard has a conception of asceticism broad enough to include practices with no overtly religious connections. In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard quotes R. L. Nettleship approvingly:

> If asceticism means the disciplined effort to attain an end which cannot be attained without giving up many things often considered desirable, the philosophical life (as Plato saw it) is ascetic; but if it means giving up for the sake of giving up, there is no asceticism in Plato.\(^{37}\)

The quotation comes in the course of an argument that Judaism is an ascetic religion: if we are willing to accept Nettleship’s definition of asceticism, Willard says, then Judaism is ascetic. But, *ipso facto*, so then is the philosophical life as Plato saw it. And not only Plato but, by Nettleship’s criterion, Socrates, Aristotle, and many other philosophical and religious moralists from the East and West—even restrained “hedonists” like Epicurus and John Stuart Mill—would also qualify as having employed ascetic practices, or adopted an ascetic lifestyle. Thus Willard speaks of “[t]he deep wisdom of Jesus . . . that he who would save his life must lose it (Mark 8:35–36)” as being “fully congruent with all the great traditions of religion and ethical culture.”\(^{38}\)

Of course, most non-religious traditions of moral formation will not have as full a repertoire of ascetic practices as their religious counterparts. But that is beside the point: as with vision, overlap in the means of moral formation need not be complete in order to be substantial enough to yield meaningful results. And in fact, of the world’s great traditions of moral formation, contemporary Western Christianity in its standard forms is arguably among the most deficient in its use of appropriate means (this is, of course, the situation that Willard’s work on spiritual formation aims to correct). Even so, Willard thinks that Christianity has a decisive advantage as a tradition of moral formation, largely on account of unique elements in its vision of moral reality: namely, the nature and availability of God and His Kingdom as exemplified in the totality of Jesus’ earthly ministry, from incarnation to teaching to miracles and acts of kindness to his death and resurrection. These themes deserve more attention than I can give them here, and I hope to give them that attention in future work. For now, it will have to suffice to say that on Willard’s view “[i]t was not for nothing that Christian life and teaching supplanted” its competitors in the ancient world.\(^{39}\)

So there are respects in which Christianity is not only unique but superior to other traditions of moral formation, and among these is the fact that

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 131. My italics.

the Christian vision gives us a more complete and accurate picture of what is happening in spiritual formation. This is why Willard says that his claim about disciplines giving us some significant control over our moral future, while true for all humans generally, “is especially true for the Christian, who can also count upon an assistance beyond him or her self—though not an assistance that replaces our own initiative toward moral realization through planned disciplinary exercises.” That is, the Christian can count on spiritual formation, entering the picture alongside spiritual formation, as another part of spiritual formation. In fact, Willard in one place describes God’s action toward and in humans as an additional means of spiritual formation, one distinguished from the use of disciplines by its not being directly under human control. Thus we can say that both spiritual formation and spiritual formation are means of Christian spiritual formation, Christian moral formation.

But to single-out the Christian as one who can “count on” God’s help in the form of spiritual formation is not to say that God helps only Christians in their attempts at moral formation. Rather, it is that the Christian vision alone gives us reason to expect and anticipate such help. Only a person who knows their local bus system and schedule can “count on” there being a bus present at a certain place and time. Someone without that knowledge can certainly sit at a bus stop, blindly hoping one will come along sooner or later, but they can not “count on it” in the same way. Of course, the bus system itself functions the same either way: buses will arrive when and where they are supposed to whether those at the bus stop are waiting with assured expectation or desperate hope. Similarly, God’s help may come to the Christian and the non-Christian alike, even though only the Christian vision enables (and warrants) “counting on it.” So it still makes sense to consider whether the non-Christian might also have a share in spiritual formation as she engages in spiritual formation by means of spiritual formation.

And Willard’s answer seems to be “yes.” In chapter 6 of Knowing Christ Today, Willard elucidates his version of “Christian pluralism.” Even “the weakest form of pluralism,” he says, will concede that “no one religion captures and conveys all truths about God (or a spiritual ‘beyond’), humankind, and their relationships.” that “many religions . . . teach some essential religious truths” which “involve important aspects of truth and goodness and must be respected as such.” This much is clear from what we have already seen concerning the overlap of vision among Christian and some non-Christian traditions of spiritual formation. But here Willard goes even further. He is not, of course, willing to affirm “strong pluralism” by saying that all such traditions are equal. But he is willing to say that

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40 Willard, “Asceticism,” italics mine.
41 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 90.
42 Willard, Knowing Christ Today, 172.
“people of ‘other’ religions or no religion at all may be ‘right with God’” on account of the condition of their hearts,” despite their misunderstandings about God. “If this is so in a given case,” Willard says, “it will be because their lives are centered on that same love that is expressed in the person and teachings of Jesus and of his people at their best. It will be because God is love.” Quoting 1 John 4:7–8 (“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. . . .”), Willard affirms that “if you really do have the kind of agape love in question, God is living in you and you know God, whatever else may or may not be true of you.”

This is Willard’s version of Christian pluralism.

It is crucial to note that “knowing God” here is not solely or primarily a cognitive thing, and in no way a matter of cognitively knowing and accepting anything about Jesus as a historical figure. It is a matter of integration with God in the deepest reaches of the self by accepting as ultimately good and worth living for the same thing(s) that God does. Thus it is fundamentally a moral agreement with God, albeit one that can exist independent of any explicit recognition of God as such. The overlap between Christian and non-Christian traditions of spiritual formation is, I believe, part of what makes this possible for non-Christians. Another part is that “fundamental moral intuition” of which Willard speaks. But behind both of these I believe Willard would acknowledge the action of God Himself. He says:

the fact that God is a being whose most basic nature is agape love for all human beings, regardless of their religion or culture, means that he cares for all human beings. That is merely the reverse side of biblical monotheism, properly understood, and the heart of the Abrahamic religions. Since he is the God of all, he cares for all. He does not sit in splendid isolation demanding that all worship and obey him. He reaches out to them, calls them to himself. His grace is an active principle in the universe. And the one we call “Jesus” is also the Cosmic Christ [i.e., the Word or Logos of God, cf. Jn. 1], present throughout creation and history, inextricably “with” the God of all, throughout time and eternity. . . . the Lord is active among human beings generally. He is their God, whether they know it or not. . . . we may be sure that God loves all people and is involved with everyone, religious or nonreligious, though they may be unaware of it or reject it if they so choose.

What form might God’s involvement with people take when it does not include disclosing Himself as God, so that people may remain unaware of His involvement with them as His involvement with them? There are many

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43 Ibid., 181.
44 Ibid., 182.
possible answers, some of them readily acceptable to any Christian. For instance, one can say that God interacts with all humans through “secondary causes,” like the laws and forces of nature—“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). A more specific providence, in the form of ordering some of the particular facts and events of a person’s life, would also qualify. But why not include ordinary moral experience as well? “The Cosmic Christ,” Willard reminds us, “is a light that ‘enlightens everyone’ (John 1:9, ESV).” But what concrete form does this universal enlightenment take in human experience? I can think of no better candidate than Willard’s “fundamental moral intuition.” And insofar as some non-Christian traditions of moral formation are aimed at fanning this fundamental spark of divine illumination into a flame, why not take those traditions themselves as “secondary causes” through which God interacts with people “anonymously”? Willard suggests as much when he says:

Much that is good is to be found in every great human tradition of spiritual formation, and the Christian will do well to respect what is good wherever it is found. “Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17)

If we are willing to go this far with Willard, then we will acknowledge that non-Christians have the possibility of growth toward genuine dikaiosune, and of genuine though anonymous cooperation with God, through their moral experience and their traditions of moral formation. But these possibilities will not be realized without the relevant intention. Do some non-Christians engage in their traditions of moral formation, or respond to their own moral experience, with a genuine intention to be good? Or do all or even most non-Christians adopt the stance of “moralism” in Coe’s pejorative sense, misusing morality as a way of hiding from their own moral failures, or even from God?

While it is fairly easy to document overlap in vision and means, proving intent is incredibly difficult. And it is not merely that intention is a matter of the invisible, spiritual side of the self. That makes it difficult enough. But, as Willard notes in Renovation of the Heart, the difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that, minus the successful carrying out of one’s intentions, it can be difficult to tell whether one’s—even one’s own—inclinations are really intentions, or whether they are mere wishes or desires. Nonetheless, Willard seems willing to grant that all human beings desire to be good, and that some, Christian or not, form genuine intentions to be good insofar as

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46 Ibid., 177.
47 Willard, “Idaho Springs Inquiries . . .”. My emphasis. The translation here may be Willard’s own; it closely resembles the NASB. cf. Knowing Christ Today, 172–3.
48 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 88–9.
they understand goodness. It is this genuine desire to be good—and not the
desire to hide from God—Willard says, that explains the universal human
interest in morality, and our persisting commitment to it in our fallen
world: “The quest for spiritual formation . . . is in fact an age-old and
worldwide one. It is rooted in the deep personal and even biological need
for goodness that haunts humanity.” In Knowing Christ Today, Willard
explains one aspect of this need for goodness in terms of the inevitability of
possessing a worldview: “Our worldview is simply our overall orientation
in life. You cannot ‘opt out’ of having a worldview. You can only try to
have one that most accords with reality, including the whole realm of facts
concerning what is genuinely good.” Accordingly, three of the four funda-
mental worldview questions that Willard identifies have to do with good-
ness: what is well-being or “blessedness,” what does it mean to be a genu-
inely good person, and how does one become a genuinely good person.
In order merely to act in the world, one must at least assume answers to
such questions. Thus, “a worldview is . . . a biological necessity for human
beings.”

But the biological necessity of having a worldview is not the only thing
that drives us to search for answers to these worldview questions, especially
in the case of the three that touch upon moral value, and most especially on
the question that touches upon it most directly, the question of character.
These are matters of desire. As Willard says, “people long to be good, to be
worthy and not just to be—from tiny children to the elderly exiting the hu-
man scene.” Moreover, “there is a lingering suspicion that you cannot
have had a good life if you failed to be a good person, and that to be a good
person is a large part of genuine success, or “blessedness.” And from this
genuine desire to be good and to live a good life emerges the human project
of spiritual formation, or moral formation. As Willard says elsewhere,

Spiritual formation is indeed a human project. No society has ever
existed without it. The human being is not an instinctual animal which
naturally develops what is required for its existence. It must be taught,
and primary to what is taught (and caught) are the inner conditions of
life (thought, emotions, intentions, etc.) which make social existence
possible and enable the individual to hope for a life that is good.

This gets us very close to Coe’s point that the universal human practice of
organizing social life by means of moral codes or moral wisdom is done for

49 Ibid., 22.
50 Willard, Knowing Christ Today, 44.
51 Ibid., 46–50; the fourth question is: “what is real?”.
52 Ibid., 43.
53 Ibid., 47.
54 Ibid., 48.
the sake of human flourishing. But as Willard describes it, the moral motives are genuine, so this does not count as “a kind of encouraged moralism” in Coe’s pejorative sense.\(^{56}\)

Not only are the motives genuine, but, says Willard, the human moral project involves a recognition of the severe challenges to becoming a good person, and that some of these challenges come from within the self:

The problem that confronts us here [in thinking about spiritual formation \(^2\)] is not, we should note, one that is peculiar to Christians. It is a severe difficulty at the heart of humanity. It is the problem of not doing the good that you would sincerely say you intend to do, that you clearly wish you would do, and that you grieve over and regret not having done. It is a fundamental problem for all who see life clearly and think deeply about it.\(^{57}\)

I think that Willard is right about this. Indeed, neither Plato nor Aristotle give any indication of trying to ignore or hide the problem of moral failure. If anything, its reality is their preoccupation. They see it as the central human problem, and their moral theories are attempts not to cover it up, but to solve it—as Willard rightly sees. But neither of them presume that they have been or will be successful in doing so. To the contrary, in light of the well-known Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge, Socrates’ famous profession of ignorance in the Apology can only be read as an admission of his own lack of moral perfection, and that admission should be taken as a sign of humility. Although there is certainly an ironic element to Socrates’ profession of ignorance, his ultimate sincerity is borne out by the aporetic nature of Plato’s early dialogues, which are usually thought to present the historical Socrates most accurately. And even in the Republic (which is a late, non-aporetic dialogue) Plato has Socrates explicitly disavow adequate knowledge of the Good. This is why he is forced to discuss it by way of analogy (in the famous analogy of the sun) rather than giving a definition of it. And in his discussion of the philosopher-king as the missing link in achieving his vision of the good life in the good city,\(^\text{58}\) Socrates predicts that, even if someone were to achieve an adequate knowledge of the good and so establish the city, success would not long endure precisely on account of human moral (cum intellectual) frailty.\(^\text{59}\) And in fact, Plato’s pessimism about enduring moral success among humans combined with the suggestion, recurring throughout many of Plato’s dialogues, that virtue is a

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\(^{56}\) Coe, 60.


\(^{58}\) Books VII—VIII.

\(^{59}\) Book VIII, 546a ff.
gift of the gods, has led some scholars to propose that this is Plato’s actual view.60

Aristotle, for his part, is quite forthcoming about the extreme challenges facing anyone who aspires to moral perfection. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he clearly writes with the presumption that the average person experiences an inner struggle to do what is right. For Aristotle, this is enough to disqualify a person from counting as truly virtuous, or good. The difference between the average, “morally decent” person and his immoral counterpart is only that the former successfully restrains the desires that tempt him to do wrong—an essential and morally significant achievement to be sure, but by no means the moral ideal. It is precisely because he takes the average, morally decent person to be merely “continent” in this way that he counsels us to aim not at perfect virtue, “the golden mean,” but at the extreme (the vice!) opposite to the one that tempts us. For instance, if we are tempted to indulge in too much pleasure (a vice of excess), we should aim to allow ourselves not the right amount (the virtuous mean), but what we know to be too little (a vice of defect). “We must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction,” he says, “for if we pull away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall reach the intermediate condition.”61 In this, he counsels exactly the same kind of asceticism that Willard supports, and not as a way of covering moral failure, but as a way of trying to move beyond it by changing the texture of the inner person. Similar counsel is given in the Confucian tradition, where one major representative (Hsun Tzu) was so taken with the difficulty of making people good that he declared human nature to be intrinsically evil.62

It may well be the case—and in fact I am sure it is the case—that neither Plato nor Aristotle nor Confucius nor Hsun Tzu understood the human moral and spiritual predicament with full depth and accuracy. But to see this deficiency as an attempt to hide from God, or even from the truth about the human moral situation,63 is hardly the view of a sympathetic

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61 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b.


63 It is of course a historical impossibility that pre-Christian moralists like Plato and Aristotle could have used their interest in morality to deny their need for a savior, since the very idea of “a savior” in the relevant sense came only through the special revelation given progressively by God in the context of the evolving Judeo-Christian tradition. Plato and Aristotle had no access to this revelatory tradition, and even among those who did the idea of “a savior” as God intended it was generally not well understood until after Christ’s resurrection. (Arguably it is still not well understood, even among Christians. Much of Willard’s work on the spiritual life is predicated on this assumption.) Lacking the idea, it simply would have been impossible
interpreter of the human moral project, as Coe claims to be. What is more, if Willard is right about the fundamental motives for the human moral project, then Coe’s interpretation is not only unsympathetic, but false. If the universal drive to develop programs of spiritual formation comes from a desire to be good coupled with the recognition of severe challenges to being good, then we can be sure that many people have not only desired but intended to be good; for this shows that they have sought out and discovered means by which to achieve that desire. Of course, those means would have to be implemented after they were discovered in order for the intention to continue as an intention. But the thing to note here is that the seeking of means is itself the first and most fundamental of means. It is the first way in which a sincere intention to be good manifests itself after one realizes that direct effort is not always adequate to the task. Thus, the mere fact that humanity has engaged in a quest for an adequate program of spiritual formation shows some level of intention to be good on the part of an appreciable percentage of human beings. Of course, it is an open question whether all such persons would have carried their intention through to the end if they had been fully exposed to the Christian vision and its corollary means, or whether, like the rich young ruler they would have “gone away sad” (Mk 10:17–29). However, the same uncertainty obtains for most Christians as well. In neither case, I think, is this a reason to doubt the reality of people’s intentions to be good at least to a point—and usually a point that surpasses the dikaiosyne of the scribes and the Pharisees, and hence “moralism” in Coe’s sense.

Moreover, the sincerity of this intention in some non-Christians is proved by the fact that it provided part of the psychological basis for conversion to Christianity once they were introduced to it. Willard explains that:

the question of how one becomes a good person was uppermost in the minds of classical and medieval moralists . . . they thoroughly understood that the well-being of the society depends upon the predominance of genuinely good people. That is one reason why the thinkers of the ancient world turned to Christ in the early centuries of the Christian era. They became convinced that he was the key to human transformation toward goodness.

Rather than using systems of morality in legalistic fashion to evade moral/spiritual reality, such persons were genuinely committed to those realities. As Willard supposes, they really wanted to be genuinely good, and

for a person to use morality—or anything else—to avoid seeing their need for a savior. But they could still have tried to hide from or ignore God, of whom they had some concept, or from the moral truths that they were aware of.

64 Coe, 56.

65 Willard, Knowing Christ Today, 49–50.
had formed genuine intentions to become good by employing the best means available to them. Thus, rather than disposing them to reject Christ when he came—as did the Pharisees’ legalistic approach to God’s own revealed morality—their involvement with the moral systems of the Greek philosophical tradition actually disposed them to accept Him. Like John the Baptist, the Greek philosophical tradition came before Christ “making straight the way of the Lord.” And it was able to do so not merely because of its similarity to Christianity in terms of vision and means, but also because the moral intentions of many of its adherents were genuine. Only thus were they able to see in Christianity the fulfillment of their own moral aspirations as shaped by Greek philosophy.

3. Conclusion

So far we have seen that, on the Willardian view, moral formation and spiritual formation are identical for the Christian, and that spiritual formation and spiritual formation are among its parts. We have also seen that, due to a partial but still significant overlap in vision and means, some non-Christian traditions aim to engage in fundamentally the same project as Christian spiritual formation, and stand a chance of partial but still significant success in that project. That is, non-Christians have the possibility of growth toward genuine dikaiosune, and of genuine though anonymous cooperation with God, through their moral experience and their traditions of moral formation. Christianity offers a unique advantage in moral formation on account of its unique vision of moral reality, but lacking this advantage does not preclude some degree of genuine success in spiritual formation. Finally, we have seen reason to think it false that all non-Christian moralists used morality to hide from God, or from the truth about the human moral condition.

Whether counterexamples to Coe’s claim are rare or common—i.e., whether “moralism” or genuine moral intentions have been the norm among non-Christians—is a different question, whose answer requires statistical information impossible to collect. However, I find it implausible to suppose that the answer would be substantially one-sided. On the one hand, it would be foolish to deny that “moralism” is a significant human problem. The substitution of morality’s outward forms for its inward reality, usually in order to cloak immorality, is common across cultures and through history. In fact, the great classicist Erik Havelock once observed that the Republic’s defense of inward dikaiosune was needed in Plato’s day precisely because, at the time, “the Greek adolescent [was] continually conditioned to an attitude which at bottom is cynical” about morality, the attitude that “[i]t is more important to keep up appearances than to practice the reality.”

same corruption of morality occurred in the Confucian tradition.\(^{67}\) And, of course, a similar pattern is visible in the history of Israel and the Church. But this pattern of corruption is matched by a pattern of renewal and return to true morality. Socrates and Plato are not the only ones to have recognized that the legalistic corruption of morality is not true morality, but a “twilight morality” in which “[d]ecorum and decent behavior are not obviously violated, but the inner principle of morality is.”\(^{68}\) That this is widely recognized is borne out by, among other things, the fact that Plato’s views eventually triumphed over this cynicism in the cultural battle for “hearts and minds,” and that his work has remained part of the “Western Canon” for over two millennia. So, while Coe is correct to think that humans are regularly tempted to reduce morality to a matter of “outward show,” he goes too far when he claims or implies that it is the norm for non-Christians to approach morality in this corrupt way. To the contrary, the recognition of such an approach as a corruption of morality is included in the moral wisdom of many non-Christian traditions. They therefore are sufficient to correct that mistake in the same way that Jesus takes “Moses and the Prophets” to be in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:29–31).

By the same token, it is not quite right to say, as Coe does, that “the Christian life is not fundamentally about being moral in itself or about being a good Christian boy or girl,” and that the mature Christian does “not want to be a good boy [or girl] any more,” but rather wants only “to open more deeply to Christ’s work on the Cross and the Work of the Spirit.”\(^{69}\) If Willard is right about the quest for spiritual formation being grounded in our desire for goodness, then the truth is that the Christian who desires to open more deeply to Christ, the Cross, and the Spirit will do so precisely because s/he desires to be genuinely good. For instance, it is only half true that, as Coe says, “prayer is not a place to be good—it is a place to be honest.”\(^{70}\) Prayer is indeed a place to be honest before God, but principally because it is good to be honest before God, both in itself and instrumentally, since progress toward greater goodness depends upon accepting that there are areas of one’s life where improvement is possible and desirable. It is thus both a way of being good, and a way of becoming better; and this is why prayer (and not only prayer, of course) is a place to be honest. This shows that the desire to be good is partially constitutive of a right relationship to God. As such it is neither more nor less fundamental to the Christian life than any other “required ingredient.”

However, it may be an element in that relationship especially important to life in “this world.” In an interview with Cutting Edge magazine, Willard

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\(^{67}\) “Diary of a Madman,” “Kong Yiji,” and “New Year’s Sacrifice” are particularly potent on this score. See Diary of a Madman and Other Stories, trans. William A. Lyell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

\(^{68}\) Preface to Plato, 12.

\(^{69}\) Coe, 57.

\(^{70}\) Coe, 63.
makes the intriguing statement that “Scripture teaches personal, though not moral, development in the life to come.” This distinction between moral and personal development is not entirely clear to me from the context of the interview, and I have not found the details developed explicitly in any of Willard’s other writings. What is clear from the context, however, is that he sees “moral development” as having to do with the ability to avoid outright rebellion against God, while “personal development” has to do with the ability to engage readily and easily in positive, creative tasks that God might assign to people in the life to come. It is also clear that, as Willard sees it, moral development is for “this age” alone. It is, to borrow a phrase from Developmental Psychopathology, the most significant “stage-salient task” for the lives we now live. If this is so, it makes it all the more crucial for us to understand the place of morality in Christianity, and the unity of moral and spiritual formation in Christian, and indeed human, life.


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NEITHER BECAUSE NOR IN SPITE OF:
A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON WILLARD’S READ OF THE BEATITUDES

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Abstract. In The Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard offers a much-needed corrective to a prevailing understanding of the Beatitudes according to which they are virtues or conditions for blessing in God’s kingdom. Unfortunately, Willard weds this corrective to an implausible read of the more positive sounding beatitudes (e.g., purity of heart and peacemaking) according to which they are vices or unattractive conditions in spite of which one can be blessed. In what follows, I hope to rescue the main thrust of Willard’s gloss on the beatitudes from his interpretation of these particular traits.

In his foreword to Dallas Willard’s masterpiece, The Divine Conspiracy, Richard Foster calls Willard’s treatment of the beatitudes a stunning and soul-satisfying banquet that upsets many of our common notions of this famous passage.1 He goes on to say that the entire book is well worth the discussion of these few verses alone.2 Countless readers, no doubt, have been brought for the first time into a reading of the beatitudes that they can make sense of and that has relevance for their lives thanks to Willard’s contribution. Unfortunately, though, Willard’s gloss on the beatitudes seems to force an unsatisfying interpretation of what it means to be “pure of heart,” “merciful,” or “a peacemaker” and some have rejected his account of the beatitudes because of what it seems to imply about these traits. It is the purpose of these reflections to suggest that the main thrust of Willard’s gloss on the beatitudes can be rescued from his interpretation of these traits.

1 Many thanks to Tom Crisp, Dallas Willard, and two anonymous referees for their thoughtful interactions with an earlier draft of this paper.
Because of . . .

As a foil for the presentation of his own view, Willard introduces a widespread understanding of the beatitudes according to which they are instructions for how to be blessed. According to this teaching, each of the beatitudes gives us a condition that is especially pleasing to God, good for human beings, or conducive to full participation in God’s kingdom. They are virtues or excellences in the economy of God’s Way. To live appropriately in response to the beatitudes, then, is to be set upon a course of life that would make these conditions a reality in one’s own experience. It is to be on the path toward becoming increasingly poor in spirit, mournful, peacemaking, pure of heart, etc. According to this interpretation of the beatitudes, one is blessed precisely because of and to the extent that one has taken on the traits and conditions listed. If you want the fullness of blessing available in God’s economy, you must become (either by grace or by effort or by some combination of both) poor in spirit, persecuted, merciful, pure of heart, etc.

Willard argues at length against this widespread understanding of the beatitudes. At the center of his critique is the claim that it presents us with a profoundly counter-intuitive and unattractive picture of the good life. It is true that a few of the beatitudes look like virtues or ideals (e.g., “peacemaker” and “pure of heart”). But beyond endorsing these virtues, the view in question suggests that the Christian ideal is to become poor, sad, weak, mild and persecuted—hardly the kind of person we naturally envision reigning with and for Christ over His created order for all of eternity. If the news of the kingdom is that you can find your way into a life characterized by hunger, poverty, sadness, weakness, persecution, and spiritual bankruptcy, then most people will need considerable reprogramming to receive the news as good news.

In order to make this a plausible description of the ideal Christian, these conditions must be interpreted in such a way as to make them laudable or otherwise attractive. “Poor in spirit”, for example, will be given to mean “humble” or “aware of one’s own spiritual bankruptcy.” But this, complains Willard, is simply not what the text says. Jesus was a fan of humility. He had language to discuss humility and often employed it. He does not here. In the beatitudes he speaks instead of spiritual bankruptcy and simple poverty (financial poverty) themselves. Likewise, if the condition he wished to describe were one of recognizing one’s own poverty or spiritual poverty, he would have said so. But he does not. He simply pronounces blessing on those without spiritual and financial resources—without any hint of reference to awareness of the poverty. Similarly implausible interpretations are required, argues Willard, in order to make the whole list of beatitudes into laudable traits that can service as conditions for blessing in God’s kingdom or as ideals for the Christian life.

It is worth noting here that the critique stands whether the beatitudes
are taken to be conditions for blessing or ideals. Some who deny that the beatitudes are conditions for blessing go on to affirm them as ideals or virtues of Christian living. On this view, the characteristics listed in the beatitudes are not pre-requisites for entrance in God’s kingdom. But since they are understood as virtues or ideals, they will still need to be interpreted in such a way as to make them plausible as virtues or laudable ideals. So, for example, “spiritual bankruptcy” becomes “awareness of spiritual bankruptcy” or “humility.” But, again, Jesus simply does not make this point.

In Spite of . . .

The beatitudes, says Willard, are not a list of instructions for receiving blessing. Nor do they give us a handy list of Christian virtues. Instead, argues Willard, they are “. . . explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus.” According to Willard, Jesus is drawing on the prophetic expectation of fortune-reversal associated with the coming of God’s kingdom. He uses his audience (filled with the religious, social, physical, and financial zeros of his day) to illustrate and emphasize the first-shall-be-last consequences of the Messianic reign. He overturns a prevailing understanding about who could be a recipient of blessing when God’s kingdom finally broke into human history through the Messiah.

Jesus’ audience had been conditioned to think that folks like the Pharisees (the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and those seemingly full of spirituality and righteousness) were well positioned to receive the blessings of the kingdom but that they, themselves, were not. That they had made their way off of God’s list of folks to be blessed was evidenced (for them) by their religious and spiritual poverty, their sickness, their social exclusion and their persecution. They would have thought themselves more likely recipients of the judgments associated with the coming of Messiah than the blessings. They were starving to be righteous since it was precisely their unrighteousness (or that of their fathers) that excluded them from society, from privilege, from physical health and well-being and from financial success. To these, according to Willard, Jesus came and made the shocking announcement that full participation in the kingdom of God was presently available to everybody (now imagine him pointing at the audience)—even y’all!


4 Willard, 106
Spiritual bankruptcy, then, is not a condition because of which one is positioned well to receive the kingdom. It is a condition in spite of which one is positioned well to receive the kingdom. Jesus is not inviting his audience to pursue, idealize or even recognize poverty—spiritual or otherwise (Is there really any doubt that these folks were aware of their spiritual and financial poverty? Did anyone ever call on them to produce or supply “goods” of either sort?). Jesus is giving them the incredibly good news that their bankruptcy is not a condition that disqualifies them from blessing. Contrary to their expectations, they were perfectly well positioned to walk right into the blessings of God’s presently available kingdom—this despite the fact that their condition was nothing like that of the Pharisees whom they assumed to be uniquely positioned (or, at least, best positioned) for blessing.

But there is trouble for Willard’s view, too. It makes good sense to say to someone that they can receive God’s blessing despite their poverty, spiritual bankruptcy, persecution, and tragic circumstances because they might plausibly have taken these conditions as evidence that God had no intention of blessing them. But what about being pure of heart? What of the peacemaker? Can Jesus plausibly be construed as announcing that you can receive God’s blessing today even though—despite the fact that—you are pure of heart? This is plausible, it seems, only if there was a widespread assumption that being pure of heart disqualified you from the blessings of God’s kingdom. But who would have thought a thing like that? Similar troubles arise, it seems for the other more positive-sounding beatitudes (e.g., merciful, peacemaker).

Saving the view, it seems, will require an understanding of these more positive-sounding beatitudes that renders plausible the suggestion that they would have been thought of as possibly disqualifying one from the good life or from God’s blessing. Cognizant of this seeming requirement, Willard provides such an understanding. To be pure of heart, according to Willard, is to be a perfectionist—someone who is a pain to himself and everyone else around because nothing is ever good enough. But blessing is available to these miserable people despite their purity of heart (i.e., despite the perfectionism that renders them otherwise miserable). The peacemaker is the one who somehow always finds herself in the miserable middle position—hated by both sides. Blessing is available to her despite this miserable condition. The merciful person is the person who, in the world’s economy, is constantly taken advantage of. But the good news is that God’s blessing is available to this person despite the worldly disadvantage of having been merciful.

But on its face, it is just not very plausible that Jesus meant to be teaching about perfectionism with his talk of purity of heart. At least, this is no more plausible than is the suggestion that Jesus meant to be teaching about humility with his talk of spiritual poverty. And while it is likely that Jesus’ audience considered poverty and tragic circumstance to be evidence of
exclusion from God’s blessing, it is unlikely that they thought of peace-making, mercy, and purity of heart in these terms.

**Two Failed Unifying Themes**

So far, two very different ideas about what is happening in the beatitudes. On the first view, we get a collection of conditions for blessing or ideals for the Christian life. On this view, living appropriately in response to the beatitudes is a matter of having one’s life come into conformity (either by grace or by effort or both) with the description we find in the text. To live appropriately in response to the beatitudes is to be increasingly poor, poor in spirit, mourning, peace-making, pure of heart, etc. But this requires making ideals of hunger, poverty, spiritual bankruptcy and sadness or adjusting our understanding of these terms so that the conditions they denote fit our existing ideals.

On Willard’s view, we get a collection of illustrations intended to demonstrate the availability of God’s blessing to everyone—even those thought of as least likely to receive it. Since the illustrations are intended to correct widespread assumptions about who could and who could not receive God’s blessing, they each take a condition thought of as a disqualifier of blessing and pronounce the availability of blessing on folks in that condition. To live appropriately in response to the beatitudes is to be ready to pronounce the availability of God’s kingdom to exactly everyone—even those folks who are often thought of as least well positioned to receive it (a terrorist cell leader, perhaps, or a single mother who works nights at the strip club). But this requires the plausibility of purity of heart, mercy, and peace-making as potential disqualifiers from God’s blessing or adjusting our understanding of these terms so that the conditions they denote might plausibly be thought of as disqualifiers.

The beatitudes seem to resist smooth unification under either of these descriptions. They seem not to be conditions because of which blessing becomes available to us. But neither do they seem to be conditions in spite of which blessing is available. How then should the beatitudes be unified?

**Neither Because of Nor in Spite of . . .**

In what follows, I wish to affirm Willard’s general suggestion about what Jesus is doing in the beatitudes. Jesus is announcing that “. . . no one is beyond beatitude, because the rule of God from the heavens is available to all. Everyone can reach it and it can reach everyone.” Moreover, I wish to

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5 See, for example, John 9:1–2.
6 Willard, 122.
affirm his suggestion that the specific conditions Jesus lists were intended to overturn prevailing assumptions about who could receive God’s blessing (folks like the Pharisees) and who could not (folks like Jesus’ audience). It would not have done much good to give instructions about how to move foreword into life in God’s kingdom to an audience who thought themselves excluded from the very possibility of such a thing. They would never have bothered to do what he said. The first order of business was to convince his audience that the good news about God’s kingdom was, indeed, good news for everybody—including them! This is the goal of the beatitudes.

What I wish to leave behind from Willard’s interpretation is the suggestion that Jesus accomplishes this goal by giving his audience a list of conditions in spite of which blessing could be theirs. But if this is not a list of conditions in spite of which blessing could be received, what is it? What unifies this list of conditions/traits if not that? In what follows, I offer two unifying themes: the “anti-Pharisee theme” and the “spectrum theme.” Neither of these themes depends on the other for its plausibility. They are, in that sense, independent. One could reasonably accept either while rejecting the other. But they are not exclusive. Both, I think, accurately represent the unity of the beatitudes.

THE ANTI-PHARISEE THEME

What Jesus most needs to get across to his audience at the front end of this talk is that the life he is about to describe—a life of blessing in God’s kingdom—is really and truly available to them. What they think is that when the Messiah comes and the kingdom really breaks into human history, they (the poor, the excluded, the spiritually impoverished, the sick, the demon-possessed) are not at all well positioned to receive the blessing. If asked to point to a model of readiness for blessing in God’s kingdom, they would have pointed to the Pharisees. So what Jesus needs to do is to make it as clear as possible that someone can look not at all like a Pharisee and be perfectly positioned to walk into the kingdom.

Think about the beatitudes in connection with how Jesus’ audience (the sick, poor, spiritually impoverished, demon-possessed, and socially excluded) would have perceived the Pharisees. Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” If we are members of this audience, that does not sound like a Pharisee. That sounds a lot like us! The Pharisees were the ones with the spiritual goods! “Blessed are those who mourn.” Once again, the Pharisees lived lives of honor and privilege. These hungry, sick, and excluded folk were doing the lion’s share of the mourning. “Blessed are the meek.” I doubt these folks experienced the Pharisees as a very meek group. There is good reason to think they were often harsh and unfeeling in their enforcement of the law. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Jesus’ audience did not think of the Pharisees as starving or desperate to be righteous. When it came to righteousness, they were full of it. It was
the audience who craved to be righteous. Righteousness, for this audience, would mean re-entry into society, health and well-being. “Blessed are the merciful.” This audience did not experience the Pharisees as a merciful bunch. “Blessed are the pure of heart.” What socially excluded group does not question the purity of the ruling class. “Blessed are the Peacemakers.” The New Testament does not give us the Pharisees as a particularly peace-making group. They were regularly stirring up controversy and generating strife. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness.” The Pharisees were not persecuted for their righteousness. In fact, they were in a position of power and privilege because of it.

What all of these conditions have in common is that they are not true of the Pharisees (or would not have been thought true of the Pharisees by Jesus’ audience). This is not a list of virtues or ideals. But neither is it a list of unfortunate characteristics that might be thought of as disqualifying one from blessing in God’s kingdom—traits in spite of which one can be blessed. Some of the beatitudes give us unfortunate characteristics. Others give us virtues. What all of these things have in common, though, is that they would not have been thought true of the Pharisees or the other members of the ruling religious class. Jesus is saying, as forcefully as he can, “You don’t have to look anything like them. In fact, you can look an awful lot like y’all!”

**Spectrum Theme**

I had a class not long ago with a basketball player (David) who sat in the back corner of the room and a paraplegic (Chris) who sat up near the front. I told the class to get out their calendars because I had an important announcement to make and that they would probably want to make significant adjustments to their schedules in light of it. I then announced to them that an NBA scout would be on campus all next week for the purpose of recruiting players. They did not believe me. But I asked them to humor me and pretend to believe me. They did. But only David seemed to be doing anything at all with his calendar—drawing lines through every appointment and making notes to himself to phone friends and cancel commitments. Nobody else made any adjustments at all to their calendars. And we all know why. It is not that they thought the life of an NBA player would be unattractive. Many would have loved that life. But the announcement was clearly not of any relevance for them. They knew themselves to be excluded at the very outset from the opportunity I was presenting.

Next I pointed to a tall young woman in the front row. “Hannah,” I said, “they’re looking for a strong woman to fill the forward position.” Confusion. Did he say “NBA” or “WNBA”? Suddenly Hannah was paying more attention to her calendar and David was putting his away. Next I pointed to Chris and said that they were looking for folks just like him to
play point guard. Chris? In a wheelchair? Finally, I pointed at David and said that they really needed an outside shooter and that he should think about showing up for the tryouts.

I asked my class what they were experiencing. Confusion! They thought they knew what a good candidate for the NBA looked like. But when they tried to take me seriously and tried to imagine that what I said was true, they found themselves completely clueless about what the NBA was doing—what it would look like after this next scouting season. Were I only to have pointed to Hannah, they would have understood me to be talking about the WNBA. Were I only to have pointed to Chris, they might have thought I was talking about a wheelchair league. Were I only to have pointed to David, it would have simply confirmed their limited view of who could play in the NBA. But as it stands, they found themselves wondering if, maybe, the NBA were being restructured so that everyone could play. This would be good news indeed (so long as they were not also massively restructuring the pay scale)! Suddenly everyone in the room had reason to adjust their lives in the light of this news about the availability of NBA life. News that would have been dismissed as irrelevant to all but a very few was now causing alterations in the schedules of the most unlikely of people.

Jesus came with news that the kingdom life is available—that a life of unimaginable goodness, strength, and joy is ours for the taking and that we should re-organize our affairs in order to lay hold of it. But he knew that his news would be dismissed as irrelevant to all but a select few who were thought of as well positioned to be blessed by God. In the beatitudes, he cites a full spectrum of conditions in order to make clear to his audience that this is for everyone. Jesus drives home the suggestion that everyone can enter with a series of illustrations along a very wide spectrum that includes virtues and unfortunate conditions.

The Apostle Paul gives us a parallel teaching both in his letter to the Galatians (chapter 3) and in his letter to the Colossians (chapter 3). He informs his readers that in Christ there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female, slave or free. Paul is saying that the life of Christ is available to everyone. It is obvious that Paul is not offering a list of conditions because of which one can be in Christ—though it is true that some of these characteristics are attractive and to be sought after (e.g., freedom as opposed to slavery). But neither is Paul offering a list of characteristics despite which one can be in Christ. Though some of the characteristics would have been thought of as potential disqualifiers from full participation in Christ (being a slave, being a woman, being uncircumcised, being a Scythian), others clearly would not have been (e.g., being a man, being a Jew, being free). Nobody would have thought that being free might somehow disqualify you from full participation in the life of Christ. Rather, Paul is presenting as wide a spectrum as possible in order to highlight the irrelevance of these distinctions to the life available in Christ Jesus. Christ is all and in all!

This is precisely the message of Jesus in the beatitudes. The life of blessing in God’s kingdom is available to everyone and everyone should
adjust his or her calendars accordingly. In order to emphasize the universal availability of this life, Jesus informs his listeners that they need not look like the Pharisees and he illustrates the availability of the kingdom by pointing to a wide spectrum of conditions. He is not saying that the kingdom is available because of the having of these characteristics—though it is true that some of these characteristics are attractive and to be sought after (e.g., peacemaking, mercy, and purity of heart). But neither is he saying that the kingdom is available despite the having of these characteristics—though some of them would have been thought of as potentially disqualifying one from blessing in God’s kingdom (e.g., poverty, spiritual bankruptcy). Rather, Jesus is presenting a wide spectrum of conditions in order to highlight the irrelevance of these conditions to the availability of God’s kingdom life now.

Willard has it right, then, in his understanding of how we ought to live in response to the beatitudes. We ought to stand ready to invite absolutely anyone at all into the life of Christ. The distinctions we might take to be relevant to a consideration of one’s suitability to take up discipleship to Jesus simply are not relevant—gay or straight, tattooed or not, piercings or not, married or single, protestant, catholic, orthodox, atheist or terrorist. None of these conditions disqualifies a would-be disciple of Jesus from surrendering his or her life today and walking into the fullness of life in God’s great economy. This is the good news of the gospel. The good hermeneutical news is that we do not have to think of peacemaking and purity of heart as unattractive qualities in spite of which we can be blessed in order to understand Jesus to be preaching this gospel good news in the beatitudes.
The Willardian Corpus

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Abstract. Dallas Willard’s five monographs devoted to Christian spirituality constitute a unified body of work that together present a comprehensive account of the nature and means of spiritual formation in Christ. This paper approaches Willard’s corpus chronologically for the purpose of culling the central components of Willard’s understanding of spiritual formation. This is not meant to be a review or summary of Willard’s writings, but rather an analytical study of Willard’s work and is an implicit call for further second-order scholarly reflection on the Willardian corpus.

The Importance of the Willardian Corpus

Within the last two or three centuries, Protestant theology has suffered from what one author termed an eclipse of holiness. This eclipse does not refer to the disappearance of sanctity within the actual lives of Christ-followers, but instead the disappearance of substantive theological engagement with the topic of sanctification/Christian spirituality. J. I. Packer states the point this way:


In the twentieth century, most of the best evangelical brains have been put to work in other fields. The result is that much of our best modern theology (there are exceptions) is superficial about holiness, while modern treatments of holiness often lack the biblical insight, theological depth, and human understanding that are needed in order to do the subject justice. The most distinguished evangelical theologians have not always been the most ardent exponents of holiness, and the most ardent evangelical exponents of holiness have not always been the most reliable or judicious theologians.

Packer provided this analysis in 1984. In that same year Dallas Willard initiated what would become a twenty-five year research project that yielded five books—roughly 1,500 pages—focused on the topic of Christian holiness. These five monographs are the following:

1984. *In Search of Guidance: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*


1998. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*


2009. *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*

The above monographs are what will be referred to here as the Willardian corpus. In what follows it will be contended that this body of work presents a unified and comprehensive account of spiritual growth in Christ and

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3 Packer, 84.
9 Willard’s *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) will be omitted in this discussion from the Willardian corpus. This is because *The Great Omission*, while important and valuable in its own right, is a collection of occasional papers/essays the content of which largely (though not entirely) overlap with what is covered more fully in the five monographs listed above.
that over the last twenty-five years it has gone some way towards remedy-
ing the eclipse of holiness. That is, the concepts that are developed across
the span of these five books hang together and provide a thorough account-
ing of the nature and means of Christian formation with, as Packer puts it,
“the biblical insight, theological depth, and human understanding that are
needed in order to do the subject justice.”\footnote{Packer, 84.} This is an important thesis to
demonstrate because, for one, it helps pave the way for other biblical, theo-
logical, historical, psychological, and philosophical scholars to seriously
approach Willard’s work as a significant contribution to the theology of
Christian spirituality.

**The Lack of Scholarly Engagement with the Willardian Corpus**

Paving the way for other scholars to seriously approach Willard’s work
is important precisely because there is some concern that Willard’s corpus
has not received the scholarly attention it warrants. For while Willard’s
books are widely read and discussed, there is at present little scholarly in-
teraction with Willard’s corpus (excluding from consideration this present
journal issue).

For instance, a recent search of “Willard, Dallas” in the main theolog-
ical research database—the ATLA Religion Database—generates seventy-
two records. But of those seventy-two records, the vast majority refer to
book reviews of Willard’s published monographs, short essays about
Willard in popular magazines, and Willard’s own publications. Only three
citations are to articles published in scholarly journals that substantively
engage Willard’s work.\footnote{The three articles that appeared in the ATLA Religion database search are:
Scholar’s Review* XXXIV:3 (Spring 2005): 341–51; Michael W. Mangis, “Spiritual
Formation and Christian Psychology: A Response and Application of Willard’s
“Rethinking the Kingdom of God: The Work of Dallas Willard and Some Applica-
tions to Psychotherapeutic Practice,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 14:4
(Winter 1995): 306–317.} In other words, secondary literature (excluding book reviews) on Willard’s spiritual formation material is almost non-
existen\footnote{Again, the present issue of this journal will offer a corrective to this situation.
Once the articles in this issue are listed in the ATLA database, the secondary litera-
ture on Willard will have tripled! Another relevant article from an earlier issue of this
journal that has yet to appear on the database is Dan Speak, “Willard, Warfare, and
Will,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1:2 (2008): 207–216.} (excluding, once again, this present journal issue).\footnote{12}
This lack of scholarly engagement is troubling because the thinkers, theories, and ideas that tend to leave a lasting mark on theological education within the University, seminary, and the local church are those thinkers, theories, and ideas that get scholarly attention. Scholarly engagement, both positive and critical, generates greater awareness, interest, and (hopefully) deeper comprehension of a particular thinker and his or her points of view. In turn, this can lead to a thinker and/or concept becoming well entrenched in the theological scene. The concern is this: as long as Willard’s corpus is not substantively engaged by Christian academics and is left as collateral reading in theological education, the influence of Willard’s account of the spiritual life will not be as great as it otherwise would be.13

The question arises as to why the Willardian corpus has not received substantial scholarly interaction. There are several things to consider. First, undoubtedly the vast majority of published theological writing does not garner a sizeable academic audience, let alone significant written interaction. Even without much secondary literature, in terms of readership and influence, Willard’s corpus is doing far better than most recently published monographs in Christian spirituality. Second, there is no way to judge what sort of scholarly attention will come to Willard’s corpus in the future. Third, Willard does not write in the style of contemporary theology, his books are not published by typical theology publishers, he is not regularly found at theology conferences (e.g., ETS, AAR, etc.), and he is not a theologian in terms of his terminal degree, primary area of scholarly expertise, or regular course offerings. All of this keeps him off the radar of academic theologians. Fourth, Willard’s biblical/theological/historical argumentation is often underdeveloped. For example, Willard will frequently cite one or more biblical passages in support of a particular point, but it is rare that he will delve into an extended discussion of his interpretation and application of these passages in dialogue with current biblical scholarship. The same is often true of Willard’s appeal to church history or philosophy as a means of supporting his contentions. This leaves the biblical scholar, church historian, and philosopher unsure of how to engage Willard.

The later point is potentially the most serious hurdle to an increase in Willardian scholarship. But the point must not be overstated. In the vast majority of cases, Willard’s argumentation is quite developed and explicit. And even in those cases where the arguments are nascent, there remains a way to reconstruct Willard’s positions in order to defend and/or critique them. Several of the articles in this current journal issue offer examples of this approach to Willard’s corpus.

13 Alternatively, there is something to be said for thinkers and ideas that dodge the scholarly maelstrom. In the best of cases, academic engagement enriches a discussion, but there is also the tendency for it to distort and deaden a discussion. I still believe Willard’s corpus would be better served by increased attention, but I am assuming the best of academia.
A Unified and Comprehensive Theory

Whatever the precise reason for the apparent lack of engagement with the Willardian corpus, in the remainder of this paper it is urged that the Willardian corpus presents the Christian scholarly community with a body of work on spiritual formation that has theological heft. Against any misinformed notion that Willard’s five books are a loose collection of disconnected musings on the spiritual life, the argument here is that the Willardian corpus offers a unified and comprehensive theory of spiritual formation in Christ, developed out of a robust theological methodology, and is a fertile source for scholarly engagement. So, in many ways, what follows is an interpretation of Willard’s views on spiritual formation using his corpus as the primary source material. The main purpose of this interpretation is to demonstrate that a unified and comprehensive view of spiritual growth emerges from Willard’s writings. Whether this interpretation of Willard is right—both in the sense of being faithful to Willard and in the sense of being a correct account of the reality of spiritual formation in Christ—is the type of question that future scholarly interaction on the Willardian corpus should decide.

As with any author’s body of work, there are various ways that the Willardian corpus can be approached. A chronological approach is pursued in this paper. That is, the development of Willard’s view of spiritual formation is traced through each of his five books in the order of their publication. This approach emphasizes the unity of the corpus by showing the logical flow and interconnectedness of Willard’s view through the five monographs. The downside of a chronological approach is that it does not offer a systematic, organizing framework for Willard’s position other than the one that arises from the chronology. Having said that, there is most certainly a subjective selectivity in what is being extracted and when it is extracted from each of Willard’s books. The selectivity is guided by what this author takes to be the main components of each book as well as how these components contribute to Willard’s overall theory of spiritual formation.

Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God

While Hearing God (also known as In Search of Guidance) covers a vast range of relevant themes, five major components of Willard’s overall theory of spiritual formation surface from this book. Most of these components are developed more thoroughly in later monographs, but the temptation to extensively refer to later monographs in the initial development of these components will be mostly resisted. This is for two reasons. First, a truly chronological approach that attempts to show the development of Willard’s view across the corpus must take care not to bring too much of the later specifications back into earlier statements. And second, the attempt to exhaustively consider all that the Willardian corpus contributes to
each of these components would turn out to be a much longer and quite different project—more akin to an encyclopedic index of Willard’s writings.

Component #1: An adequate understanding of spiritual formation is needed to effectively care for one’s spiritual life.

A major unifying theme of the Willardian corpus is Willard’s diagnosis of the current problem when it comes to Christian maturation. It is important to note that Willard’s corpus as a whole is in response to what Willard consistently sees as a deficit in the Christian community’s understanding of spiritual growth in Christ. While Willard’s diagnosis unfolds and deepens as the corpus develops, the essential problem is clearly put forth in Hearing God: “Those who operate on the wrong information are likely never to know the reality of God’s presence in the decisions which shape their lives and will miss the constant divine companionship for which their souls were made” (10; cf. 16, 26, 29). Later in the book Willard writes, “what we do or do not understand, in any area of our lives, determines what we can or cannot believe and therefore governs our practice and action with an iron hand” (193).

Willard’s judgment that a lack of understanding as well as positive misunderstanding is the central problem may come off as a commonplace description of what ails the Christian community. But it is important to see that Willard has a view of “understanding” that makes it an essential and fundamental element in any practical endeavor. For Willard the problem is not biblical illiteracy, nor deficient relationships amongst believers, nor doctrinal error, nor lack of sustained effort in Christian living, nor even the failure to utilize spiritual disciplines. For Willard, the crisis among us is the failure to adequately understand and therefore effectually enter into a transformational relationship with God. Perhaps in a way that only becomes clear in Willard’s final book—Knowing Christ Today—understanding (or knowledge) is essential to successfully interact with any reality. Since God calls human persons into responsible participation in their growth, having knowledge regarding what it is that one is participating with is indispensable.

14 All parenthetical page notations in this section of the article refer to Hearing God unless otherwise noted.

15 In Spirit of the Disciplines, Willard puts the point as follows: “I believe our present difficulty is one of misunderstanding how our experiences and actions enable us to receive the grace of God” (x); “I finally decided their problem was a theological deficiency, a lack in teaching, understanding, and practical direction” (18). In Renovation of the Heart, Willard writes, “Because we are active participants in the process of spiritual formation and what we do or do not do makes a huge difference, our efforts must be based on understanding. The degree of success in such efforts will essentially depend upon the degree to which this general pattern is understood and intentionally conformed to” (83).
It is also noteworthy that Willard’s diagnosis of the problem of Christian immaturity amongst Christ followers is consistently related to the problems confronting human existence on a national, international, and global scale. Willard insists time and again that the lack of understanding of the Christian community leads to a spiritual mediocrity which in turn does nothing to help the dire condition of humanity in general and that the corresponding corrective begins with the spiritual transformation of the inner life of the Christ-follower (cf. 146). In a period of time in which there is an increasing awareness of the need for social justice and cultural engagement, Willard’s emphasis on the connection between the inner life and the outer/active life is timely.16

Component #2: The nature of spiritual formation in Christ determines the method by which it is to be known.

While Willard’s theological method is exemplified throughout his writings and is discussed further in the remainder of his corpus, it is important that it be laid bare at the start. Put simply, Scripture is a unique and privileged source of knowledge, for Willard, that is supported and augmented in substantial ways by church history (both the history of biblical interpretation and historical exemplars of Christian devotion), personal experience (his own and his appeal to others), and philosophical analysis. Willard writes, “The Bible . . . is inerrant in its original form and infallible in all of its forms for the purpose of guiding us into a life-saving relationship with God in his kingdom. It is infallible in this way precisely because God never leaves it alone . . . [The Bible] reliably fixes the boundaries of everything [God] will ever say to humankind” (141, 142).17 For Willard, “God never leaves” Scripture alone in the sense that the Spirit of God illumines the biblical text in a manner that is transformational (142–143).

Willard’s clear stress on Scripture and the Spirit’s role in Scripture is seamlessly integrated with his emphasis on relating one’s own experience to the words of Scripture and looking for the lives of others (both contemporary and historical others) to help clarify both the meaning of the text and one’s own experience of God’s truth (cf. 36). For instance, early in Hearing God Willard discusses his own experiences with hearing God’s voice (16) as well as the writings of “great Christians of the past such as John Calvin and William Law” which gave him “further insight into what was happening in my experiences and why it was happening” (17; cf. 23). Another example of Willard’s integrative method comes in his discussion of the spiritual force of words. Willard discusses three biblical passages which he takes to support his point (John 6:63; Heb 6:6; John 15:7) and continues with references to Plato (pagan philosopher c. 347 B.C.), Augustine (early church

16 For extended discussion on this theme, see Renovation of the Heart, 217–232 and Knowing Christ Today, 193–211.
17 See his “assumptions about the Bible” in The Divine Conspiracy, xvi–xvii.
theologian d. 430 A.D.), and William Penn (Quaker political theorist d. 1718) that further confirm and elaborate on the biblical exposition (120–121; cf. 167, 176, 183–184).

Of course, Willard is in good company with his utilization of Scripture, experience, tradition/history, and reason. And yet, it is rare to see a theological writer who navigates biblical texts (most often direct quotes), experiential appeals and testimonies, and relevant statements from historical sources in the integrated manner that Willard does. The pervasive influence of his philosophical insights often go unnoticed in that the very way Willard approaches and initiates discussions already presuppose a thoughtful analysis of the topic in question.

This focus on Willard’s theological method is by no means perfunctory. In the case of Christian spirituality, having a theological method that takes both Scripture and Christian experience seriously is essential to developing a psychologically realistic view of spiritual growth.

Component #3: Relationship with God is an experiential reality.

The third major component of Willard’s unified view of spiritual formation is the central focus on and detailed specification of the experiential nature of relationship with God. Willard’s analysis of the divine-human relationship is the core element of his understanding of Christian growth. For Willard this relationship is grounded in the ontology of the person in the sense that the human person was designed/structured by God to exist within a certain kind of relatedness to the Trinity as well as other persons. In Hearing God this divine relationship is most often countenanced as a conversational relationship, but Willard also uses the following descriptors: “intimate friendship” (10), “close personal relationship” (10), “constant divine companionship” (10), “richly interactive relationship” (10), “hand-in-hand, conversational walk with God” (11), “God’s indwelling his people...
through personal presence and fellowship” (18), “personal communion” (22), “loving fellowship with the King” (31), “a direct and fully self-conscious personal relationship” (46), and so on. Willard clearly sees the divine-human relationship as involving more than conversation: “. . . in the progress of God’s redemptive work communication advances into communion and communion into union. When the progression is complete we can truly say, ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20)” (155).

This relationship with God is experiential in at least two senses. First, the relationship is experiential in the sense that one can be consciously aware of the communication, communion, and union. And second, the relationship is experiential in that it has a personal impact on the person’s emotional, cognitive, volitional, and embodied existence. God, Willard writes, “is able to penetrate and intertwine himself within the fibers of the human self in such a way that those who are enveloped in his loving companionship will never be alone” (43).

Willard distinguishes four ways in which God can be experienced. The first is a “blind faith” that God is with the believer when there is “no awareness of his being here with us at all and no evidence of his action in or around us” (46). Willard sees this as a limited though still important form of God’s presence. Second, there is an “indeterminate but often very powerful sense, feeling or impression of God’s presence” (47). This is the conscious awareness referred to above. Third, is the experience of God through the occurrence of events that cannot be plausibly attributed to merely natural causes—i.e., God is present to a person or group through what he accomplishes through that person or group (49–50). The fourth kind of experience of God is the conversational relationship in which God’s thoughts and intentions are consciously communicated to believers (51–57). This way of experiencing God proves to be the most significant given both the human need for God and how God desires to work in human lives. This point is further elaborated in the next component.

Component #4: The word of God carries with it God’s experiential presence.

The fourth major element of Willard’s overall theory is his analysis of how the word of God is at the core of this life-giving, experiential relationship. In a manner that illustrates Willard’s philosophical acumen, Willard discusses how a word conveys a person’s meanings—“the thought, feeling or action that person associates with it” (119). Meaning “hooks into the hidden levers of mind and reality and gives [words] their immense power” (119). This power is a spiritual power in that it connects spirit (“unbodily, personal force”) with spirit (120–121).

Since words are meaningless without personal intention, God is always present with his word. These expressions/communications from God can be external to the human mind (e.g., natural phenomena, the words of other
human beings, the incarnate Christ, or the Bible) or internal to the human mind (i.e., communications from God in one’s own thoughts, intentions and feelings) (121). Since words (thoughts/intentions) have power to govern reality—“to direct action and events”—when they are spoken by “authorized individuals” (129–130), so too, God’s word, when it is received, governs the reality of the human system. On the basis of this understanding, Willard maintains that the proper use of the Bible is central to human transformation (160).

Willard’s analysis on this point is invaluable in that it makes sense of how the word of God is both personal and transformational as a corrective to views of the Christian life that depersonalize the Bible and thereby de-nude it of its power to transform. All that can be done with a depersonalized and denuded Bible is to hold right views of what it says or approach it superstitiously, and neither approach will actually nurture an interactive relationship with God (cf. John 5:39–40). On this Willard writes, “It is better in one year to have ten good verses transferred into the substance of our lives than to have every word of the Bible flash before our eyes. Remember that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6). We read to open ourselves to the Spirit” (163; cf. 171).

Component #5: God’s experiential presence (or word) is inherently transformational.

Bringing together Willard’s understanding of the experiential nature of the divine-human relationship (component #3) and the transforming power of God’s word (component #4), the last feature drawn from Hearing God is what might be called Willard’s relational theory of human transformation. Since human persons were created in the very fibers of their being to exist in communication/communion/union with God, when God’s word (meaning) and Spirit (presence) are received by a person, this enlivens the previously dead dimensions of the human heart. So for Willard:

The gospel . . . opens the door of the mind and enters the heart. From there it is able to progressively transform the whole personality. Thus “the sower sows the word” of the kingdom (Mk 4:14). When this takes root in the heart and mind, a new life enters our personality and increasingly becomes our life as we learn to “be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25) and “sow to the Spirit” (Gal 6:8)” (150).

It is the meaningfulness (the truth) of the divine presence in the person’s life that brings about change. Truth alone does not change, nor does the human will bring about change by effort alone. Rather, “God causes the growth” through the penetration of his divine life into the structures of the human personality that were made to receive and draw life from him.

Willard makes clear that “impurities,” “distractions,” “false ideas,” “attitudes,” “fears,” and “lusts” stand in the way of God’s cleansing/life-
giving word (153). But again, the change-agent is the person of God through Christ by the Spirit:

The *literal* truth is that Christ through his word removes the old routines in the heart and mind—the old routines of thought, feeling, action, imagination, conceptualization, belief, inference—and in their place he puts something else: *his* thoughts, *his* attitudes, *his* beliefs, *his* ways of seeing and interpreting things, *his* words. He washes out our minds, and in the place of confusion and falsehood—or hatred, suspicion and fear, to speak of emotions—he brings clarity, truth, love, confidence and hopefulness (154).

Seeing relationship with God as the transforming principle/person leaves open the question of human responsibility in Christian growth. And yet, it also makes clear that whatever role human agency plays, such efforts do not *cause* transformation. Nonetheless, *Hearing God* initiates a discussion of human responsibility: “Once the new life begins to enter our soul, however, we have the responsibility and opportunity of ever more fully focusing our whole being on it and wholly orienting ourselves toward it. This is *our* part, and God will not do it for us” (158). While Hearing God introduces Willard’s take on “our part,” Willard’s understanding of this crucial dimension of Christian formation comes to fruition in The Spirit of the Disciplines.²¹

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives

A major thesis of this paper is that there is a cohesiveness to the Willardian corpus. Moving from *Hearing God* to The Spirit of the Disciplines (hereafter referred to as *SD*) is the first major test of that cohesiveness. The question becomes: in what manner does *SD* coherently build upon *Hearing God*? Willard himself signals a continuity between the two monographs in his introduction to The Divine Conspiracy, a book which he sees as completing a “trilogy on the spiritual life”:

In the first, *In Search of Guidance* [i.e., *Hearing God*], I attempted to make real and clear the intimate quality of life with [Jesus] as a

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²¹ One element of *Hearing God* that was not developed in this overview is Willard’s practical theology of, believe it or not, hearing God. Since this overview is meant to paint with broad strokes Willard’s theology of formation, a summary of Willard’s view of how one goes about hearing God was omitted. But Willard’s guidance on hearing God’s voice is certainly the central feature of the book and in many ways what has been laid out in the five components is the theoretical husk to this practical kernel.
“conversational relationship with God.” But that relationship is not something that automatically happens, and we do not receive it by passive infusion. So the second book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, explains how disciples or students of Jesus can effectively interact with the grace and spirit of God to access fully the provisions and character intended for us in the gift of eternal life.²²

The kind of transformational interaction with God that Willard envisions and explicates to some degree in *Hearing God* is only possible through the intentional efforts of the already reborn individual. The main components of *SD* center around developing an understanding of salvation and the spiritual life which make sense of both the role and the effectiveness of spiritual disciplines.

Before moving on to these elements, it is important to more clearly expose the fifth component developed from *Hearing God*—relational transformation—within *SD*. In *SD* Willard has been at times misunderstood as suggesting that disciplines alone transform human persons—perhaps in the sort of way that Aristotle might have envisioned certain practices bringing about virtue formation.²³ But Willard clearly reiterates in *SD* his view from *Hearing God* in which he maintains that it is the enlivening presence of God that brings about transformation due to the human capacity and anthropological need for such a relationship and that the disciplines are at their core means to align one’s self, in loving union, with God. For instance, in the preface of *SD* Willard writes:

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself . . . We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father (ix).²⁴

Note that the disciplines are activities aimed at remaining in *constant fellowship* with God the Father. Fasting, prayer, meditation on Scripture and the like are not transformative in and of themselves, but only as they attach the disciple to the transforming resources of the Godhead. Disciplines are “an avenue to life filled and possessed of God” (18). In this way, the five components presented in *Hearing God* are really foundational to *SD*, al-


²⁴ All parenthetical page notations in this section of the article refer to *The Spirit of the Disciplines* unless otherwise noted.
though it is not as if SD essentially depends on Hearing God. One could read SD without reading Hearing God and still grasp Willard’s position on these matters, but the reading of SD is nonetheless well-served by a comprehension of the main components of Hearing God. And it is in this sense that there is a unity between the two books as well as a logical progression from the main themes of Hearing God to the major components of SD. This leads to the three main components of SD that build upon the earlier components extracted from Hearing God.

Component #6: As embodied persons in relationship with a loving God, informed human participation is essential for spiritual growth.

The sixth component is Willard’s understanding of the role of the intentional efforts of the Christ-follower in spiritual growth. This issue has been a major area of doctrinal dispute in church history. Within Protestant theology, the discussion centers around the sense in which human effort is required and yet growth occurs by faith and grace alone. A tension arises as to why human effort is needed as well as what kind of human effort is needed given sola gratia and sola fide. This discussion often gets conflated with a related discussion regarding the place of “works”—typically understood as overt good acts—in the Christian life. At times the human effort required for spiritual change is identified with the human effort involved in practicing good works and spiritual change itself then becomes identified with doing good works. Once this occurs, there really is no transformation only mere human effort to do good, perhaps out of a sense of obligation to Christ or out of autonomous obedience to a set of biblical commands (Paul’s “putting confidence in the flesh” Phil 3:4). The vital question remains: what sort of effort is required to be conformed to the image of Christ in a manner that is consistent with God’s sanctifying grace?

Willard could not be clearer in SD that human agency is essential for growth: “the harmonization of our total self with God will not be done for us. We must act” (68; cf. 93). “Now that new life is graciously visited upon me, my part in the redemptive process is to [submit myself to God]. God will not do it for me any more than he did it for Moses or Elijah, for his son Jesus or his apostle Paul. And if I do not submit my actions through the disciplines that fit my personality, I will not enter into the powerful, virtuous new life in a psychologically real way” (120). Of course, the requirement

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26 See, for instance, G. C. Berkeouwer’s discussion of this tension in his, Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 17–46.
27 As an illustration of this, see John Webster’s treatment of the issue in his, Holiness (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 79–92.
for persons to be active in spiritual growth does not negate the necessity of God’s grace: “We are saved by grace, of course, and by it alone, and not because we deserve it . . . But grace does not mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically ‘infused’ into our being in the moment of need” (4). Instead, God calls his children to exercise themselves in learning to live under his care and provision. It is all by grace because human effort does not merit God’s transforming work nor is God’s transforming work accomplished by human effort alone.

Willard’s view on why human effort is necessary will become more apparent upon treating The Divine Conspiracy, but in SD Willard does maintain that human cooperation in spiritual formation is essential to the nature of a personal relationship that operates on the basis of love and not coercion. It is on the basis of being in the image of God, according to Willard, that God invites persons to co-labor with him in their sanctification.

And yet, to insist on human agency in spiritual formation due to issues of freedom and the nature of personal relationship does not explain in what way human agency can make a difference in formation. Is human involvement required only because human nature and the divine-human relationship necessitate it, or is human involvement also required due to the nature of spiritual growth itself? Willard thinks it is a both/and. For Willard not just any exercise of the human will is called for, but an informed exercise of the human will. There are certain activities that are well-suited or fitting for growth given the nature of God’s transformation of the human self. What sort of efforts are required?

Willard is quite unique in his understanding of human responsibility in formation. The responsibility humans have is primarily grounded in the human body:

It is precisely this appropriate recognition of the body and of its implications for theology that is missing in currently dominant views of Christian salvation or deliverance. The human body is the focal point of human existence. Jesus had one. We have one. Without the body in its proper place, the pieces of the puzzle of new life in Christ do not realistically fit together, and the idea of really following him and becoming like him remains a practical impossibility (29–30).

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28 Willard certainly has in mind, though does not explicitly say so in SD, that humans have libertarian agency as opposed to a compatibilist view (see his discussion on top of page 53). Nevertheless, it would be an interesting exercise to consider how Willard’s explanation of the necessity of human involvement in spiritual formation could be applied to a compatibilist understanding of human agency. For more on Willard’s view of free will, see his “Spiritual Formation and the Warfare between the Flesh and the Human Spirit,” Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care 1:1 (2008): 79–87 as well as a response to this article referenced earlier (Speak, “Willard, Warfare, and Will”).
Although we call the disciplines ‘spiritual’—and although they must never be undertaken apart from a constant, inward interaction with God and his gracious Kingdom—they never fail to require specific acts and dispositions of our body as we engage in them. We are finite, limited to our bodies. So the disciplines cannot be carried out except as our body and its parts are surrendered in precise ways and definite actions to God (40; cf. 29–31).

The crucial point for Willard is that God has given persons some direct control over their bodies in a way that they do not have direct control over anything else.\(^{29}\) A person may not have direct control over their thoughts or direct control over their attitudes or even direct control over certain ingrained behaviors, but typically a person does possess some measure of direct control, and therefore responsibility, over the parts of their body. Persons may not be able stop sinning by direct effort alone (willpower) and certainly persons do not have the direct control to stop sinning out of love for God. Only God’s transforming presence can bring about the character traits—the fruit of the Spirit—that will lead to righteousness motivated out of love.

So how do persons engage the transforming presence of God—what is the role of the human agent? Willard’s response is that often the only thing that persons can do is to place their bodies in the conditions in which God regularly chooses to work. Willard writes, “The human body is the primary field of independent power and freedom given by God to people. Put simply—no body, no power. People have a body for one reason—that we might have at our disposal the resources that would allow us to be persons in fellowship and cooperation with a personal God” (92). God has deposited a “measure of independent power” in the human body (53, 54) and it is up to the individual person to place their body in submission to God. That is the “our part” of spiritual formation.\(^{30}\)

This responsibility is magnified once it is realized that humans have an astonishing “power to use what is beyond ourselves” (61) to accomplish in their bodies what are otherwise impossible feats. For instance, persons join their bodies with various tools and raw materials to make musical instruments, bulldozers, computers, etc. and then join their bodies with these mechanisms to do things that could not be done by the human body operating alone. But joining one’s body with mechanisms that extend the powers of the body takes bodily training. Willard regularly appeals to the baseball player or the pianist each of whom train their bodies to effectively interact

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\(^{29}\) For more on the body, see The Divine Conspiracy, 353–354 and Renovation of the Heart, 159–178.

\(^{30}\) Again, it is important to see that Willard’s view of human effort in spiritual formation makes it very difficult to applaud one’s self regarding “our part” in sanctification. All we have done is place our body in the right places, God has done all the rest.
with powers outside themselves to accomplish what would otherwise be im-
possible (e.g., hitting a fast ball or playing Rachmaninoff). There is no more
direct control over hitting a fastball or playing Rachmaninoff than there is
putting another’s needs before one’s own. But there is a bodily preparation
that is under one’s direct control that with sufficient practice will lead to
one’s body being able to join itself with a power outside of itself (the bat or
the piano or the Spirit of God) to accomplish what could not be accom-
plished by direct effort.

No doubt the ultimate resource beyond one’s self is the infinite God.
Persons were “designed by God, in the very constitution of their human
personalities, to carry out his rule by meshing the relatively little power res-
ident in their own bodies with the power inherent in the infinite Rule or
Kingdom of God” (54). Such a meshing requires training of the body be-
cause the body is oftentimes one’s only hope. One’s thoughts, attitudes, de-
sires, dispositions, and so on may set on the kingdom of self, but if there is
at least some thought of and desire for the Kingdom of God, one has the op-
portunity to begin placing their body in postures of prayer, worship, med-
tation on Scripture, Christian fellowship, solitude, and so on. All of these
practices are at their core bodily in nature (56–62). This naturally leads to
Willard’s understanding of the disciplines themselves (component #8), but
prior to that is a brief summary of Willard’s view of sin.

Component #7: Sin is primarily a disconnection from the
life-giving resources of God.

The seventh overall component of Willard’s view as it is developed in
SD is Willard’s harmartiology. Willard discusses the nature and effects of
sin in Hearing God and it is more fully developed in Renovation of the
Heart (esp., 45–61), but in the logical flow of the Willardian corpus it is im-
portant to take stock of sin at this juncture. Within SD Willard presents sin
as the disconnection of human life from the life of God which results in a
“pervasive distortion and disruption of human existence from the top
down” (63). “The evil that we do in our present condition is a reflection of
a weakness caused by spiritual starvation” (63).

Willard consistently pictures the divine-human relationship in terms of
nourishment/sustenance. This positions sin as a severance from the life-
giving divine substance (i.e., “spiritual starvation”) and subsequently the
attempt to live on “bread alone.” As Willard puts it elsewhere, “We are our
own god, and our god doesn’t amount to much.”31 As embodied selves, hu-
mans become habituated in “automatic tendencies” to live life on their
own, apart from the empowering, interactive relationship with God (72; cf.
54, 85, 89–91). The body, or flesh, is not inherently evil but becomes bent
away from dependence on God and “serves as primary host for sin” (90).
Willard continues, “In this condition the flesh opposes the spirit, does that
which is evil, and must be crucified to restrain it (Gal. 5:16, 19f)” (90).

31 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 56.
Component #8: Bodily disciplines place the regenerate person into contact with the life-giving resources of God.

With this understanding of sin and the role of human effort, the third component of SD—Willard’s theology of the disciplines—fits well:

The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order. They enable us more and more to live in a power that is, strictly speaking, beyond us, deriving from the spiritual realm itself, as we “yield ourselves to God, as those that are alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God” . . . (68).

One helpful biblical example from Willard is Jesus’ recommendation to Peter, James, and John to “Watch and pray, that ye may not enter into temptation” (Matt. 24:41 KJV). The text continues that “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Willard writes:

The plain meaning of this advice to his sleepy and worried friends was that by engaging in a certain type of action—keeping of vigil combined with prayer—they would be able to attain a level of spiritual responsiveness and power in their lives that would be impossible without it. In this simple but profound episode we find the whole nature and principle of the kind of activity that is a spiritual discipline. Such an activity implants in us, in the embodied personality that is the carrier of our abilities (and disabilities!) a readiness and an ability to interact with God and our surroundings in a way not directly under our control (151).

Willard understands disciplines to be bodily exercises over which persons have some direct control that place them into contact with God in ways that “cannot always be realized by direct and untrained effort” (151–152). Peter, James, and John were not able to train their bodies to draw strength from God, and so, even though they desired to remain faithful, their lack of faith soon prevailed when they were tempted to abandon and/or deny Christ. The discipline of keeping watch in prayer would have brought about “habitual reliance upon God” which makes “sin dispensable, even uninteresting and revolting . . . Our desires and delights are changed because our actions and attitude are based upon the reality of God’s Kingdom” (118).32

Willard is clear that the disciplines themselves do not change believers. Rather, the disciplines make the follower of Jesus more available to the

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32 It is important to note that Willard believes that the disciplines are not only explicitly discussed in the Scriptures but are implicitly referred to and assumed in various biblical texts. See his discussion, for instance, of Pauline psychology, pgs. 95–129. This is another place where some attention of biblical scholars would be welcome.
gracious operation of God by his Spirit and it is that personal, gracious presence of God and his kingdom that is transformational. Willard writes, “... the disciplines have no value in themselves. The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living, and so forth. Rather, it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed” (138).

Even when a person acts against their sinful inclinations to do what is right, that performance of a righteous act is not to be identified with transformation nor is it what Willard calls “pure discipline” (120). For instance, Willard urges that believers should submit their bodies to righteous deeds by choosing to bless those that curse them even when they would rather curse back or use their legs to walk the extra mile with someone they would rather kick (119). But the performance of righteous deeds, according to Willard, is simply another way to offer up one’s self to God’s transforming presence. Willard writes:

I submit my body to righteousness when I do my good deeds without letting them be known, though my whole frame cries out to strut and crow. And when I do, I offer up my body as the place of God’s action. I prepare myself for God’s action in me... Our eyes and our life are fixed upon God who is our life and who sets us free from bondage to all that is less than himself, including the bondage to righteous deeds (119).

Willard is clear that the disciplined effort to do the good act becomes a means of further dependence on God’s strengthening presence. Doing the good act without the thoughts, feelings, and dispositions that naturally give rise to such an act is not the “easy yoke” to which Christ calls his followers. So when Christ-followers do such acts without the inner goodness that naturally gives rise to them, they do them as indirect efforts to find “gracious strength beyond ourselves” (118). The performance of the righteous act is itself a means of drawing near to God. Nonetheless, the “pure disciplines” are those activities undertaken (e.g., solitude, meditation on Scripture, prayer) to prepare one’s self to do the good act out of a good character which has been formed by the grace of God.

While there is certainly more to be drawn out from SD, these three components joined with the earlier five constitute the core of the evolving picture of Christian formation that emerges from the Willardian corpus. In many ways the central themes of the three remaining monographs reinforce the view already developed and attempt to clear away misunderstandings regarding God, Jesus, salvation, and eventually, knowledge itself.

The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God

Moving from book to book in the chronology of the corpus gives ample opportunity to revisit and further expand on components already ex-
explored. Perhaps *The Divine Conspiracy* (hereafter *DC*) is the most fertile in this regard.\(^{33}\) For instance, component #1 from *Hearing God* explored Willard’s diagnosis of the problem when it comes to spiritual formation. Both *Hearing God* and *Spirit of the Disciplines* insist on the problem being a lack of understanding amongst well-meaning Christ-followers. In *DC* Willard goes even further, explaining some of the historical and sociological forces that place persons in this situation:

> It is the failure to understand Jesus and his words as reality and vital information about life that explains why, today, we do not routinely teach those who profess allegiance to him how to do what he said was best. . . . It is a matter of how we *cannot but* think and act, given the context of our mental and spiritual formation. So any significant change can come only by breaking the stranglehold of the ideas and concepts that automatically shunt aside Jesus, “the Prince of Life,” when questions of concrete mastery of our lives arise (xiv–xv).

Rehearsing Willard’s diagnosis of the problem is particularly important to understand the central themes of *DC* for in many ways the goal of the book is to break “the stranglehold of the ideas and the concepts that automatically shunt aside Jesus” (xv). As Willard explains in his introduction to *DC*, the disciplined life in relationship with God that was made available through Jesus and is still found in him is seen by many as a “costly option,” rather than as “the very heart of the gospel” (xvii). *DC* uncovers misconceptions that prevent persons from seeing life with God as attractive and available as well as offering a theological framework within which such a view can be grounded.

Component #9: The good news is that God’s reign is available to anyone who relies on Jesus.

The first misconception that Willard addresses is the way in which many Christians view the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ. For Willard, and many other biblical scholars, the gospel that Jesus and his early followers taught was the gospel of the kingdom of God and *not* merely the good news of forgiveness of sins.\(^{34}\) Willard’s analysis of the kingdom breaks through (or perhaps better, skillfully dodges) many of the common debates that surround the timing and nature of the kingdom of God in order to provide an account of the kingdom that illuminates the accessibility of God’s kingdom as well as the personal impact of God’s kingdom.

Willard understands a person’s kingdom to be the “range of [their]
effective will” (21). It is what a person, whether human or divine, has control over. God has allowed human persons to have “dominion in a limited sphere” (21) and yet has made them to exercise their dominion under his loving rule and drawing off his resources (22). “God equipped us for this task [i.e., stewarding the earth] by framing our nature to function in a conscious, personal relationship of interactive responsibility with him. We are meant to exercise our ‘rule’ only in union with God, as he acts with us. He intended to be our constant companion or co-worker in the creative enterprise of life on earth” (22). As discussed above (component #7), Willard maintains that human persons “fell away from our intended divine context” and consequently the divinely given task to rule the earth with him has been distorted (23). The hope of redemption then—the good news—is that through reliance on Jesus Christ human persons can once again align their kingdom with the present availability of the rule of God:

From the very beginning of his work, those who relied on him had, at his touch, entered the rule, or governance, of God and were receiving its gracious sufficiency. Jesus was not just acting for God but also with God—a little like the way, in a crude metaphor, I act with my power steering, or it with me, when I turn the wheel of my car. And this “governance” is projected onward through those who receive him. When we receive God’s gift of life by relying on Christ, we find that God comes to act with us as we rely on him in our actions (20).

This view of the gospel—the gospel of the kingdom—does not disconnect Christian conversion and justification from sanctification and discipleship. Entrance into the rule of God through confidence in Jesus is what happens at conversion and is precisely what persons grow up into through the sanctifying process of the Spirit. Willard writes, “[Jesus’] basic message, ‘Rethink your life in the light of the fact that the kingdom of heavens is now open to all’ (Matt. 4:17), presents the resources needed to live human life as we all automatically sense it should be and naturally leads one to become his student, or apprentice in kingdom living” (274).

But if the gospel of the kingdom seamlessly propels one forward into a life of interactive discipleship to Jesus, the “gospels of sin management” make such notions of discipleship pointless and seemingly avoidable (41). For Christians on the conservative “right,” salvation is often reduced to getting one’s sins forgiven as a means to enter heaven upon death. For Christians on the liberal “left,” salvation is often reduced to a commitment to eradicate social evils (41–55). Either way, according to the essence of these “gospels,” there is no need or call to look to Jesus here and now as the master teacher of life under the loving reign of his heavenly Father. Without the gospel of the kingdom the Christian convert is initiated into a social situation (either conservative, liberal, or something in between) that is ill-equipped to adequately address the questions and problems of practical human existence in a manner that makes Jesus and his Father integral.
Component #10: Jesus is the master of living life under God’s reign and he wants to teach his students how to live under that reign in their actual lives.

Once the gospel of the kingdom begins to overrun more narrow visions of the gospel, an account of what is involved in discipleship to Jesus is required. A key to understanding Willard’s view of discipleship is contained in the following: “Jesus’ good news about the kingdom can be an effective guide for our lives only if we share his view of the world in which we live” (61). A crucial part of entering into training under Jesus is to develop the mindset that he had:

To his eyes this is a God-bathed and God-permeated world. It is a world filled with a glorious reality, where every component is within the range of God’s direct knowledge and control—though he obviously permits some of it, for good reasons, to be for a while otherwise than as he wishes. It is a world that is inconceivably beautiful and good because of God and because God is always in it. It is a world in which God is continually at play and over which he constantly rejoices. Until our thoughts of God have found every visible thing and event glorious in his presence, the word of Jesus has not yet fully seized us (61–62).

Willard conveys that Jesus regarded God as a joyous Father who is vitally available in the surrounding atmosphere and in whose power and goodness there is no fear or ultimate harm (61–95). Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was freely available to anyone who puts their trust in him (97–127) and that deepening reliance on Jesus transforms the inner resources of the human heart such that outward expressions of love flow naturally (129–185). Persons can accept Jesus’ understanding of these things precisely because “he is the best and smartest man who ever lived in this world . . . He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life” (90, 94).

So a crucial dimension of discipleship for Willard is that Jesus’ view of things (his word) must come to richly dwell in his students. “In order to develop as his disciple one must progressively come to believe what he knew to be so” (319). This is not, though, simply a download of information. Essential to learning to view the world the way Jesus does is to come to understand and experience that disciples are to live with him:

The assumption of Jesus’ program for his people on earth was that they would live their lives as his students and co-laborers. They would find him so admirable in every respect—wise, beautiful, powerful, and good—that they would constantly seek to be in his presence and be guided, instructed, and helped by him in every aspect of their lives . . . In his presence our inner life will be transformed, and we will become
the kind of people for whom his course of action is the natural (and supernatural) course of action (273).

Christ’s presence is mediated by the Holy Spirit—the strengthener—and God’s preferred way of relating to persons is through communication. This makes Scripture and prayer central to discipleship as well as solitude and silence as “an appropriate context for listening and speaking to God” (277). Discipleship for Willard is both a learning from Jesus and a learning with Jesus that is ultimately focused on aligning one’s actual life with the kingdom of God, which brings about the transformation of human character.

Willard has much to offer regarding entering into a discipleship relationship to Jesus (281–310). For one, discipleship is not an option for the Christian—one is either intending to live their life as Jesus would or they are not. Second, discipleship must be intentionally entered into—a person must decide to make Jesus the master teacher in everything that they do. And then, disciples simply try to do what Jesus asks them to do within the concrete details of their daily existence, coming to believe more and more that he is right there with them, empowering their efforts through his constant companionship. Jesus knew how to live in the kingdom of God and apply that kingdom for the good of others, and that is what disciples of Jesus learn how to do in their lives (282–283).

In his theology of discipleship, Willard emphasizes that Christ-following is not primarily about external conformity to biblical commands nor profession of correct doctrine (320). Rather, Willard lays out two objectives: (1) “bring apprentices to the point where they dearly love and constantly delight in that ‘heavenly Father’ made real to earth in Jesus and are quite certain that this is no ‘catch,’ no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or to his power to carry them out” (321); and (2) “remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God, to free the apprentices of domination, of ‘enslavement’ (John 8:34; Rom. 6:6), to their old habitual patterns of thought, feeling, and action” (322). Willard writes, “When the mind is filled with this great and beautiful God, the ‘natural’ response, once all ‘inward’ hindrances are removed, will be to do ‘everything I have told you to do’” (321). This is the curriculum of the student of Jesus and can be reliably entered into with Jesus involving many of the earlier mentioned components (e.g., the role of the body and spiritual disciplines—components #6 and #8).

Component #11: Students of Jesus will rule the universe with him for eternity.

Another crucial component for Willard’s view is his articulation of the future state of disciples of Jesus. “We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join the eternal Logos, ‘reign with him,’ in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God” (378). Disciples are being trained to reign. The practical implication of this is that the progress disciples make here and now is somehow transferred to the eternal state.
Willard suggests that one’s characterological state is carried over and continued in the eternal state as well as the corresponding ability (or lack thereof) of humans to faithfully serve God in his eternal kingdom (378). So, what is at stake in spiritual formation is not simply for this present order, but also for the order to come. Willard writes, “Perhaps it would be a good exercise for each of us to ask ourselves: Really, how many cities could I now govern under God? If, for example, Baltimore or Liverpool were turned over to me, with power to do that I want with it, how would things turn out? An honest answer to this question might do much to prepare us for our eternal future in this universe” (398).

Of course, students of Jesus do not need to worry about their level of preparedness. There is no need for concern because the ultimate meaning of their future is secured:

The purpose of God with human history is nothing less than to bring out of it . . . an eternal community of those who were once thought to be just “ordinary human beings.” Because of God’s purposes for it, this community will, in its way, pervade the entire created realm and share in government of it. God’s precreation intention to have that community as a special dwelling place or home will be realized. He will be its prime sustainer and glorious inhabitant (385–386).

In many ways, this component brings to completion Willard’s view of spiritual formation. And yet, there are two monographs left within the Willardian corpus. These remaining books serve to flesh out several more detailed components of the Willardian account.

Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ

Turning to Renovation of the Heart (hereafter Renovation), Willard presents his most comprehensive overview of spiritual formation. Each of the eleven components culled so far show up in Renovation to one degree or another. But there is at least one development in Renovation that advances Willard’s overall view of formation. This is Willard’s theological anthropology.

Component #12: Understanding formation in Christ involves understanding how to bring the various dimensions of the human self under God’s reign.

Willard’s theology of human nature is present throughout his corpus, but Renovation offers the clearest and most detailed presentation. Willard’s

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specificity on the nature of the person is another characteristic of his view that stands in contrast to other treatments of sanctification/Christian spirituality which often leave the theology of the person nebulous. In many accounts, anthropological terms such as “soul,” “mind,” “flesh,” “image of God,” “spirit,” “will,” “heart,” “character,” etc. are used without settled definitions or distinctions, let alone an account of how the different aspects are interrelated in the transformation process. Is the object of God’s transforming work the human body, soul, mind, will, heart, spirit, or all of the above? And if the latter, what does transformation in Christ look like given the interrelatedness of these various dimensions of the person? Willard’s theological anthropology is aimed at answering these types of questions.

Accordingly, Willard sees the delineation of human nature as central to understanding spiritual formation in Christ. Jesus’ revolution of the human person “proceeds by changing people from the inside through ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another. It is one that changes their ideas, beliefs, feelings, and habits of choice, as well as their bodily tendencies and social relations. It penetrates to the deepest layers of their soul” (15). In order to fully comprehend the dynamics of God’s transforming work it is important to get clarity on these distinct aspects of the human self and how God is involved in them.

For Willard, the fundamental dimension of the person has three aspects: the heart, spirit, and will. The “will” refers to the core dimension’s “power to initiate, to create, to bring about what did not exist before” (29). This is the unforced “yes” or “no” that decides the eventual character of the human person (33; cf. 141–157). The “spirit” refers to the core dimension’s “fundamental nature as distinct and independent from physical reality” (29). The human spirit, like all spirit, is “unbodily, personal power” (34). And “heart” refers to the core dimension’s “center or core [position] to which every other component of the self owes its proper functioning” (29). This is due to the fact that the will (heart or spirit) possesses “the power to select what we think on and how intently we will focus on it” (144). The heart/will/spirit, therefore, governs every other aspect of the human self and is the primary dimension of the person that must be properly aligned with God’s rule (34).

But while the will (heart or spirit) is meant to govern the mind, it is also largely at the mercy of the mind. The mind is the realm of the person that includes thought and feeling. “To choose, one must always have some object or concept before the mind and some feeling for or against it” (34). Through thought (ideas, images, and information) the human mind becomes consciously aware of what one takes to be real, true, and good. Through feeling (sensations, desires, and emotions) the human mind is either attracted or repulsed by the ideas, images, and information that come before the mind in thought—“feelings move us” (121). Thought and feeling

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36 All parenthetical page notations in this section of the article refer to Renovation of the Heart unless otherwise noted.
in the mind are always working in concert (32–33; cf. 95–139). As mentioned above, the will has some power over what is thought and felt, but once particular thoughts and feelings are fostered in the mind, the will eventually succumbs to their directionality.

The will and the mind are intimately connected to the human body. The body is the human “power pack” in which there is strength to live out human existence in a physical, social context (35; cf. 159–177). Habituated choices (or character) become ingrained in the body “where they then occur more or less ‘automatically,’ without our having to think about what we are doing” (35; cf. 142). This is why the body becomes crucial for spiritual formation—both the need to reform the body away from its ungodly habits as well as the body’s role in forming the will and mind.

Next Willard discusses the social context of the human. It is significant in a time where many are calling for a relational ontology of the person that Willard himself emphasizes the necessity of “rootedness in others” for human persons (36).37 “We only live as we should when we are in a right relation to God and to other human beings” (36). And yet, the necessity of relationality for the human self on Willard’s view is interrelated with more fundamental structures and capacities of the person.

The human soul, for Willard, is that aspect of the person that “correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self” (199). Since each of the previous dimensions of the person is intermingled and interdependent, the soul is that which unifies the person. The soul holds the self together and brings “strength, direction, and harmony to every other element of our life . . . When we speak of the human soul, then, we are speaking of the deepest level of life and power in the human being” (204, 205).

Willard’s delineation of human nature not only offers a heuristic through which to grasp Christ’s transforming work, but coupled with components #1–11, it brings a level of specificity to Willard’s overall view of transformation. For instance, understanding the role of the heart/spirit/will as the chief operating center of the person, further clarifies Willard’s emphasis on bodily discipline (presented most fully in Spirit of the Disciplines—component #8 above). The will’s inner “yes” or “no” can be used to redirect the body to certain disciplines and experiences in which God is received more deeply into the will, mind, body, and soul. And yet, the human will will not function in this way unless it is first reborn by the Word and Spirit of Christ (41). Then, the regenerated mind must have before it thoughts and feelings about God and his kingdom (a vision) that offer the reborn will sufficient motivation (intention) and an object of choice (means). The human social context is essential in this process in terms of encouragement, comfort, edification, and so on. But the ultimate relational

37 For an example of the call for a relational ontology, see F. Leron Schults, Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
rootedness is in the person of God, as the will by means of the body directs the whole person (the soul) into growing communion and union with God. And, once again, it is through this divine relationship that the various dimensions of the person are reordered and conformed to the image of Christ. As Willard writes, “[Sanctification] is a consciously chosen and sustained relationship of interaction between the Lord and his apprentice, in which the apprentice is able to do, and routinely does, what he or she knows to be right before God because all aspects of his or her person have been substantially transformed” (226).

Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge

The last monograph of the Willardian corpus covers an array of issues (epistemology, moral theory, apologetics, religious pluralism, etc.). But the element of the book that offers an essential piece to Willard’s overall view of spiritual formation is Willard’s realism regarding knowledge of the spiritual life.

Component #13: Knowledge of the reality of Christ and his kind of life is available.

This final component of Willard’s theory of spiritual formation in Christ—his theory of knowledge—is foundational to his entire project. No doubt Willard’s commitment to epistemological realism was well-developed far before he began to write on Christian spirituality. There is equally no doubt that Willard’s understanding of how the human mind can grasp reality as-it-is-in-itself fueled and guided his persistent and careful attentiveness to the nature and dynamics of spiritual formation. This is to say, there is a reason why a professional philosopher has produced one of the most detailed treatments of Christian spirituality in church history. The reason is not simply that Willard is a well-trained philosopher per se, but that his philosophical work led him to a view of knowledge that, once understood, yields an appropriate confidence about coming to know things as they are through sustained attention. Willard has developed a unified and comprehensive account of spiritual formation precisely because his mind was seeking to know things as they are. Things-as-they-are are unified wholes, so to

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38 See my précis of Knowing Christ Today in Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care 2:2 (2009): 245–247. See also the symposium discussion that follows the précis in which John Ortberg, J. P. Moreland, Aaron Preston, and Kelly Kapic respond to Knowing Christ Today and Willard replies to their respective responses (247–285).

39 Willard’s dissertation and early philosophical publications largely defend a Husserlian realism regarding the mind-world relationship. For instance, see Willard’s, Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge.
describe such a thing is to describe the parts and properties of that thing, including the relations between those parts and properties and how they function together as a whole. Once again, while this view grounds Willard’s entire project, it is in some ways fitting to have at the conclusion of this analysis. For it is through such an account of knowledge that others can come to see for themselves how what Willard has presented is true.

Willard maintains that knowledge is “essential to faith and to our relationship with God in the spiritual life” (10). He defines faith as a “commitment to action, often beyond our natural abilities, based upon knowledge of God and God’s ways” (20). On Willard’s view, persons have knowledge of something when they are representing the thing as it actually is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience (15). Willard discusses how knowledge secures access to reality while “Acting on false or ungrounded beliefs . . . leads to destructive encounters with reality” (39). At the level of worldview, knowledge of what is real, who is well-off, who is a good person, and how one becomes a good person governs one’s attitudes and actions. So to know Christ’s answers to these questions on an appropriate basis of thought and experience orients the whole of one’s life to how things actually are. According to Jesus, God and his kingdom are ultimate reality, anyone who is living under his kingdom rule is well-off, the good person is the one filled with love for God and neighbor, and the way to become this kind of person is to “place your confidence in Jesus Christ and become his student or apprentice in kingdom living” (53). But how does one come to possess knowledge of Jesus’ understanding of these things? Willard holds that three sources of knowledge—authority, reason, and experience—supplement each other in providing the appropriate basis on which to know Jesus’ answers and to come to experience Jesus himself.

The problem remains that many Christians do not know these realities and only profess belief in them, which leaves them with only willpower or feelings as the means to sustain their spiritual lives. So here, as before, understanding is the basis of care. Willard attempts to show forth the requisite understanding of human knowledge in order to help persons come to have spiritual knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The main intent of this article was to present the Willardian corpus as a unified and comprehensive account of spiritual formation in Christ. Willard’s five monographs on the spiritual life are not a collection of assorted musings nor do they simply restate or reorganize what has been said previously. Each volume offers distinct elements of Willard’s overall theory.
and takes the attentive reader into nuanced treatments of the anticipated parts of a theology of sanctification (e.g., human nature, sin, salvation, etc.). In addition to this, Willard offers an in-depth analysis of various elements of Christian spirituality that are often overlooked or given superficial attention (e.g., the role of the body in formation). No doubt some will find some important element missing from the thirteen components culled from Willard’s corpus. Others will disagree with the interpretation of Willard presented in this paper or with Willard’s analysis itself. Still others will desire to take one of these points or some other concept that Willard addresses further and develop it theologically, historically, psychologically, etc. Whatever the case, the suggestion here is that the Willardian corpus stands as a major contribution to the church’s reflection on what it is to follow Jesus Christ and be conformed to his image. It is a unified and comprehensive theory that warrants the attention of the Christian scholarly community. As Protestant theology recovers from the eclipse of holiness mentioned at the start of this article, it behooves the Christian scholar to carefully reflect on what can be learned from the Willardian corpus.

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A Tribute to Dallas Willard: My Favorite Psychologist

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One might find it odd that I would refer to the philosopher/theologian Dallas Willard as my favorite psychologist. But if a person traces the roots of modern psychology back through the centuries, it becomes easier to see him as one of that discipline’s best modern-day practitioners.

In the late 1970s I began studying psychology at a major southern university. I will not tell you the name, but I will say that on Saturday afternoons during football season, most of the students drank too much beer and would commence barking like dogs. While I did not know it at the time, Dallas Willard had also majored in psychology at a much smaller and decidedly more sober institution about 120 miles north. Consequently, I have never known him to bark.

I also did not know that just over ten years prior to my first undergraduate class in psychology, the university I was attending had offered Dallas a job teaching in their philosophy department. But when another suitor institution offered a reduced teaching load—one more conducive to the writing he wanted to pursue—he took that job instead and began his storied career as a philosopher at the University of Southern California. Dallas never returned for more than a brief visit to his southern roots, thus inadvertently proving just how much someone can accomplish outside the will of God. But I digress—back to my first psychology class.

In our History and Systems course, we used a thick textbook that devoted about 95 percent of its attention to modern psychology, which the authors claimed sprang to life in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt in 1879. Forty-eight of the fifty psychologists working as professors in the department echoed the same sentiments; the other two were closer to retirement than they knew.

During the halcyon days of behaviorism, the prevailing feeling was that not much worth considering within the discipline of psychology had happened before the late 1800s. I drank the Kool-Aid, never pausing to ponder how it would have sounded if the literature department of the same institution had been telling the students, “No need to read Homer, Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky; real literature goes back only to the modernist writers of the early 20th century.”
Years after graduating from that university and completing doctoral studies in clinical psychology at another institution, I was listening to a gifted communicator as he unpacked Norman Rockwell’s famous painting *Breaking Home Ties*. At some point in the middle of his discussion, I had an epiphany concerning the history of psychology and the debate over which ideas should be kept in and which culled out.

The storyteller described the Rockwell classic:

See the face of the young man. It is a canvas for excitement, anticipation. He stares out, wide-eyed, into the distance. An oversized red tie rests on the outside of a crisp white shirt. A brightly-colored triangular banner featuring the words “State University” decorates his battered suitcase. He looks like Huck Finn on Easter Sunday.

But look at the other figure, probably the boy’s father. He’s sitting beside his son on the running board of a dirt-caked truck. The man’s face is weathered and leathery-brown. He is wearing the faded denim overalls of a farmer. He stares downcast at the dusty ground, tenderly holding his son’s hat in his hand, perhaps as a way somehow to hold on to the boy a little longer. A large red handkerchief hangs down from an oak barrel as a signal for the next train to stop.

While the speaker was using the image to help a roomful of church leaders representing a small, rural denomination grieve a lost generation—a generation of young people who went off to college and never returned home, the image helped me process what had happened to the discipline of psychology.

Rural America and that particular Christian denomination were not the only “fathers” who have seen their “children” leave. Psychology (and subsequently pastoral and professional counseling) also left “home”—the ancient traditions of soul care—to seek new insights and opportunities in the “city”—methods of modern psychotherapy.

Hurding, Gorsuch, Benner, and LeShan provide interesting overviews that illuminate the migration of modern psychology from its home as a discipline of soul care practices to its present-day dwelling place in the city—or at least the suburbs—as a science of behavior.1

Gorsuch and LeShan remind us that psychology distanced itself from the practices of soul care and its parents, philosophy and religion, when it turned toward the “hard sciences” as role models in the late 1900s. Much was gained, but much was also lost.

Psychology prospered in the “city.” It won a place in the academy—usually a few doors down from the biology department (if you get to anthropology, you have gone too far). Hundreds of new divisions, schools, and departments were spawned. Scores of new academic journals were launched. National organizations, some with considerable political clout, were initiated. Human behavior was squeezed under a microscope and studied from the outside in. For many students of the modern discipline of psychology, life on the farm was a dim memory.

But even with all the success, many look back with a sad nostalgia. Thomas Oden is one of these. He is arguably the most outspoken critic of modern pastoral counseling and professional Christian counseling and has made numerous assertions that these have lost touch with their historical roots. Oden, in his book *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, provides a striking graphic to support his claim that pastoral counseling in particular has also left the farm and has “fallen into a pervasive amnesia toward its own classical pastoral past.”

Oden selected ten key figures in classical pastoral care: Cyprian, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Luther, Calvin, George Herbert, Richard Baxter, and Jeremy Taylor. He then checked the number of times they were referenced in seven standard works of pastoral theology in the 19th century. He found that each of these texts unfailingly quoted at least six of the ten classic figures he had selected, and in all he found 314 references to them. He then selected seven representative 20th-century pastoral writers and conducted a similar indexing procedure. What he found was mind-boggling. There were no references, none, to the classic figures. However, there were 330 references to the city-dwelling friends of their older brother, psychology: Freud (109), Jung (45), Rogers (101), Fromm (27), Sullivan (22), and Berne (26). With this research, undeniable crediblity is added to his bold-faced assertion that “pastoral counseling has become in many cases little more than a thoughtless mimic of the most current psychological trends.”

While these surveys conducted by Oden have a specific focus on pastoral counseling, he and others make parallel observations concerning the youngest brother, professional Christian counseling. David Benner reflects on the wide variety of approaches to Christian counseling and determines that, with only two possible exceptions, “none of the other approaches have been explicitly developed from Christian theology. Rather, they are adapted forms of existing secular theories which the authors argue are consistent with Christian truth.” A friend of mine who is less diplomatic than Benner puts it like this: “It seems to me that a lot of Christian counseling/psychology is sacred glaze brushed onto a secular ham.”

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Leslie D. Weatherhead, using less picturesque speech, states,

Psychology has its place as material medicine has, but neither is to be regarded as a substitute for the dynamic spiritual energy which the Church of the first century knew. We are trying to make do with both, because we are not prepared to pay the price which a healing Church costs. We pretend that the first-century healing miracles are being repeated by psychotherapeutic treatments. We interview a patient for two hundred separate hours, and then rejoice when he does not limp quite so badly. The Apostles could say, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ, rise and walk!’

By the late 1980s, after having completed doctoral studies and finding myself suddenly immersed in a thriving private practice, I began to experience a growing disillusionment with a psychology that would embrace the laboratory rat while ignoring the celestial soul. It was not that I did not appreciate the rich contributions the discipline had to offer; I just wanted to know more about areas where it was often silent and sometimes condescending. I had also begun to wonder why I was selling the fruit of modern psychology to those who came to me in distress while I was drinking the wine of Christian spiritual formation to ease my own pain.

It was precisely at the height of this internal questioning that I discovered Dallas Willard’s book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. After a slow reading that took almost three months, I came to the conclusion that this “amateur” theologian and professional philosopher knew more about the soul than any psychologist (literally “soul-ologist”) I had ever encountered. And his focus was not on helping people limp less; he was teaching people how to rise up and walk “with God.”

Within a couple of years of discovering Dallas, I invited him to come to the university where I was teaching to give a lecture series that was to celebrate the launch of something we were calling The Institute of Clinical Theology. I was shocked when he agreed to come and completely bewildered when he would not set a fee for his talks. While visiting with Dallas in our home, I discovered that this mere lad of 55 was the most authentic and genuine follower of Jesus that I had ever met. I was drawn to live as he lived, to know Jesus as he seemed to know Him.

That initial encounter with Dallas was so positive, so life-giving that I spent much of the next 20 years looking for excuses—a journal to establish, an institute to launch, DVD projects to film—for immersing myself and others in Dallas’ ideas and presence. I am not sure I have ever stood in front

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of a class for more than an hour without referencing Dallas Willard; it is not unusual for me to do so while standing in the express line at a grocery store.

To speak boldly, it would not surprise me if Church historians of the future peer back through the centuries and judge Dallas Willard’s contributions to the Kingdom to be of equal importance to those of other reformers such as Martin Luther and Ignatius of Loyola. It also would not surprise me if future psychologists look back and see Dallas Willard as a giant in that discipline as well.

For the remainder of this article I will limit my comments to just three of the psychology lessons I have learned from “psychologist” Dallas Willard. These lessons are about 1) the components of the person, 2) the process of transformation, and 3) the implications to the field of Jesus’ being very smart.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE PERSON

As we have discussed, modern psychology has had the tendency to ignore things that cannot be measured. It is rare to find the word “soul” mentioned in an American Psychological Association (APA) sponsored journal; or a psyche-ologist who would be willing to focus attention on that aspect (the psyche-logical) of his or her client.

Do not get me wrong; I am a huge fan of modern psychology. Most training programs in counseling or clinical psychology offer a curriculum that provides a breadth of exposure to scientific approaches to ameliorating dysfunction, including classes in the biological, cognitive, social and relational aspects of behavior. However, the soul and its integrative functioning within the person is not part of APA’s suggested course of study. So perhaps you can imagine my delight when I discovered a psyche-ologist who wrote and taught about the entirety of the person.

Examining the soul is not an easy task, even for a theologian. Even beginning with the Bible may not help. Attempting to understand what is written in Scripture about the soul or spirit—for that matter, about any of the components of a person—is confusing. But I have found Dallas Willard to be very helpful in elucidating matters of our inner world and navigating past three of the primary problems posed to our understanding. 1) He reminds us that the words soul and spirit, while often used as parallel expressions, should not be viewed as synonymous. 2) If you decide to lower the microscope to find distinctions between soul and spirit, you discover that in Scripture spirit can also refer to both heart and will.6 3) Hebrew and Greek conceptions of the soul’s relationship to the body were very different. While

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Greek thought often presented a view of the soul as a separate entity from the body, Hebrew anthropology was more holistic than compartmentalized. It seems that modern theology has gravitated toward the more unitive Hebrew view. It is no longer in vogue to debate as to whether human beings are composed of two parts (soul and body) or three parts (soul, spirit, body). For most scholars today, the soul/spirit is not considered to be “part” of a person’s make up, but instead characterizes the individual in his or her totality. When asked in class if I am a dichotomist or a trichotomist, I will think of Dallas and simply say, “Either is a good start.”

In contemporary usage it is safe to say that the terms soul and spirit refer to the nonmaterial aspect of a human being that gives individuality. In Christian theology these terms carry the further connotation of being the part of a person that has the potential to partake of divinity and survives the death of the physical body.

Against this slightly blurred background, I believe Dallas Willard offers more help than most in attempting to bring the entire “person” into focus. In Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ, Dallas Willard proposes there are six basic aspects of a human being, which together and in interplay make up “human nature.”

- Thought (images, concepts, judgments, inferences)
- Feeling (sensations, emotion)
- Body (action, interaction with the physical world)
- Social Context (personal and structural relations with others)
- Spirit (choice, will, heart, decision, CEO of the person)
- Soul (the factor that integrates all the above into one life).

In this model (please see Figure 1), we are presented with not only the components of the person but also the only five things a human being can do. Humans can think, feel, behave, interact with others, and choose. Spirit/will/heart is the center or core of a person’s life and may be called the “ego”—especially when functioning separate and apart from God as the source of life. “Choice” is perhaps the best one-word encapsulation for the activity of this spirit/will/heart dimension. It underscores the most fundamental decision faced by humanity. Like their foreparents, Christians awaken each day to the choice of living in an intimate, conversational, and communal relationship with God, or of initiating and maintaining a separate existence. The spirit/CEO’s critical decision is between willingness,

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7 Ibid., 30.
8 I hope I am not being confusing here; I believe that we both need a healthy ego and that as part of a Christian’s journey of experiencing a greater sense of union with God, we need to lay it down. In this sense I am using “ego” to represent what has been called the “false self,” or that aspect of the person which is holding on to the notion that a life separate from God is good and desirable.
surrender, and obedience versus willfulness, autonomy, and separation from the Source of life.

According to Dallas, the *soul*, as distinguished from the *spirit/CEO*, can be viewed as the invisible computer that keeps everything running and integrated into one person. The *soul* is the aspect that integrates all of the components of the person to form one life. The *soul* is not the “person.” The person includes all aspects of the self, including the *soul*. The *soul*, Dallas pens, “is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. It is the life center of the human being.”

Why is this important? For starters, I have referenced being exposed to psychology at a time when many major universities saw the discipline primarily concerned with only one aspect of the entire person: behavior. It was very interesting for me to return to my alma mater a decade after my undergraduate graduation only to discover that the psychology department had been taken over by those who were lobbying for the primacy of cognition, a second aspect of the person. If you traveled far enough back in time, you

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would see that still other aspects of the person (emotional, relational) had been given their decade (or so) in the sun. The point is, I do not mean to be merely contrasting Dallas Willard’s conceptualization of the person with behaviorism, but rather with any approach of modern psychology that is not both holistic and inclusive of the non-physical aspects of the individual.

What am I saying? I have found that Dallas Willard provides me with a more comprehensive model for understanding the person than what I was offered by modern psychology. And as an added bonus, it includes biblically and philosophically informed formulations about the soul (basic organizing mechanism) of the person and the spirit (or CEO) of the person and the importance of its moment-by-moment choices between willingness and surrender versus willfulness and independence from Life and Love.

I believe Dallas Willard’s model of human functioning provides a holistic way of conceptualizing and working with individuals that easily embraces abnormal psychology, positive psychology, and the soul/spirit. That is to say, each component (let’s think “cognitive” aspect as one illustration) can be focused on for the purpose of 1) improving maladaptive functioning (e.g., reframing and restructuring thought patterns that lead to negative outcomes); 2) increasing positive outcome (e.g., strengthening and enhancing existing thought patterns that support positive functioning); and 3) enhancing Christian spiritual formation (e.g., examining an individual’s views and concepts of God for the purpose of facilitating the process of learning to live more moments “with” God). Now, that is a psychology I can be excited about.

REAL CHANGE CAN HAPPEN

Several years ago while I was producing a DVD for a small-group resource based on *Renovation of the Heart*, something very memorable happened. It had been a long day. That morning, Dallas had done a remarkable job summarizing each of the thirteen chapters from his book in front of a live studio audience. That afternoon he, John Ortberg, and Larry Crabb had been sitting around a small café table discussing the topics from that morning over coffee and on camera. The idea behind the casual recap was that since some people find Dallas painfully smart, it would be a good idea if a couple of colleagues helped him bring things down a few notches so the rest of us could get it.

We were two hours into the afternoon taping, and I was beginning to feel it was past time to take a break. I was moving to get the director’s attention so he would call for a break in the action when I heard John begin to make a tearful confession:

“Dallas, I could take you to the time and the seat on the airplane when I read the words in your book that changed my life.”

While I was not a seasoned producer, I knew that was not the time to yell, “Cut!”
John went on to quote the line from *The Divine Conspiracy* that states, “My central claim is that we can become like Jesus by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself.”\(^{10}\) There were tears in John’s eyes as he went on to confess that these words impacted him deeply and filled him with hope because, even as a successful pastor, he had begun to doubt if real change, authentic transformation, was possible.

This cuts to the heart of the second indelible psychology lesson I learned from Dallas. Real change—not just alterations of thought and behavior but also a transformation of will and character—is possible. But it will require an inspired CEO.

*The CEO of the Person*

If God created the *spirit/heart/will* as the key influence (read, CEO) of one’s life, then how the heart becomes transformed from “darkened and secretly idolatrous” (Dt 29:18, 19; Mt 15:8; Rom 1:21) to “honest, good and open to God” (Lk 8:15; Rom. 10:9) becomes the most important question that can be asked in theology, philosophy, and psychology. To get a better grasp of the person in the context of transformation, I like to use the Dallas-inspired imagery of a Fortune 500 company.\(^{11}\)

Picture an executive meeting of a large company. The CEO (*spirit/heart/will*), who makes the key choices, sits at the head of the table in a conference room. She is surrounded by five division heads representing research and development (thought), human resources (feeling), labor (body), corporate relations (social context) and information services (soul). In an ideal situation for your company, all essential parts are effectively organized around its mission statement—its purpose and reason for existence—that was put in place by the board of directors (the Trinity). The CEO (*spirit/heart/will*) seeks the higher good of the organization and its mission. In the best of worlds, the five division heads cooperate and comply with the administrative will of the CEO, which is one with the will of the board of directors.

The problem is, however, that most “companies” (or “human beings”) are not headed by a CEO who operates in perfect alignment with the “board.” The key question is how transformation can occur in me that will realign the vision of the CEO (*spirit/heart/will*) to comply with the mission statement of loving God with my whole heart and my neighbor as myself.

The biblical answer is clear. The *spirit/heart/CEO* is changed through a relationship with the Trinity—most specifically, Jesus Christ. When Jesus says as part of his commencement address to his disciples, “Now this is

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eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3, TNIV), he is pointing the CEO of our person to an intimate and interactive friendship with God. It is the CEO in relationship with the Board that produces singleness of purpose, willing surrender, and the ultimate organization of all the division heads around one purpose. Spiritual formation in Christ is the process leading to that ideal end where all essential parts of the human self are effectively organized around God. The ideal result is love of God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength and of one’s neighbor as oneself (Mk 12:29–31; Dt 6:4–9; Lv 19:18).

Christian spiritual transformation involves “knowing” God at such a deep, relational level that one’s spirit is progressively aligned to Divine Will while the soul is humming in the background like a well-functioning computer, integrating all the components of the person into one fully functioning organism.

From Fortune 500 Companies to the Desert Fathers

This all sounds almost too easy; most find the journey of transformation difficult to the point of seeming to be impossible. But it is precisely here that Dallas offers both hope concerning the possibility of real change and descriptions that seem to me surprisingly at home with the early traditions of the Church Fathers and Mothers and Orthodox traditions of Christian faith. Let me explain.

Kallistos Ware tells the story of a fourth-century desert father, St. Sarapion the Sindonite, who traveled on a pilgrimage to Rome. Once there, he was told of a respected recluse who spent all of her time in a small room. Sarapion was skeptical of her way of life because of its contrast to his own approach, which included much travel. He called on her and asked, “Why are you sitting here?”

To this she replied: “I’m not sitting, I am on a journey.”

To be a Christian is to be on a journey—from the pigpen of self-rule to the outstretched arms of a loving Father. Not surprisingly, one of the most ancient names for Christianity is simply “the Way.” It is possible that some Protestants have become fascinated with spiritual direction because of the partial loss of the richness and texture in viewing Christian transformation as a journey. Even though Reformers such as Calvin discussed three broad stages of the journey—conversion, sanctification, and glorification—in practice it seems that many modern Protestants are more likely to expect a microwave instead of a crock-pot approach to transformation.

As Rogers observes, one of the most striking differences between ancient and modern Christianity concerns the view of salvation. “At the risk

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12 K. Ware, The Orthodox Way (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 7.
13 See Ware, 7 and Acts 19:23.
of oversimplification,” he states, “Protestants generally define salvation in legal, juridical, or forensic terms. Christ’s death pays the just penalty for man’s sin. We receive salvation (forgiveness of sins) by virtue of our faith in His meritorious sacrifice on our behalf.” While not denying the sacrificial aspect of salvation, ancient Christianity, according to Rogers, believes it is better to view salvation as a process of transformation and the fulfillment of the image of God in humankind.

Perhaps it should not be surprising to hear Christians described as “forgiven sinners” instead of “beloved children of God on a transformational journey that will lead to restoration of the imago dei, and spiritual union.” Nor is it startling that someone whose identity is that of absolved reprobate might dance for joy at the notion of being offered a personal invitation to live in union with God.

Three Stages

The journey motif for spiritual formation was adopted by both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians and is conceived of as including three stages: purgation, illumination, and union.

Purgation is the process by which one’s character is purified through confession of sin and a growing detachment from worldly values. Using the imagery of Dallas Willard’s model of the person (see Figure 1), foundational to purgation is a metanoia, or a radical reorientation of all the dimensions of the person (thoughts, emotions, will, behavior, social interactions, life of the soul) toward God. It is here the seeker battles, along with the grace of God, against the passions and habit patterns of sin within the human body and soul that corrupt human nature. In the imagery of the parable of the prodigal son, purgation describes the stage of thinking things through again—leaving the pigs to begin the journey back home.

Illumination refers to a deepening experience of the love, joy, and peace of God, along with a growing desire to surrender the will to God. It is characterized as a time of becoming dispassionate for all things not God and passionately attached to God and his kingdom. During this stage, conversations with God increase and begin to deepen into communion and movement toward unceasing prayer from the heart.

With reference to Figure 1, illumination can be visualized as an increasing interior surrender to the presence and passion of the indwelling Spirit of Christ within each dimension of the person until the person’s character becomes a better mirror of Christ. For the prodigal, illumination describes the
time of staring into the eyes of the father, realizing the extent of his boundless love, and then becoming lost in his embrace.

Union with God is the final stage of spiritual formation. This state will not reach ultimate fruition until heaven. It involves complete interior surrender to the presence and will of God. As this stage is approached, there is little to distinguish the character of the believer from that of Christ. The mystery of “Christ in me” is realized as an interior surrender of all components of the person—thought, emotion, will, behavior, relationships, and soul functioning—is made to the transforming presence of Christ. For the prodigal son, union would mean a full re-entry into the family and taking on the mind of the father with such a deep appreciation for his love that he has become pig-proofed for life.

Willard describes the process of spiritual transformation as the renovation of the human heart. He believes that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.” It also involves a progressive union with God that takes the form of a conversational relationship that is personal, concrete, and ongoing.

As the process of Christian spiritual formation reaches fruition, several things become evident. 1) One begins to awaken to her true identity and, with God’s grace, dethrones the false self. 2) Conversation and communion with God increase and deepen into a sense of spiritual union. 3) The various dimensions of the person become united by the presence and love of the indwelling Christ. The truly important thing, the common thread of spiritual formation, according to Thomas Merton, is the journey of surrender to the will of God and his love.

By way of summary, Dallas Willard rightly reminds us that the “Spirit of the Disciplines” is “nothing more than the love of Jesus with its resolute will to be like him whom we love.” He also reminds us there is but one “way,” one “truth,” and one “life.” We must become like him and follow him in overall lifestyle. “And [you] have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:10, NASV).

**Jesus Was Really Smart**

The third psychology lesson I learned from Dallas is to always remember that Jesus was really smart. Let me explain.

I liked the title *Slums of Beverly Hills* more than I liked the movie. I think it struck a chord because it reminded me that many academics seem

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to think possessing Christian faith automatically relegates a person to the intellectual slums.

I recently received an invitation from the same psychology department of the major southern university I referenced earlier. They wanted me to send them some money. In a section of the appeal labeled “past milestones,” a brief psychological history of the department was offered.

1800  Psychology first represented in the university’s curriculum as “moral and mental philosophy”
1897  “Psychology” first appeared as a university course, but remained philosophically rather than scientifically oriented
1902  First laboratory course in psychology taught
1970s  Department represents psychology as the “science of behavior”
1990s  Major research grants awarded for achievements in neuroscience and the biological basis of behavior

In just five lines taken from the history of the department, one can see an overview of psychology’s evolution from “moral philosophy” to a “science” that can be used as a basis of reliable prediction and control of human behavior. But in the century-long, cross-campus move, two very important things were lost, moral understanding and the human soul. And yet, in spite of this heavy tariff, psychology, for the most part, has existed for over a century in the slums of the natural sciences—physics, biology, chemistry, neurology—it has sought to imitate. As a psychologist interested in the integration of theology and a Christian worldview into professional practice, I am keenly aware of another slime. As Dallas Willard articulates so well in his most recent book, Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge, faith in Jesus Christ and living life as his students has been repositioned outside the category of knowledge. “Serious and thoughtful Christians today... are urged to treat their central beliefs as something other than knowledge—something, in fact, far short of knowledge.”

For most of my professional career I created a hierarchy of value for the various “schools” of psychology based on how closely they resembled the natural sciences. Neuropsychology and the biological explanations of behavior were at the top, closely followed by behavioral and cognitive approaches. I gave some credence to person-centered approaches as a safe way to spend time with clients before the “real psychology” could be brought in, and I tolerated the existence of Freudian approaches in a manner similar to the way I would tolerate a beloved, senile grandparent.

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17 Dallas Willard, Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009), 78.
18 Ibid., 1.
At the same time, I came to accept the Western view that the term “knowledge” should be reserved for subjects like math and the natural sciences. Religion—even Christianity—dealt in matters of faith, belief, and profession, but not knowledge. Indeed, how could one make a “leap of faith” if one’s faith were grounded in actual knowledge?

For two decades I have been a teacher and a practitioner of integration—integrating “knowledge” from the science of psychology with “beliefs and practices” from Christianity. Initially, I viewed Christians as an underserved population who could benefit from the knowledge psychology had to offer. I later began to view various soul-care strategies (e.g., practice with a variety of Christian disciplines) as outside-the-box techniques for some Christian clients who might benefit in a variety of ways from participating in these “practices.”

Recently, however, a slow change in my way of thinking has percolated to the surface and now causes me to believe that I have been dramatically short-changing what Jesus has to offer. I believe it is time for me—and perhaps others in the integration enterprise—to reposition faith in Jesus Christ and the ability to live interactively with him back within the category of knowledge.

Have I decided to join the ever-present band of psychology bashers who have dogged the integration movement since its inception? God forbid! What I am confessing is that before encountering Dallas’ line of thinking, I had not given Christianity its rightful place at the table as a source of not merely belief and practice, but knowledge.

As just one example, consider afresh for a moment the following table, which presents the four most fundamental worldview questions in the universe: 1) What is real? 2) Who is well off? 3) Who is a good person? and 4) How do I become one?19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) The Reality Question:</th>
<th>Jesus’ Answer: God and his Kingdom; that is what you can count on and what you have to come to terms with.</th>
<th>Skinner’s Answer: The measurable physical universe.</th>
<th>Freud’s Answer: The physical universe—including the unseen subconscious mind.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2) Who has it made?</td>
<td>Jesus’ Answer: Anyone who is alive in the kingdom: that is, anyone who is interact-</td>
<td>Skinner’s Answer: Anyone who is able to live with as many pleasant events as poss-</td>
<td>Freud’s Answer: The person who is maximally in touch with his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reality question is</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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19 For a more detailed treatment of worldview and knowledge see Knowing Christ Today, 39–58.
joined at the worldview level with the question of well-being. Who is well off?

- tively engaged with God and the various dynamic dimensions of his reigning. Such engagement with God is an eternal living, an eternal life.
- sible while living free from physical pain or her unconscious and able to live an examined life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3) The Character Question: Who is a really good person?</th>
<th>Jesus' Answer: Anyone one who is pervaded with love</th>
<th>Skinner's Answer: Anyone who on a personal and corporate level seeks to minimize pain and maximize pleasure for self and others</th>
<th>Freud's Answer: A person who seeks to understand the self and help others do the same</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| 4) The Development Question: How does one become a genuinely good person? | Jesus' Answer: You place your confidence in Jesus Christ and become his student or apprentice in kingdom living. That amounts to progressively entering into the abundance of life he brings to us. | Skinner's Answer: You learn to shape by your environment in such a way that you minimize the cause of pain in others. | Freud's Answer: Analysis |

In reviewing this table, I am convinced that Jesus offers a source of exquisite knowledge to life’s most important questions and that his answers deserve—at minimum—equal attention as that received by psychology’s pioneers. I also believe that profound psychological good could be accomplished by moving this knowledge from the academic slums to Beverly Hills. The mental health benefits of becoming a person pervaded with love are simply too enormous to ignore, as is the possibility of living more and more moments of each day in firsthand interaction (knowing by acquaintance) with Jesus and his kingdom.

**Conclusion**

I began this article with the statement that “one might find it odd that I would refer to the philosopher/theologian Dallas Willard as my favorite psychologist.” Only you can decide if I have made the case that this “amateur” theologian and professional philosopher has made praiseworthy contributions in a third domain. I can simply say that when it comes to better understanding the person, the process of transformation, and the
psychological implications for Jesus’ being very smart, no one has helped me more with these matters of the *psyche* than Dallas Willard.

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**Author Note:** Some of the material presented in this article is a synthesis of ideas I previously published in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls* (IVP, 2004); *Renovation of the Heart: Leader’s Guide* (LifeSprings, 2003), and *Dictionary of Everyday Theology and Culture* (NavPress, 2010).
Dallas Willard calms me down. His demeanor is relaxed; he does not seem worried. I recently congratulated him on his birthday; I wished him many more good years. He answered, “Oh, I don’t think about more years. I don’t have any control over that; I just take them as they come.” Part of what makes Dallas appealing is that he seems to live out of the riches of his person. He is the embodiment of the antidote for what ails the church and the culture in which it lives.

The church is in a hurry, addicted to short cuts, frantic to be hip and to make it with those who already are. The hipsters are of the Google generation; newer is better, and faster is best. Google’s mission statement includes making all the information in the world free on the Internet. In 1984 George Orwell worried about information being withheld from the public; in *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley warned that the problem was too much information. Huxley feared that people would come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think. The church gets swept away in this fast moving, superficial locomotion; it does not slow down to think, reflect, pray, and wait. It is the sign of an unsatisfied soul.

By way of contrast, Dallas is at peace, he is non-competitive on his own behalf, and he does not even know how many books he has sold. Any author who does not know such a thing is suspect. Possibly he is on a mood-altering drug, or could it be that he knows something the rest of us do not? That is his charm, which is why he interests us; we keep chasing his secret as to why so many things that bother us do not bother him.

When Dallas speaks, his hearers have smiles on their faces; they are disarmed by his way. It does not seem to matter that he has no PowerPoint or nifty outline, or tear-jerking story; they camp on every word, and their fingers hurt from typing or taking notes. If he says something cryptic or if he does not make sense, they think it is their fault. They will let him tell them off and thank him for it.

He is a reluctant prophet whose avuncular nature creates receptiveness in the multitudes who read his work and would love to meet him. They
would not only like to meet him; they want to sit on the front porch and listen as he explains the mysteries of the ages. Here is a man who is determined “not to make anything happen.” He does not seem to be on a mission, but few have more influence. He has great influence, yet it seems incidental to his life. He is the accidental prophet. His intention was to teach from the university; his reality has been that his university has become universal.

He seems a rather benign figure for a revolutionary as he strolls across the University of Southern California campus where he has taught philosophy for over forty years. He is unaccompanied by the press; a casual wave at a student or fellow faculty member is as exciting as it gets. He ambles along with books under his arm; he hardly looks the part of a man who has crafted a scheme to take over the world. On a clear day you can see the Hollywood sign from the campus, yet no film mogul has pitched a movie to him. Federal agents have not knocked on his door; he is not even under surveillance. His plan is not hidden; you can buy it or download it onto your iPod. You might see it on a pastor’s bookshelf or spy a college student reading it at Starbucks. It is called The Divine Conspiracy, a book written by Professor Willard, an outlandish plan to change the world.

No one is threatened by this Conspiracy because it seems so unlikely, so impractical, so not news. Realists believe that the way of Jesus is nice for people, but lacks the power to penetrate the real strongholds of culture: it cannot tackle injustice, hatred, and political tyranny. But Dr. Willard contends that ordinary people who change from the inside out can, given enough time to multiply, transform the power structures of the society in which we live. How does Professor Willard propose we change the world, and what would it look like if we did?

1. He Starts with Discipleship.

My affection for Dallas Willard began with his commitment to what is commonly called discipleship. He was different from most who consigned it to a post-conversion basic training for converts. He saw it as the heart of the gospel; without it, the gospel and the world mission would be debilitated. Discipleship was to be a normal part of salvation, not an option, an afterthought, or a class for newbies meeting in the fireside room. In this regard, he was in the tradition of Bonhoeffer, who, upon taking on the directorship of the Confessing Church’s Preachers’ Seminary in the summer of 1935, devoted the first two hours of the day to his lectures on discipleship. Bonhoeffer was developing an integration of justification and sanctification under the single rubric of discipleship. It proposed that the command to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 was the core work of the church. The commitment to teach them to obey everything Christ commanded was the primary method. I have believed this since I first read the Scripture as a 21-year-old, and my life has been dedicated to teaching it to the nations. In
Willard I found a partner, someone with an international congregation that added gravitas to the cause. Dallas, the philosopher, and Michael Wilkins, the theologian, have been two great pillars in establishing discipleship as a central theme, getting it into the conversation. In fact, Dallas seems to think that we cannot take over the world without making discipleship the centerpiece of our work. I am sure many Christian leaders do not believe this. I know this because they do not talk about it and they do not participate. To them I recommend the question Professor Willard asks: “Why bother with discipleship?”¹ and ask them to consider his proposal:

Jesus told us explicitly what to do. We have a manual, just like the car owner. He told us, as disciples, to make disciples. Not converts to Christianity, nor to some particular “faith and practice.” He did not tell us to arrange for people to “get in” or “make the cut” after they die, nor to eliminate the various brutal forms of injustice, nor to produce and maintain “successful” churches. These are all good things, and he had something to say about all of them. They will certainly happen if—but only if—we are [his constant apprentices] and do [make constant apprentices] what he told us to be and do. If we just do this, it will little matter what else we do or do not do.²

Truly radical, he is proposing that we demote from its first rank getting people into the fold.

The Law of Indirection

Adding people to the flock, like so much that is valuable in life, works via the law of indirection. Just as you do not find joy by pursuing it directly, neither will people be joined to the fold through numerical growth schemes. Both come through spiritual exercise, which puts us into situations where we are being transformed through serving others. This is that “something more,” the vitality that has been lacking, the key that will multiply our meager efforts to gain new followers.

The key to getting things done for Christ in this world is to consider the kind of people we are creating. Think of efforts to correct injustice, to help the homeless, to reach out to the needy as good but not essential. Even the importance of starting and maintaining churches must take a back seat to being disciples and making disciples.

Making disciples transcends the church; it is bringing the reality of Christ to the world as an ordinary follower of Jesus. If the church could do

² Ibid, xii.
only one thing, it would be to make disciples because only disciples, people who are formed in Christ, will have what it takes to sustain the mission to the needy and to correct injustice. The enemy’s strategy is to distract us from such work with good deeds that would delay transformation. This is not a call to stop organized efforts to the needy; it is the voice of Christ recalling us to put first being disciples who are making other disciples.

If you have ever watched the Super Bowl pregame show, which is longer than the game itself, you will notice a rather benign activity on the field. The players come out and start running, stretching, and doing an array of calisthenics. The commentators do not mention it; in fact, they have their backs turned to the activity. Yet it is this pregame warm-up that makes it possible for the players to perform at a high level over a long NFL season. When they reported for training camp in July, they started with sit-ups, leg-lifts, push-ups, wind sprints, and other drills that made their muscles sore, their breathing labored; each player was in his own level of pain. Now in February, at the pinnacle of their game, they are running and jumping without pain, their legs and lungs filled with energy and air. They are in condition for the game; no one is worried about his body not being able to do what he needs to do. There are no awards for calisthenics, but indirectly they are the foundation of the game. The disciplines of the Spirit are the same: when they are practiced, they make it possible for each person to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done as it needs to be done.

2. HE IDENTIFIES THE EXACT PROBLEM AND HOW TO CORRECT IT.

The Great Omission from the Great Commission is not obedience to Christ, but discipleship apprenticeship to him. Through discipleship, obedience will take care of itself. Some might be shocked to hear that what the “Church”—the disciples gathered—really needs is not more people, more money, better buildings or programs, more education, or more prestige. Christ’s gathered people, the church, have always been at its best when it had little or none of these. All it needs to fulfill Christ’s purposes on earth is the quality of life he makes real in the life of his disciples.

It is easy to miss the heart of the statement, “The Great Omission from the Great Commission is not obedience to Christ, but discipleship apprenticeship to him.” The normal mistake is to think of the Great Omission as primarily a lack of emphasis on mission work or obedience in everyday life. There is no shortage of preaching on the importance of obedience, the vital nature of mission, or even the call to discipleship. Willard says that what is
missing is the critical process of apprenticeship, which makes it possible to teach others to do what Jesus commanded.

People do not become able to do what Jesus commanded merely by being told to do it. Churches are crammed with guilty and frustrated members who have tried ad infinitum, ad nauseam and have failed to make progress. Most of this failure can be attributed to the absence of an environment conducive to apprenticeship, where both leaders and followers enter into relationships that provide the venue for the transformation of their character. Where it is lacking, apprenticeship is lost. When you lose apprenticeship, you have lost the ability to teach someone deeply. “Deeply” here means basic character change.

Teaching others to do everything that Jesus commanded is a process embedded in a relationship. Again, this is what Bonhoeffer set out to demonstrate in the seminary he led for two years before the Nazi SS closed it. His little book Life Together is about the experiment of discipleship in community. A community based on relationships of trust gets you permission. When a person feels safe, he invites you into his life; the necessary bonus is submission.

Much of current discipleship is superficial; by superficial I mean without the depth of human relationship. The results we are presently getting are directly related to this superficiality. It glosses over the real reasons for timidity, dropouts, and resistance to change. You may get a very knowledgeable, highly skilled person who has excelled in the apprenticeship system, but is still very much living a self-willed life. This is why Willard and others believe that fulfillment of the Great Commission is more about depth than strategy. By depth we do not mean academic prowess, but agape love. As Paul so aptly put it to the Corinthians, “But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church.”


Most of us want a strategy that looks good on a chart with steps and measured milestones. This is what Dr. Willard calls the “exaltation of the practical.” The way of Christ seems impractical; as Eugene Peterson declared, “American culture is stubbornly resistant to the way of Jesus.” This means more than Christ’s way of life; it is about methods, about the way the spiritual life on the inside is to be presented and preached to the culture. Jesus’ method is too slow, taking great patience and faith to stick with it. “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be

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4 1 Corinthians 8:1c, The New Living Translation.
hidden.”6 What we are is evident to the watching world; that is why Dr. Willard’s strategy is to create bigger Christians; bigger churches are not the point. He makes his case:

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as “Christians” will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence. Will they break out of the churches to be his church—to be, without human force or violence, his mighty force for good on earth, drawing the churches after them toward the eternal purposes of God? And on its own scale, there is no greater issue facing the individual human being, Christian or not.7

A fifth column, if you will, a clandestine army behind enemy lines, strategically placed by the Holy Spirit and divine providence . . . “From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall and he determined their boundaries. His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any of us.”8

What will Christians become? This again strengthens the argument that the secret to fulfillment of the Great Commission is not strategy as much as depth. But God does have a strategy, and it is quite simple. When we become disciples, apprentices—when we take on Christlikeness as a habit—it makes the strategy work. The reason it is not working now is the lack of spiritual animation of the army. It is as if the soldiers are in place, but are distracted by other, mundane matters, so the mission has been forgotten. The soldiers now think that the important work is to return to headquarters for very stimulating training and speeches about the mission. It seems all the praise, honor, and money go to the large rallies and speeches, but their leaders do not go to the field. If you want to see them, you will have to go to headquarters. The leaders have not led the troops into the field to activate the mission.

But we have been recruited into a different kind of army; we take off the uniform and assimilate into the culture, into, as Dr. Willard says, “every corner of human existence.” We are not spies, nor do we march lockstep through the streets. Rather, we live in very ordinary circumstances but do so in an extraordinary way, such that observers are able to tell we are different. That is the promise: “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”9

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6 Matthew 5:14, *The New Living Translation*.
He goes on to ask, "Will they break out of their churches to be the church?" This is what so many advocate, but they cannot seem to figure out how to program inner revolution. Is that not the catch? You cannot program it, you cannot count it, and you cannot make your church bigger because of it. That is why it does not hold long-term appeal for the impatient church. The irony is that a church so impatient to get results has been so patient with its own failure to produce any.

The church is the church only when it exists for others. That is almost true; we are only the church when in practice we exist for others. Jesus was a man for others; as his disciples, we are to live for others, and the church is at its glorious best when it exists for others. The breakout is usually not led by the clergy, but by those who dare to go first to create the fifth column, those who "without human force or violence, his mighty force for good on earth, drawing the churches after them toward the eternal purposes of God."\(^{10}\) The force of it is magnetic as it pulls other members in the same direction. It can be easily pictured, the slivers of people pulling a growing number of members into the "world" as a mighty force of love and kindness that attracts all within their path. This takes time; it does not make for captivating headlines, but it can work; it is the divine conspiracy.

But there remains a very sticky issue: how does personal Bible study, prayer, fasting, and extended times of silence and solitude change the world? Have not these religious practices been around for centuries? Do not people do them daily, and they do not seem to make much difference? Dr. Willard believes that such private and sometimes solitary practices can change the world, really change it. The most concentrated apology for how private spirituality can change structures and institutions is found in Dr. Willard's 1988 work, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. In the chapter entitled "The Disciplines and the Power Structures of the World," he insists that:

4. **The Practice of Spiritual Disciplines and the Law of Indirectness are the Keys to World Revolution.**

... A widespread transformation of character through wisely disciplined discipleship to Christ can transform our world—it can disarm the structural evils that have always dominated humankind and now threaten to destroy the world."\(^{11}\) There is the declaration; private practices can bring down structural evil, the temples of greed, the cathedrals of self-aggrandizement, the ideologies that destroy human desire and achievement.

He goes on:

\(^{10}\) Willard, *The Great Ommision*, xv.

We have one realistic hope for dealing with the world's problems. And that is the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now, in people who are his by total identification found through the spiritual disciplines. Why? This faith and discipline yields a new humanity, one for which “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” or “Our Father who art in heaven” does not express a resolve, a hope, or a commitment, but vision in whose firm grip Jesus’ people live with abandon.12

I doubt any serious Christian would argue against the hope being “the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now . . .” More than a few, however, could be found to resist the idea that a “new humanity” is created through the spiritual disciplines. This is because of the natural evangelical resistance to all things “Catholic.”

Spiritual disciplines have a monastic history; the monastic movement is under-appreciated in many conservative circles. This resistance comes from two strands of evangelical thought, first from the educated class, the well-educated, well-read evangelicals. Its resistance is rooted in the finer points of theology. At the street level, the resistance is a built-in aversion to “works righteousness” or a fear of legalism. This finds its roots in a misguided view of grace, a grace that breeds passivity, a notion that there is nothing I can do for my salvation or to participate in my salvation. The protest is that spiritual disciplines are not listed in Scripture like spiritual gifts. They are not commanded as clearly and at the same level. At another time and place an extended answer should be given, but for now, let it be said, Jesus practiced them in a healthy and regular way. Since Jesus is our leader and teacher, should we not look to his life and adapt such practices to our lives? Jesus fasted, prayed, and spent extended periods of solitude and silence. He served, he gave, he was chaste, he was frugal, and these practices were all found in his life.

For Dr. Willard the process is simple in this way; it is transforming people through the spiritual disciplines from a readiness to do evil to a readiness to do good. This is the quest of any serious disciple: to be an apprentice of Jesus, to be in training to become a new kind of person in practice, not just on paper. And this quest is to be led by pastors who teach it by example, by their apprenticeship, not just in elocution.

5. **He Believes the Church and Its Pastors Should Make Teaching Disciples to Obey What Christ Commanded Their Primary Work.**

The logical conclusion is that beginning with leaders, the church should be primarily focused on learning and practicing these disciplines. Dr. 12 Ibid, 237.
Willard calls out the pastors: “Ministers pay far too much attention to people who do not come to services. Those people should, generally, be given exactly that disregard by the pastor that they give to Christ. The Christian leader has something much more important to do than pursue the godless. The leader’s task is to equip saints until they are like Christ, and history and the God of history waits for him to this job.”13

Has not the pastoral priority in the past fifty years been “to be more relevant” to the unchurched community? And the foremost reason given by pastors to their congregations for dismantling traditional programs has been “to better reach the surrounding communities.” Everything—from changes in service time, music styles, media technology, and evangelistic methods—has been driven by the Great Commission mandate. But because of the great omission in the commission, namely, the failure to teach people deeply through apprenticeship, we have been focused on the end product while ignoring the process that creates it. It is much as if a football team dons their uniforms, the band plays, and the cheerleaders lead the team onto the field. The crowd is cheering, the broadcasters are in place, and the game is on, but the team did not prepare. No one is in shape; they know the plays, but their bodies are not able to execute them effectively because they have not been conditioned to do so. Their coaches would be fired. Pastors have led many an unprepared team onto the field.

There should be no argument against the idea that the church should focus on becoming a new humanity. This transformation is the key to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It is just that we skipped the “new humanity” part, and set out to work our plan. Dr. Willard tells us how the revolution is to work.

Those who think that the cultivation of inner Christlikeness through personal discipleship to Jesus amounts to a “privatization” of our faith in him [“quietism” and “pietism” are words often used in that connection] simply do not understand how the spiritual life in Christ works. You cannot privatize the fire of God that burns through the life of a disciple of Jesus. This was Jesus’ point in saying that “a city built on a hill cannot be hid,” and that one does not light a candle and put it under a bushel.14

Pastors as the teachers, then, lead the congregation through the transformative process. It begins with the desire to follow and learn; second, the willing members engage in spiritual exercise; third, this creates new habits, which in turn form a person’s character. Desire, exercise, habit, character: kindness is a habit; self-control is a habit; returning good for evil is a habit—all habits formed by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with a community.

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13 Ibid, 246.
14 Ibid, 228.
6. **He Believes in Something, Dare We Say, Greater Than the Church?**

Yes he does, but not greater in importance, only greater in quality and scope than what is normally thought of as the church. The words of a non-churched person, Peter Berger, can help us here: “The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is something very different from Religion.”

Can it be that Jesus is not confined to his Church? If this question is pondered but for a moment, we must answer yes. The first chapter of Colossians alone would require such a conclusion. “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.” Just this short statement gives warrant to the reality of Christ outside time, space, and institutions, even the church. He is the head of the church, but not confined to it. He was before the Church; he will reign after the institution of the church has expired.

This is why Peter Berger’s statement is so vital; Jesus rises above all things cultural. He is bigger than Christianity itself. This means that he is free to roam and work wherever he decides. He started the church, he is the head of the church, he has gifted the church, and he has instructed its leaders in what to do in order to participate in the revolution. They are to be and make disciples, equipping the congregation to do the “work of ministry.” When the church decides to do something else, it limits its participation. The Church becomes a welfare state that must be sustained, but does not contribute. Christ, however, continues to orchestrate his people who are available and are at work in all segments of society.

For the divine conspiracy to work, Jesus must permeate the power structures of the world. This is going after “big game”; it is not the trivial goals of higher church attendance and building programs that so often occupy the church. Because the church has made other choices, it is criticized, as Dr. Willard explains:

That criticism is largely justified when applied to the form usually taken by Christian faith throughout our history. More often than not, faith has failed, sadly enough, to transform the human character of the masses, because it is usually unaccompanied by discipleship and by an overall discipline of life such as Christ himself practiced. As a result, when faced with the real issues of justice, peace, and prosperity, what is called faith in Christ has often proved of little help other than the comfort of a personal hope for what lies beyond this life.

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16 Colossians 1:15, *New Living Translation*.

The Church has not taken the creation of apprentices of Jesus seriously; therefore, we have not had the people in place who could do what needed to be done when it needed to be done. The general society approaches justice, peace, and love in a negative way, by placing restraints on people so they will not harm others. This is a temporary fix intended to restrain the readiness to do evil lodged deeply in the human soul. But the real revolution is to create a “new person” for whom the creation of justice, peace, and love comes from inside.

What is Jesus Doing Outside the Church?

When one speaks of “outside the church,” it should be said that it means outside the orbit of the organized church’s plans and programs. For a follower of Christ is a member of the church even if not on any local registry. There is a force field of the church, which is centripetal, or center seeking. This is when the actions of its members are to draw friends and associates toward their local congregation. This is a normal effort of the church, and it has its place, but falls far short of a different kind of force. The opposite force is centrifugal, or center fleeing; this occurs when the energy and speed at the center flings people out.

The church energy is most often center seeking because its teaching and instincts are preservational. The early church stayed in Jerusalem too long; only persecution flung them out; only then did they begin to evangelize. It is just our nature to be slow about the hard things. But we know that the people to be reached are not in church. And here is the kicker—if we do not focus on being disciples, we will be slow to make disciples. The energy of the church will be center-seeking. For the church to get out of the church to be the church, it must take on apprenticeship as its normative first priority. It is counter-intuitive, but by being patient in the building of apprentices, you build an energy that will make everything go faster in due course.

There are seminars on how to get Christ into the marketplace. Many of you reading this have been trained to do evangelism and have participated in formal campaigns. But we all know that such efforts fall short of the natural or organic systems of society. Another way to put it is the often-asked question, “How do I get Christ into my office?” The answer? “Go in and sit down.”

When you as a disciple of Christ arrive at work, the kingdom has arrived because you are there. You might protest, “I am here, but now what do I do, sit around and look holy, start a Bible study, leave a few gospel tracts in the lunch room? Some direct efforts have their place, but what is really needed is the transformed life of Christ present in that space. Enter into the community at work, social clubs, and other associations as a person willing to take actions for the benefit of others. Begin to train to live as Jesus lived, with humility, with others in mind.
How Does This Change Society?

How does this make the world a more just place? How does this change the social structure of the world and bring down strongholds of greed, hate, and tyranny? The first order of business is to reject the idea that today's normal, nominal Christian can do it. Dr. Willard puts it this way; “There are those who do not see personal virtue as an answer to social ills. The effect of this saying is to keep people working at changing society without attempting radical transformation of character. It pleads for a continuation of ‘life as usual’ which is precisely the source of the problem. Often they think of themselves as radicals; the only true radical is one who proposes a different character and life for human beings.”

May I be so brazen as to use Dr. Willard’s question? “If Jesus were a schoolteacher, what kind of schoolteacher would he be?” Fill in the blank: parent, plumber, president, police officer, bank president, stockbroker—you get the idea. Would government be the same if the Christians working in it were transformed rather than nominal? What about the United Nations, the leaders of media, universities, and unions? This seems impossible, does it not? It seem so only because we know there are Christians in very high places, and it has not seemed to help that much. Yet Dr. Willard believes that transformed disciples in the harvest field where we live, work, and play can create communities of justice and peace. The church thinks of community as internal to the church. Dr. Willard espouses transformed disciples to live in community with the people in real community.

The real communities of living are neighborhoods, recreational associations, schools, businesses, and friendships—living in these communities as Christ would live, because most of the members are not disciples. There are no planned meetings or curriculum. There is only the “Big Curriculum,” the living of life. Churches have not shown much interest in this because it is hard to measure; it does not make them bigger and more successful. He believes there are enough Christ-followers to receive the reign of Christ. “Their leaders have only to bring them to the fullness of life which Christ has provided.”

The reason we know it can work is that it has worked before. Tertullian in his first Apology answered the critics who were concerned about Christians overrunning the world:

Men cry out that the state is besieged; the Christians are in the fields, in the ports, in the islands. They mourn, as for a loss, that every sex, age, condition and even rank is going over to this sect; we are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled every place belonging to you—cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camps, your tribes, compa-

\[18\] Ibid, 238.
\[19\] Ibid, 249.
nies, palace, senate, forum; we leave only your temples. . . . All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the martyrs is their seed.20

Sociologist Rodney Stark in his groundbreaking work, The Rise of Christianity, begins with a question: “How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement move from the edge of the Roman Empire to dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?”21

In 100 A.D. the church was between 7,000 and 10,000; three hundred years later they were 350 million. It should be stipulated that acceptance and assimilation of the Christian faith in the Edict of Milan in 311 did inject a deadly dye into the church’s bloodstream. Every missional movement becomes an institution, and then it must be challenged and revitalized. The monastic movement led by Saint Anthony was the beginning of the needed revolt. But the rising movement of the Christian faith in the first three centuries was miraculous. It was not pretty, easy, or very well organized, but it was potent because so many of them decided actually to follow Jesus, to be his disciples.

So Dr. Willard’s conspiracy is not a new idea; it is a very old idea that has already worked. But would it work now? There are many who assume that if the Church were to take over the world, the world would be better off. Dr. Willard’s point is that the Church is not ready to take over the world and that we may never be. Dr. Willard is suggesting that the Church is only valuable to the world if Christ takes over the Church. That means we intentionally choose to be his disciples in practice. He must be allowed to be more than a figurehead; he must be our leader. This is what Bonhoeffer meant when he said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”22 Otherwise, we will only make things worse. Oh, by the way, when the takeover is complete, there will be no throne for the good professor; he will gladly disappear into that great chorus to harmonize with those who sing the same song.

20 Willard, The Great Omission, 228.

I have been graced to know Dallas Willard for the last 15 years as a teacher, colleague, and friend. His life and teachings have schooled me, transforming my own life and ministry. In this article I share some of the lessons he has taught me in Kingdom life: 1) the possibility of attaining moral knowledge resulting in actual progress toward becoming like Christ; 2) the development of training (not just trying) so that intentions for obedience can be embodied; 3) the power of submitting to a “rule of life” for ruling in Kingdom life; and 4) the use of practical exercises to walk into virtue for specific character results. These lessons include a number of his “sayings,” which I now call “Dallasisms,” that have drilled his teaching down into my life.

“Grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning.”
“God will let into his heaven anyone who can stand it.”
“The greatest enemy of intimacy with God is service for him.”

One of those Dallasisms has to do with the shallow and wishful thinking presented in popular rock songs calling for people to change. I have often heard him lament, “What real hope can we find in the advice for life presented in lyrics like John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ or ‘Peace Train’ by James Taylor and the Dixie Chicks?”

Fascinated by Dallas’s command of not only Scripture but also contemporary culture and yet sure this time that Dallas had got it wrong (I grew up in the late ’60s and early ’70s, and think I know rock music), I sheepishly interjected, “Oh, Dallas, I think ‘Peace Train’ was by Cat Stevens.”

Undeterred, he stated, “Yes, I know that the original was by him, but last year a cover was done by Taylor and the Chicks.” I checked on it, and he was right.

I have learned to trust what Dallas says about almost anything.

Although he often humbly and authentically says, “If I am wrong or mistaken, please correct me, for I certainly may be,” his consistent ring of truth has so greatly influenced my life and ministry that I not only trust what he says, but also have learned to put confidently into practice what he says to do and models for me.
The Moral Knowledge Lesson: Why Would Anyone Try to Be Good? ¹

Over the last two years, Dallas has been writing a book to address the disappearance of moral knowledge today. At dinner with my daughter and son-in-law, he shared with them that he was about to publish two books on the subject, one a popular work, titled *Knowing Christ Today*, and the other a longer and untitled work he was writing for the academy, one “that would hurt your head” to read. I am eagerly waiting for my head to hurt from reading that book. Meanwhile, I have seen evidence in my own ministry of the disappearance of moral knowledge in the church and seen the fruit of Dallas’s teaching on the possibility of moral knowledge or virtue in changed lives.

There is no greater reward in proclaiming the good news of life in Jesus than seeing people begin to realize that they can actually become good. And when they do, I find that many of them go through a kind of grief and even anger for not having been told there was more to the gospel than just being forgiven and waiting for heaven for perfection. This becomes even stronger when they see that the teaching they received made them blind to what the Scriptures clearly and consistently present as not only possible but as the normal and expected result of following Jesus. They wonder why this training has been lost to the church.

But for each one who comes to this awakening there are many more who are confounded and show themselves to be powerfully conditioned for low expectations of growth in this life. I empathize with them. I held their view for many years, and it took time to trust that Jesus would work with me to learn to obey him. In life before Dallas, it sounded like promoting righteousness based on good works. Beside, does not Jesus accept me “just as I am”? ²

His question floored me. A middle-aged student in my class on 2 Peter titled “How Can Your Life Become Really Good?” asked the million-dollar question of formation: “Why would anyone want to do this?” “This” was taking the teaching of Peter, with strong doses of Dallas’s thought and applying it by doing a Virtue Walk training exercise (see the so-titled section of this paper below). His honesty was refreshing, but I could feel the

¹ The following six themes or lessons are my learning taken from Dallas’s books, lectures, and interactions with him in think tanks and conferences. Sections of the article are from chapters 7 and 8 of a book I have written (*Whole Life Transformation: Becoming the Change Your Church Needs*, InterVarsity Press, Formatio, Foreword by Dallas Willard, release June 2010) and a chapter I have in another book with chapters by Dallas Willard and others (*The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, NavPress, Foreword by Rick Warren, released March 2010.). The Dallasisms are taken from lectures, talks and sharing at conferences at Church of the Open Door and others venues and in informal groups or private conversations and think tank projects I have been in with him.
tension in the class as everyone knew he was unknowingly and unintentionally challenging the whole basis for the class.

His question was great! It was an opportunity to go deep into the depths of the transformation gap in contemporary Evangelicalism, to uncover the reduced gospel that offers forgiveness but no change in this life and to expose the resulting “double life,” a devotional and church life devoid of character formation in our real lives.

He explained why he did not think it was necessary. “Why do so,” he asked, “when I am already forgiven of my sins and have peace with God for the future? Why make such a big deal about being good? If Jesus is already our Savior, why sweat this goodness thing?”

I could not have planned a better class curriculum for that day. His question raised the issue of what our experience of heaven would be if we did not desire that experience while here on earth. It also awakened desire in the students for a life with God that could start now in our everyday lives, not just in heaven. It showed how much our expectations for life with God had been lowered—how in 2 Peter’s terms, we have been blinded to God’s call for a Kingdom life of moral excellence here and now.

I did not have to answer the student’s question. The class did it for me. Many of them shared how their own lives had changed. Obviously this person will need, as I did myself, either to become tired of the way he is living now or to open up to a vision of a better life.

I did not get a chance to go deeper with him on the question. I have learned not to rush or push anyone’s desire to be formed or follow Jesus. Such a desire must come from the heart and sometimes that very question, “Why do this?” is the beginning of an inner process that will take its own time, in which God is slowly disturbing our temporary and earthly peace. That student has since been able to see new possibilities for his own life, but his lowered expectations due to his reduced gospel first had to be exposed.

What are our expectations for life: the lowered expectations and false comfort of the American dream, or the high and lofty reality of life in the kingdom of Jesus? Where did we get them? Did Jesus expect that we should live without worry, anger, lust, contempt, and greed? Could these sinful states cease to rule our lives?

What might God accomplish in us if we became more alert and conscious of God, more available to him and his power to rule in us, versus being more preoccupied with ourselves and meeting our own needs? And what would be the result for others if we were to become more available to them, more peaceful, and more loving and giving in our relationships?

I have not been able to shake the man’s question: “Why would anyone want to do this?” This has had most of my attention lately, making me wonder how to help answer it for those who are asking.

Wondering why anyone would want to become good is a sign of how much we have lost of our biblical heritage, not only in American culture, but also in the church, even Bible-toting, born-again Evangelicals. The proverb is true: For lack of vision or knowledge the people perish (see
Hosea 4:6). There is a loss of knowledge of how to obey that the church and our culture need to recover. The student in my class reflects a shift in our culture that puts the knowledge of good and the method for attaining it out of reach.

In *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*, Dallas Willard makes the case that we no longer see morality as a legitimate field of knowledge or something one can know and experience. So our institutions of learning have no basis for helping students make moral decisions or assessments of basic good and evil. “For most of Western history, the basic claims of the Christian tradition have in fact been regarded by its proponents as knowledge of reality, and were presented as such.”

But today, educators cannot help their students become good at anything in a moral sense. I would add that most Christians, pastors and laypeople alike, have no basis for the reality of moral excellence in their lives and communities. “It is now widely thought that there is no objective difference between a good person or a bad person, or at least that we do not know what that difference is. So, if that is true, a method for becoming a really good person would be presumptive and pointless.”

If this is true of much of the church, and I believe it is, there is no knowledge of what goodness would look like in a believer beyond the condition of being forgiven. Then a method of becoming a good person, such as the Virtue Walk I had proposed, seems “presumptive and pointless.” But wait a second. My class was not at Harvard or the University of Illinois. It was at my church, where Evangelical, Bible-believing, born-again, witnessing Christians attend. What is up with that?

The problem is that belief is no longer seen as knowledge of how to live well, but is now about having the correct theological doctrine to be accepted by God into heaven. In the church there is a gap between belief and knowledge. Beliefs that are seen as only doctrinal truths and not lived realities are “professions” of belief, a matter of lip service. These beliefs are not confessed or held close for repentant living and practice. They merely tickle the ear and mind as unused but warmly received information.

Dallas goes on to apply this to the church’s poverty of right living: “The difference between belief and knowledge is a difference that makes a huge difference in every area of life. Not having knowledge (read “experiential” here) of the central truths of Christianity is certainly one reason for the great disparity between what Christians profess and how they behave, a well known and disturbing phenomena.” This defines “nominal Evangelicals,” those who hold their beliefs and professions in name only, not in life. The old hymn “Trust and Obey” says it all. The only way to be happy in Jesus is to trust and obey. But how is that done? Who will teach us?

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3 Ibid., 49.
4 Ibid., 15.
Another lesson I have learned from Dallas is that not only is Jesus my Savior and Lord, but also, as part of that saving, he is my Teacher of life. This was not presented to me growing up in a typical Evangelical church that saw “Jesus as Teacher” as a foil for the liberal gospel of salvation by our own efforts, namely, education. But I longed for someone to teach me how to live my life.

I recall first being asked, “Who is my teacher?” in a Doctor of Ministry class with Dallas. That might seem like an unusual question since we do not live in days of rabbis or master teachers. The closest we might come to such is having a tutor in school, or a master craftsperson training us as an apprentice. But the master-student model was the most ancient form of instruction, and we are being reintroduced to it from the East in the form of Muslim imams, Hindu gurus, and Zen masters. Such a practice needs to be reintroduced into the church or, rather, simply imitated as we see it exemplified in our own Scriptures: Rabbi Jesus teaching his apprentices, and the latecomer, Paul, calling us to follow him as he follows Jesus and then to become teachers ourselves who model for other imitators.

Then the church will fulfill once again its role as a teaching force, one that catches others up in its life, with fathers and mothers, as Ephesians says, giving the Lord’s instruction to children; older men and women, as Titus says, modeling life for the younger ones, generation to generation, crossing even ethnic and social class lines for forming the one people of God.

Another Dallasism is, “So who is your teacher in life? If you want to know, look at the kind of life you have; that will reveal who your teacher is.” Actually, most of us have had several teachers: our parents and schoolteachers, peers and bosses, the media and Madison Avenue advertisers, our pastors and church leaders, televangelists, and authors. When I examined my life’s trail of practices and habits, I found that though I claimed Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I found he has not been my teacher in much of my life. Jesus is the only great religious teacher who is now alive and well and giving private instruction. The classroom is not just Sunday morning at church but all of life. And the curriculum is not just a book, even the Bible; it is our lives, with all of the ups and downs, the trials and the triumphs.

I now recommend in my teaching of pastors and in preaching in congregations that they read chapter nine of The Divine Conspiracy. It is a kind of altar call, not just to Jesus as Savior, but also to Jesus as Teacher. And the surprise for many is that they can actually do what Dallas promises: begin to put into their own bodies the kind of obedience Jesus calls for in those who intend to follow him. In preaching about this, I have seen many come alive to the possibility that they can actually obey Jesus with the members or parts of their body.
The man who stood before me for prayer came in response to the sermon I had just given. He was trembling with emotion. I had shared how my new understanding of whole-life transformation had changed my ideas of what was possible in obeying Christ and the kind of training it required, and I was beginning to incorporate it in my life. I now trusted Christ to teach me how to obey him in areas of my life that I had little hope for change in before—areas where I had tried so many times without success and had given up. One of those areas was anger and contempt for those who did me wrong.

I now knew how I could cooperate with God’s grace to train my body to actually do the things he said I could—love my enemy and live without contempt, that disdain and ill will that kept me locked up inside. I had hope that facial expressions and a sharp tongue would be rewired. Christ allows no room for grudges, hatred, or even low levels of irritation with those who oppose me. Better than that, I wanted to genuinely be able to bless my enemies and even pray for their well-being. My vision was that my body would become like Teflon to anger and contempt—they would not stick to me anymore and would have no hold on me. Having learned some measure of this, I knew how to offer this hope to others that they, too, could trust and obey in areas of life they had not dreamed could possibly change.

Responding to that invitation, the man came to me for prayer and did not say anything for a bit, looking deeply and longingly into my eyes, tears streaming down his face. He was already praying with his body. Leaning toward me, his bulky frame and muscular hands communicated to me that he used his body in some kind of demanding work. He placed his hands in mine as if they were an offering.

He had been a policeman and had to do some hard things with his body to protect innocents and stop perpetrators, whom he termed “dirt-bags.” The trouble was that his anger, exercised and now embodied in him, was spilling out and turning on those he loved. He knew he would need to forgive and learn to love “dirt-bags” for the healing he would need for those he held dear.

When he finally said something, he asked, “Would you pray for my hands?” He shared that he, too, wanted Jesus to help him to get rid of the anger that inhabited his heart, mind, and other parts of his body. Could he really be free of the leftover contempt and hatred that had accumulated over the years?

How do we train into Christlikeness? And how do we bring others along? Once we are “caught up” with a new vision of life in Jesus’ kingdom and intend to do his will—to be ruled by his power—we must do more than just try harder. We must enter into training or practice, to bring our intended will into our bodies. Otherwise our “tries” will keep us failing, and we will give up hope of changing.

Once I was asked to drive a friend’s car home from the airport after he drove us there. I was delighted until, getting into the driver’s seat, I noticed his car was a stick shift; I had never driven one. I had a quick and tough “on
the spot” lesson on the foolishness of trying without training, lurching and stopping my way out of that busy airport and fearfully getting on the highway. I sweated that drive all the way to his house, vowing never to “try” again without training first. Trying to obey and deal with contempt “on the spot” in life without training is just as frustrating, and we will soon give up unless we learn to train. I took time in a parking lot with a stick shift to practice and train to avoid another “trying” disaster.

Like the policeman, I remember the exhilaration I felt when I first heard Dallas explain that through training, our intended will, our thoughts and desires to act as Jesus says we should, could become our embodied will. Our intended will can be incarnated through training or practice, resulting in new habits of mouth, hands, eyes, and body. Dallas applied this to ordinary road rage, the kind we all experience and participate in. When we are confronted with an angry and rude driver, our knee-jerk response of cursing them under our breath is due to a habit we have developed in the course of our lives, first having heard our parents or friends do so, and then over time we make it our own, anger becoming an easy and reflexive response. By God’s grace and power these habits can be put to death and new ones brought to life. Our knee-jerk reaction to rude people will become one of automatic blessing.

If we partner with Jesus in prolonged use of the disciplines of prayerful blessing of enemies and rely on his supernatural power and train for change, cursing others will become a distant memory as we naturally bless them, hoping things will turn out well for them. Of course we could try to do this without Jesus. But we would be pumping out a behavior without a heart change, trying “on the spot” to churn out a behavior. Or we might do it as a way to prove ourselves better than the other, but then we would not truly be transformed.

Dallas often refers to how Jesus acted while on the cross; Jesus’ embodied reaction to the cursing, jeers, and taunts of the two thieves, the religious leaders, and Roman soldiers was to bless them and pray for God to forgive them. He did not have to think about it or push back anger and contempt. His supernaturally natural response was to bless. With small steps and victories over temptations along the way, Jesus had trained all his life for this moment (see Hebrews 5:7–8).

At the conference where I first heard this, Dallas went on to explain how we could develop such supernaturally natural and easy responses. He explained that this kind of embodied willful action comes about only by a deliberate and protracted practice of training. Upon hearing Dallas explain this, a conference participant who is a personal friend of the professional golfer Tom Lehman leaned over to me. Hardly able to contain his excitement, he said, “That’s what Tom says about his golf swing when he is in the groove and has practiced well—he doesn’t even think about his swing, how he grips the club, eye on the ball, shoulder down, just like all the instructors tell beginning and advanced golfers—none of that is in his mind; it is just what comes out of his body without even thinking!”
The Rule of Life Lesson: Ruling Your Own Pile of Dirt

As I continued to learn from Dallas, I was taken up with his vision of training and the kind of life he painted as possible. But how could I lose my present life and gain a kingdom-sized one in which Jesus ruled? Is there a “rule of life”—a set of practices, relationships, experiences, and responses to life’s circumstances—that can help me to allow God rule in my life?

Dallas taught that if we brought our lives into apprenticeship with Jesus as our teacher, he would teach us to rule in Kingdom life, and he introduced me to the concept of rules of life that would allow one to rule in life. He referred to “rules” such as those of St. Benedict and others and made the concept of ruling in Kingdom life practical for their times. Another Dallasism that made this biblical and medieval concept contemporary was his question about one’s personal experience of God’s rule in the realm of our own bodies: “So how is it in your Kingdom today?”

I had a friend in grade school who had a strange practice that he and his younger brother engaged in. Occasionally they would take all their stuff, their toys, sports equipment, games, and other prized possessions and put them into two piles to see who had the most stuff. Whoever had the most stuff ruled. The winner was the family’s “King of Stuff.” In the Bible whatever stuff (people, places, and things) over which God’s rule is present and active is called the kingdom of God. In effect, where he does not rule is a rival kingdom. Since we do not have kingdoms or kings and queens, we need examples, like my friend’s strange practice, to understand what is meant by God’s kingdom.

If you were to list all the stuff in your life, not just material things but your whole being—spiritual, relational, physical, and emotional—and sort it into two piles, one ruled over by Christ and you, and one ruled by sin and the world, what would be in each pile? Who would be the king of your stuff? When we talk about life in the kingdom of God, we are talking about placing all our stuff under the rule of God. God’s kingdom is where his will is effective, where it is done. To pray “Thy kingdom come” is to ask God to reign not only over our planet but also over us—our minds, bodies, and relationships. He has given us a will that, when submitted to his rule, makes our lives and bodies places where his kingdom comes alive.

Though we may experience an initial and often remarkable work of God’s power in an area of our life, there remains much more ground to be taken. It is God’s will that our whole being—body, mind, heart, and relationships—be transformed, area by area, until he rules over all. To have this happen we need rigorous training and much practice over our lifetime. Such training requires the interruption of our current routines, the habits that got us into the kind of life we now have. The reason many Christians have such little power to rule over their bodies is that they have never undergone training. In fact, most do not know they need it. Sadly, believers are discouraged with the Christian life because no one has offered to train them to live it fully. I know; I was one of them.
My brother was a wrestler in high school. We all knew that when wrestling season came, his whole routine would undergo serious changes. They even affected our family routines. This did not mean he merely practiced each day after school. But his eating and sleeping, his daily mental preparation, his schedule—in short, his everyday life was turned upside down and oriented to wrestling. His coach laid down some rules that definitely transformed his daily life. To have a hope of winning a match and of making it to state competition, to that final championship match, he would have to submit to his coach’s rule for his life.

As I began to pursue my own transformation, Dallas’s teaching about disciplines and training reminded me of my brother’s training regimen. It was called a “rule of life,” a set of activities and directions that would help bring my life, my body, my pile of dirt under God’s rule. To begin to construct a rule of life, I needed to look at what kind of life my practices, relationships, experiences, and responses were giving me and who I was becoming. I discovered that all of us already have a rule of life, a set of activities and practices that form our present life. It is just not as intentional or conscious to us as the rule of life I am suggesting.

Dallas had whetted my appetite for a life that was enjoyable, desirable. The life I had and my rule were not to my liking. Those who love Christ should really like their lives. If we do not, it is a sign that our lives are not Christ’s. I gradually developed the set of questions below to help me discern the kind of life I wanted:

- Who am I becoming? Do I like this?
- What are the regular practices or habits I have given myself to?
- What relationships do I cultivate? Do they affect my life for good or bad?
- What kind of experiences and states of being am I cultivating regularly?
- What are my responses to life’s circumstances? How are these contributing to the kind of person I am becoming?
- What kind of life do I have as a result of these practices, relationships, experiences, and responses? Is it one that others would want?
- Who is God calling me to become?
- What changes is God calling me to make to reach the life he wants for me?

My practices of prayer and Scripture were not nourishing—I rushed through them as a duty so I could minister while medicating myself with destructive habits. I needed to slow down and learn to be with God in my practices. My relationships were almost entirely about church work, serving my ambition for success while neglecting my family—too busy and self-absorbed to be close to others. My experiences in ministry activities drained me and began to define my worth in pleasing people and performance. My response to my life’s circumstances was to become so busy and driven that I
lived on the surface of my life. I was numb and quietly despaired of becoming different.

When Dallas woke me up from my driven pace, I found that I did not like my life, my family did not want it, and I was becoming someone I did not want to be. On top of all this, I had to face the fact that in many areas of life, I just did not want to or intend to become what I should in Christ. I was too used to what I had become. So I needed to start where I was, asking Jesus first to help me want what I needed to trust him to help me become.

As I looked hard at the previous list of questions and came up with answers, I eventually developed a basic four-part personal rule of life that God used to put me under his rule and eventually came up with a corporate rule of life for use in groups. In reading what Dallas has suggested in his books and lectures, he introduced me to communities and leaders who demonstrated through their writings but also in their stories the power of a common rule of life and the kind of powerful influence these groups have had in history. Such corporate rules of life have been the secret for the formation of powerful communities of transformation throughout history such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* and Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*. These men were formed by community rules of life powerful enough to counteract the drag of our broken world. And others were caught up in their transformed lives.

### Practical Lessons: Taking a Virtue Walk and Care Casting

Dallas often refers to what he calls the signature passage explaining the process of formation into Christlikeness, 2 Peter 1, and it is explained in chapter 12 of *Renovation of the Heart*. As Dallas suggested, I memorized this passage and meditated on it and found that God had given me a way to walk on water in areas of my life where I applied the processes and truths of this passage. Dallas said this formation was critical for power in partnering with Jesus so we would become “effective and productive” (2 Peter 1:8) and in another Dallasism I often heard, he warned us “not to ask for more power in ministry than we had the character to handle.”

A “Virtue Walk” is one of the training exercises I have developed to cooperate with Jesus for specific life change and powerful partnering in ministry. It began in my own life as I, like Peter, tried to “walk on water” or have power over areas of my life. It is based on 2 Peter 1:1–10, which tells

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us that in Jesus we have all we need to participate in life and godliness, and can escape the corruption found in our culture. It says . . .

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness; mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if any of you do not have them, you are nearsighted and blind, and you have forgotten that you have been cleansed from your past sins. 6

The passage says that our cleansing from sin has the added benefit of power over sin and a good and virtuous life. Verses 10–11 say that we are to make every effort to do these things, and we will not stumble, but become productive and effective in loving others, even enemies, as Jesus did. Those who live like this will find a “rich welcome” in the kingdom. A “Virtue Walk” develops a picture of transformation in specific areas of my life and requires careful training plans to accomplish it. Dallas challenged us to envision what goodness would look like in particular areas of our lives, not just some vague spirituality:

Money: If I were out of control in spending and full of greed, what would it be like to be content and free to be generous with what I have?

Sex: If I were a slave to lust, what would it look like to be uninterested in lustful fantasies and to be intimate with others without lust?

Prayerfulness: If I were going through my days without much of God’s presence and partnering, what would it look like to know his voice, to sense his mind on things, to know that he is with me—like a best friend sitting beside me and ready to engage me at a moment’s notice?

Anger or control: If I were angry and controlling, what would it look like to be able to put away anger quickly and to trust others and God for outcomes, rather than manipulate things or people to meet my idea of what is best?

Fear or worry: If I were living in fear or worried about some matter, what would it be like to be able to trust God’s provision for that area and be peaceful, no matter what was happening?

Contempt or Hatred of an Enemy: If I were in the grasp of contempt for someone at work, a workmate, client or customer, a member of my family or neighbor, what would it look like to be able to bless

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6 2 Peter 1:5–9, Today’s New International Version.
and work for the betterment of that person genuinely and freely, not with condescension but with true humility and agape love?

I broke the Virtue Walk down into the various components, identifying a recurring thought, feeling, attitude, behavior or habit of sin to be transformed. Besides having a clear vision of a good outcome in my life, I would also need to develop a strong intention or willingness to obey or at least to admit my lack of intention and ask for God to help me intend what he wanted for me.

Then I developed an actual plan of practices and training exercises to do in that specific area of life. This involved finding the appropriate spiritual disciplines that would put me in a place where God could rewire my internal and external life. As I became an apprentice of Jesus, the training in these disciplines reformed the reactions and habits of particular parts of my body. With lots of trial and error, all smothered in God’s grace and mercy, I expected Jesus to bring some real and tangible goodness to my life—but in his time and in his way.

One particular practice I developed to eliminate worry is “care casting.” My worry has decreased and has been replaced with patience and rest when circumstances do not go my way. There are still aspects of my wiring for worry that set me to fretting, but I also know how to recover from this and find peace by what I call “care casting.” Due to Dallas’s admonition, I take seriously the verses “Do not be anxious about anything” (Phlm 4:6) and “Casting all your care upon him . . .” (1 Pt 5:7, KVJ), finding peace in obediently trusting God’s care for me, which guards my heart and mind.

If there is something that concerns me, I just keep on giving it to Jesus in prayer, and I have learned to keep from taking it back into my consciousness. When it does show up, I just give it back up to God. After a while I actually lose the worry to God, and he keeps it from harassing me. I catch his peace in the process by continually being present to God rather than to my worry or fear. When I guard myself against my cares, I replace the presence of worry with Jesus himself, and in the process I am caught up in his peace.

My son loves to fish, and he always reminds me when we are bass fishing that the lure has to be in the water to catch fish. The fish will not find the lure if it is in the boat. I also have found that to catch peace I need to keep casting my concerns and requests, my cares, into God’s hands. As Dallas predicted, the remarkable thing about these exercises is that when we work on one area of our life, say, worry or contempt, it has incredible crossover effects on other areas. Working on one area brings one’s whole body into a process of training for obedience. I intended to act differently in one area and asked God to work my intention into my body for every area. Romans 12:1–2 became a prayer for me.

I offer my body to you, Jesus, as a living sacrifice. Set it apart from worry, anger, rage, and contempt, and make it acceptable to you. This only makes sense in view of how you have poured yourself out on me with mercy after mercy. Let me not be molded any longer by the world, but transform
me totally by changing the way I think and feel about everything in my life. Make me living proof of your kingdom life in my very body.

The View From Dallas’s Shoulders

Dallas Willard has called Evangelicals back to the ancients and their practice of the forgotten disciplines of silence, solitude, reflective reading of Scripture, and unceasing prayer, fasting, etc., and their vision of the kind of life these can produce. We who have learned from him stand on his shoulders looking for how to build on his work.

Dallas rightly calls us to a formation that must start in the hearts of individuals. It cannot become corporate until it is personalized, as illustrated in the figures of cultural transformation Dallas points us to, such as Anthony of the Desert, Francis of Assisi, or John Wesley, individuals who reformed the corporate culture out of their own experience. But as I have read these authors, they call me to consider how the corporate aspect of formation—specifically the Body of Christ and the ordinances or sacraments—figures in our formation, although the institutional forms of Church can be a fallen “power,” and these practices can become deadly ritualistic substitutes for personal appropriation of the life of Jesus.

I believe that we Evangelicals need to go further, standing on the shoulders of Dallas and others, and expand our privatized formational paradigm to recover that heritage and explore the truth of what contemporary Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas explores in his book *Being as Communion* and Simon Chan explains and applies to formation in his book *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community*. The practices of worship, specifically those of the word and communion, are not just the marks of the church, but “are the determinative means by which the Spirit constitutes the church.”

Worship forms the One Body of Christ, a community which in turn forms the individual parts, such as you and me.

Whether you are low or high church, I believe it is true that we become what we worship and how we worship, a very powerful aspect of formation. If we have a poor and inadequate ecclesiology and worship practice, we will have a weakened expression of church and, in turn, less fully formed individual members of the Body.

In my read of Dallas’s writing and teaching, the Church, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper make their appearance almost anonymously in the practices of fellowship, service, worship, etc., and in the context of our personal practice rather than as powerful practices of the One Body of Christ. They do not figure as prominent components of his formational structure al-

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though Dallas makes clear in his writings the critical nature of the church in formation.

Those who know Dallas say that he does not include these because his primary focus is on apprenticeship to Jesus in the model of the “on the ground” Gospel accounts of rabbi Jesus and his disciples and the undeveloped ecclesiology and sacramental worship of that group of wandering apprentices and their master. But Jesus’ use and transformation of the worship practices of Israel figured into that group’s formation.

The Church and worship-life figure prominently in the catholic ancients and the Wesleyan corpus Dallas recommends, as well as the church fathers he cites. This was an aspect of formation that was once there for Evangelicals and is found in most of our church history, whether high or low.

Dallas has helped to restore much of the living tradition that the church once had, and wisely started with individual formation. The trouble is that this may not go far enough to address the current Evangelical weaknesses and blind spots in regard to the role of the church and worship in communal, versus just privatized, formation.

Perhaps it remains for his apprentices to develop his work, and his gift was to call us all back to the necessary personal and individual appropriation of Christ’s life. If this is not addressed, I am afraid that the formation movement in North America, one that has so much potential to revive the heart of Evangelicalism, will just limp along on one privatized leg, not getting its full stride by adding the corporate leg as well, or may be fatally crippling.

On another subject, the humanity of Jesus, Dallas has some nontraditional views of Jesus’ experiences which I did not agree with at first, but they had continually intrigued me, and I now have come to affirm and illustrate what also needs to be expanded from what Dallas is teaching.

I have come to discern that many of us Evangelicals have a docetic Jesus, who is not as fully human as Dallas’s Jesus, who he claims was the smartest human being who ever lived. We need to take Dallas’s view of Jesus very seriously to challenge the gap most of us have in regard to the kind of maturity we can see God bring about for us in our imitation of Jesus.

One example of this view of Jesus is the way Jesus faced the suffering of his cross and the anguish in Gethsemane. What was the nature of the “cup” Jesus asked the Father to let pass from him and the nature of his Gethsemane agony? Dallas takes the unusual and unheard-of (at least in my experience at that time) position that the “cup” was his being hijacked from his goal, kept from dying on the cross of Roman execution. He was so fully matured that he was praying to be protected not from death itself, or the suffering for our sin on the cross, but from being ambushed somewhere out of public view or dying in any way short of the public shame of being a “cursed one, who is hung on a tree,” fully facing into the sin, guilt, and shame of it all, in front of the whole world.

But in my reading of Origen, Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea, I find that they too held the view Dallas did, but with much more vigor and detail,
hypothesizing how his death would be powerless if anywhere but on a cross, lifted up. Ouch . . . I am glad I never challenged Dallas on that one, as I did on the Peace Train!

CONCLUSION

My last thanks for Dallas has to do with how Dallas has helped many of us in discovering our calling and gifts. Over the years, as I would share what I was learning, he would gently suggest, “Keith, you should really write down these things Jesus is teaching you.” I protested that I was “writing on the hearts of people,” not in books—adding, without realizing how pompous it sounded, that “Jesus never wrote a book.” Dallas rejoined that he never sought to be published, but writing was a way of partnering with God, developing and getting these things deep into his soul.

Finally, one year later and with God’s clear direction for me to write, but not yet taking the time to do so, he said, “Now, as your spiritual grandfather, you must really attend to the writing of these things.” I now love writing, and my final thanks to Dallas is for his empowering and his calling out God’s potential in so many of us.

One of my favorite new “Dallasisms” is this piece of advice he gave me when I got my first book contract: “Just remember, Keith, you are just a ‘donkey’ pulling the Jesus cart.” I pray that I might be able follow the example Dallas has embodied for me, a humble yet bold pulling of that Jesus cart.

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