

KINGDOM APPRENTICESHIP

Dallas Willard's Formational Theology and Missional Vision

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ONE

REDISCOVERING WILLARD

I HAVE FOUR MAJOR claims about Dallas Willard, which gave rise to this book. First, he should be understood as a theologian of the Christian life, putting him in good company with ancient theologians but in a minority among contemporaries. Although a remarkable thinker and competent in multiple domains of knowledge, in the final analysis Willard is essentially practice-oriented rather than theory-oriented. Yet that is not to say his work belongs solely in the field of “practical theology,” as it is understood today. Rather, it is to say that he is first and foremost interested in how we live as Christians, and he uses all theoretical resources available to get to this question—which means he does not belong with the systematicians either. Modern theology has increasingly become an intellectual exercise confined to academic institutions, detached from the practical realities of life. Though promising efforts to integrate theology and real living exist, they remain exceptions rather than the rule. In much of the academy, theology is treated primarily as an object of study rather than a way of life. But for Willard, all theology should be *clinical* theology, aimed at helping people flourish by knowing and growing in Christ. In this, he has much in common with the patristics and other “doctors” of the church who viewed theology as therapeutic and as medicine for the soul.

Second, Willard’s theory of spiritual formation represents a lifetime of thinking deeply on the theological and phenomenological dynamics of personal transformation, with much to offer today. It

deserves careful study and analysis, as well as comparison with the work of other theologians to identify what is unique and significant about his approach. There is a critical need for the American church to devote more attention to the doctrine of sanctification, especially given the crisis of character currently experienced in the church and society. Willard's formational theology can greatly contribute to this task.

Third, Willard's approach to formation reflects a profound understanding of the relationship between divine grace and human action that is participatory yet not Pelagian.¹ The extreme anxiety over works righteousness shared by many modern Protestant thinkers has significantly contributed to the development of a reductionistic soteriology and corresponding intellectualist approach to spirituality prevalent in Western Christianity. Willard's paradigm of formation, with its interplay of heart and habits, virtue and action, and emphasis on active apprenticeship to Jesus, serves as an important corrective. Moreover, this relationship between grace and human effort extends to his understanding of vocation and ministry. Participation in God's divine conspiracy—his master plan to overcome evil with goodness—is surely an effort, but it is an effort that opens us to God's grace. It is not about merit but rather a spiritual discipline of increasing dependence on God.

Fourth, Willard's theory of formation is inherently missional—an aspect that has not been recognized or appreciated even by those who most admire his work. By *missional*, I mean participation in the triune God's ongoing work to redeem and renew the world. Much of the spiritual formation literature within Protestantism over the past fifty years has lacked a missional framework for spirituality and sanctification. Considering Willard was a major figure in what has come to be known as the spiritual formation movement, it may come as a surprise to learn there is a missional thread that runs throughout his

¹Pelagianism is the belief that salvation or moral transformation can be achieved without God's enabling grace.

theory. He sees spiritual formation as part of God's mission but also as necessary for God's mission. Thus, when truly understood, Willard's formational theology is both a practical curriculum for Christ-likeness and a crucial strategy for the church's mission.

DISCOVERING AND REDISCOVERING

This last claim was my initial impetus for researching Willard's work. But that came later in my story. First, let me describe how I discovered Willard—and then, years later, rediscovered him.

As a sophomore in college I was given a copy of Richard Foster's *The Celebration of Discipline*. The book did wonders for my faith, as it introduced me to a host of past luminaries and guided me into the practice of ancient spiritual disciplines. But another consequence was that it piqued my interest in this philosopher “Dr. Dallas Willard,” whom Foster describes in his introduction.² So the next time I was at the bookstore, I went looking for a book by Willard and found *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. The year was 2002, and looking back on my copy now, I see that I initially only made it through a couple of chapters before skipping to one near the end that surveys the classical spiritual disciplines. (The dead giveaway is the pink highlighter, a relic from an era when I thought marking up a book meant attacking it with neon.) If I'm being perfectly honest, most of the book went over my head, which is why I didn't read it cover to cover. I wasn't yet ready for all Willard had to offer. At some point, after hearing much ado about Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*, I added it to my library as well, but it remained unread—a grievous but all-too-common sin of many book lovers.

Fast-forward a decade to when I was pastoring a small church in Miami. A spiritual rhythm of mine then and still now is to go every few months on what I call a “desert day,” an entire day outside my zip

²Luckily for me, my copy of *Celebration of Discipline* was the 20th anniversary edition (1998), which includes a new introduction wherein Foster explicitly names Willard as a major influence for the book.

code for prayer, reading Scripture, and simply being in the presence of God. Now, you should know that I love theology—which will become apparent in this book—and I can happily disappear down a rabbit hole of doctrine with the best of them. But desert days are for knowing God, not merely knowing about God (a vital distinction), so I often bring along a book that deepens my friendship with God or invites deeper attentiveness to his presence and voice. A friend had suggested Willard’s book *Hearing God*, which I brought with me on my next desert day.

I did not expect to find such profundity in the book—and with a quietly winsome touch. Willard explained how divine knowing is possible, even in a skeptical and secular age such as ours, and he seamlessly wove—so it seemed to me—the biblical account of those who walked with God into practical guidance for us today. This motivated me to pull *Divine Conspiracy* off my shelf, which I quickly devoured—or, considering its weight, both literal and theological, as “quickly” as one can. I was amazed and quite moved by, among other things, Willard’s commonsense Christology. He described Jesus as not only Lord but brilliant. Reading about how this first-century Palestinian Jew is the smartest person who has ever lived—about how Jesus is Master because he is Maestro—made me fall in love with Jesus all over again.

Soon I was working through Willard’s *Renovation of the Heart*, struck by the clarity with which he describes human personhood and how, by God’s grace, it might be transformed through what I’ve come to call kingdom apprenticeship—learning to live as a student of Jesus under the reign of God. Coming full circle, I now returned to *Spirit of the Disciplines*—but this time I was prepared for its depth. In these writings on spirituality, Willard clearly has scholarly chops. Yet he labors to translate his ideas for people in the pews, not theologians in the towers.

Somewhere along the way, I discovered his short essay “A Cup Running Over” in, of all places, a volume on preaching.³ Dynamite comes in small packages, and I still return to this small gem—perhaps my single favorite piece by Willard—every six months or so for my own edification. That essay is a fitting example of how Willard’s work has shaped me both personally and pastorally. Differentiating between the two is difficult. Furthermore, it is unnecessary—at least from Willard’s perspective. A key conviction of his is that the most important thing we get out of life, far surpassing any work or leadership roles we might have, is the person we become. (This is also, he believes, the most important thing God gets out of our life.)

Now, as a pastor striving to form mature disciples engaged in God’s work in the world, I constantly encountered a tension in the church between the inner and outer life, a tendency to favor either personal spiritual growth or missional activity at the expense of the other. Should we focus on contemplative practices that foster connection with God and growth in Christlikeness or on missional living that extends God’s love and invitation to others? For the former, I read literature from the spiritual formation movement; for the latter, I explored works by those associated with missional Christianity. But there was little to no overlap between the two—a gap I observed not only in our local congregation but also more broadly in the American church.

Through reading Willard, however, I sensed that he somehow bridged this divide. Although at the time I did not yet fully comprehend how this was worked out in his theology, I found a companion in my desire to combine discipleship and spiritual formation with vocation and missional consciousness.

³Dallas Willard, “A Cup Running Over,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Zondervan, 2005), 71-73.

THE JOURNEY BEHIND THIS BOOK

In 2016 I became, quite unexpectedly, a full-time theology professor. Even though I did not seek out this change (my journey to the academy was quite unorthodox), I had for some time felt called to both pastoral and academic work. Yet transitioning from the church to the classroom did not diminish my engagement with Willard's work. In fact, it only increased it, as I found a companion once again—this time in terms of a pastor becoming a professor, a path Willard took in the 1960s. As a newly minted professor, I immersed myself in his reflections on the current state of higher education, the disappearance of moral knowledge, the need for a renewal of the Christian mind, and the philosophical texture underneath his spiritual writings, as well as the vision behind his calling as both a university teacher and a minister of the gospel—a vocational understanding that continues to inform my own.

As mentioned, when I was pastoring I had an intuitive sense that Willard somehow resolved the tension between spiritual formation and missional living. Following that hunch, I embarked on a research project in which I systematically worked through his entire body of work. In the process, I came to see just how valuable his formational theology is for the church today. His account of spiritual growth in Christlikeness is not only cohesive and comprehensive but also permeated with missionary logic. The aim of God in human history, says Willard, is the formation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons who will one day share in God's governance of the cosmos. Our present life, then, is the training ground for becoming the kind of people—characterized above all by *agapē* love—whom God can entrust with that responsibility. This is the missional vision that sits firmly behind his formational theology.

The intimate connection between formation and mission may have been what first drew me to engage more deeply with Willard, but once the keg was tapped, a continuous flow of insights from his thought

followed. For instance, his metaphysic of grace is unlike anything I had encountered in my study of modern theology. This metaphysic, however, is predicated on a profound doctrine of God, which seamlessly connects to a relational epistemology that makes intimate knowing of God possible—a knowing that is inherently transformative. Further, Willard’s ecclesiology and theory of societal transformation, both largely unexplored until now, proved more robust than I had imagined. They emerge naturally from his understanding of personal transformation and align closely with his vision of salvation history and God’s ultimate purposes for humanity.

The book you are holding represents seven years of research. To truly comprehend Willard’s thought, I read everything he published in theology and spirituality and all his major philosophical writings, listened to hundreds of his recorded lectures and sermons, and spent multiple weeks in the basement of Westmont College’s library studying his unpublished papers and notes.⁴ I want to take you on a journey through what I discovered. That may sound like an odd way to introduce a scholarly book of theology, but this truly is a journey. It traverses his philosophical and churchly concerns, pinpoints the areas he identified as most crucial for human transformation in the Spirit, reveals the biblical and theological underpinnings of his paradigm, and brings together those findings to reflect on the relevance of his approach to formation for the church today.

Along the way, I also explore potential weaknesses in his formation theory and how they might be overcome. For Willard to be engaged

⁴I reference many of these unpublished works throughout this study, all of which are available in the Dallas Willard Collection at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California. In footnotes, I provide abbreviated citations (typically title and date); full details are listed in the bibliography. A note about how audio and video recordings of Willard are cited in this study: Because the full bibliographic information of these recordings is usually much lengthier than that of books or articles, in footnotes I provide the recording’s title, date, and format (MP3 or video) the first time it is cited in each chapter. I also provide a time mark when quoting or referencing a particular discussion in a talk. In the rare case that multiple talks have the same title, I provide the talk’s date each time it is cited. Full details of the recordings are provided in the bibliography.

constructively by theologians moving forward, the study of his thought must also include critical analysis. That said, I will go ahead and lay my cards on the table. Although certain areas of his model may need further development, I believe you will find that Willard’s formational theology presents a sophisticated account of personal transformation in the Spirit with a rather sharp missional edge, one that is incredibly important in our cultural moment. And it is a theology that, as my own story shows, warms the heart while informing the mind.⁵

WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT

Since this is a study of Willard’s theology of spiritual formation, it is helpful to explain as briefly as possible what we are talking about when we talk about spiritual formation in Christ—at least in this book. Let me first delineate between a Christian understanding of spirituality and spiritual formation, since the two are intimately connected but different in critical ways. While Christian spirituality has a broad designation, encompassing all of one’s relationship with the triune God, *Christian spiritual formation* is a more refined term referring to a particular dynamic within Christian spirituality.⁶ Willard describes it as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world

⁵I say this at the risk of sounding sentimental. But it is a risk worth taking, since the gap between serious theological inquiry and heartfelt adoration of God is one more divide I hope to bridge—as did Willard. In this, he certainly is not alone. For instance, Jonathan Edwards argued that a truth is not fully known until one experiences the affections appropriate for such truth, while John Wesley believed Christian scholarship must seek not only *light* but also *heat* if it is to be true to its design.

⁶See Tom Schwanda, “Formation, Spiritual,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Zondervan, 2011), 452. Historically, the language of *spiritual formation* was primarily used in the Roman Catholic tradition, where it referred to one of the four core areas of training for priests prior to ordination, alongside human, intellectual, and pastoral formation. Protestant seminaries later adopted this language to emphasize character development and the nurturing of spiritual and emotional life, in addition to theological education. Only in recent times has the term come to be widely understood as an essential aspect of maturing in the Christian life, applicable to all believers, rather than merely a teaching tool for preparing individuals for church ministry. As a case in point, “spiritual formation” does not appear as an entry in the original *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (1983) but was added in the *New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (2005).

of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁷

Of course, spiritual formation is hardly exclusive to Christians. As spiritual beings, our interiority is continually being shaped in one direction or another, whether we are intentional about it or even aware of it.⁸ Yet Christian spiritual formation is laser-focused on the process of *becoming like the person of Christ*—which requires nothing less than transformation of the human spirit. As a domain of theological reflection, it includes all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended to foster spiritual growth and further Christian maturity. So, while Christian spirituality is a broader subject dealing with our relationship with God in general, it embraces Christian spiritual formation, with its sharp focus on character transformation in Christlikeness, as a cornerstone of its vision.⁹

Christian spiritual formation is thus sometimes described as character transformation. *Character* has been defined in a variety of ways in theological-ethical literature, but it generally refers to the settled dispositions that a person possesses or, perhaps more accurately, is possessed by, since they largely dictate a person’s choices and behaviors. For Willard, “spiritual formation is character formation” since, in the Christian tradition, “it is the process of establishing the character of Christ in the person.”¹⁰ Yet some scholars distinguish between spiritual, characterological, and moral formation while maintaining that these different dimensions of growth are

⁷Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (NavPress, 2002), 22. Willard was fond of italics, but to streamline the reading and avoid unintended overemphasis, I occasionally omit them. Any italics that remain are his, and those I have added are noted accordingly.

⁸Adrian van Kaam insists that all human formation is spiritual formation since the spiritual dimension, as a gift from God, is the unique, defining characteristic of being human. See van Kaam, *Fundamental Formation* (Crossroad, 1989), 13-14, 243.

⁹See Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Brazos, 2008), 23-24.

¹⁰Dallas Willard, interview by Agnieszka Tennant, “The Making of the Christian: Richard J. Foster and Dallas Willard on the Difference Between Discipleship and Spiritual Formation,” *Christianity Today* 49, no. 10 (2005): 42.

interconnected.¹¹ While acknowledging the usefulness of making these conceptual distinctions when describing the comprehensive and diverse nature of Christian spiritual formation, in this book a singular and synthetic understanding of spiritual formation is assumed that encompasses all three notions of formation. Thus, throughout this study it is taken for granted that genuine spiritual change also brings about genuine character and moral change, and Christian spiritual formation is concerned with all of these changes.

It is also important to delineate between Christian spiritual formation and *discipleship*, another set of interrelated terms. Historically, both refer to the process of becoming conformed to Christ's image through obedience to Jesus and imitating his way of life, by means of being with him and learning under his care and direction. In modern usage, *Christian spiritual formation* commonly designates the academic study of this process, whereas *discipleship* signifies the actual, on-the-ground practice of it. For the purposes of this study, then, discipleship will be defined simply as the act of following Jesus by obeying his teachings and patterning one's life after him. Christian spiritual formation explains what happens to a person's character through discipleship, the process one undergoes when apprenticing oneself to Jesus. Discipleship is a *status* of relational activity, while spiritual formation is the *process* experienced in that status.¹²

In the spiritual formation literature, the terminology *apprenticeship to Jesus* is often used interchangeably with *discipleship to Jesus*, largely due to Willard's influence. Indeed, *apprentice* is a primary term for Willard, and in *Renovation of the Heart* alone the word appears

¹¹Steven L. Porter et al., "Measuring the Spiritual, Character, and Moral Formation of Seminarians: In Search of a Meta-Theory of Spiritual Change," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 12, no. 1 (2019): 5-24. See also Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation* (SCM Press, 2014), 3-42.

¹²Dallas Willard, "Christian Discipleship and the Mission to the World: Churches and World Leadership" (January 8, 2010), video, 40:45. See also Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (IVP Academic, 2010), 54, 58.

fifty-nine times, though he is not the first to emphasize the medieval apprentice model for understanding the disciple-rabbi relationship Jesus had with the Twelve.¹³

Lastly, a word should be said about the correlation between Christian spiritual formation and *sanctification*, the doctrine of growth in Christian holiness. Although there are subtle conceptual nuances between the two terms, some of which will surface later in my treatment of Willard's theology, they have the same fundamental referent since we are talking about *Christian* spiritual formation. In this book, then, the terms are treated as synonymous. One important difference, though, which I have mentioned, is that spiritual formation per se is not uniquely Christian; it is a human phenomenon. Regardless of a person's faith or lack thereof, spiritual formation is always taking place. Sanctification, by contrast, more narrowly refers to the nature of spiritual growth in a Christian's life from the time of regeneration until the time of glorification.¹⁴ The language of Christian spiritual formation thus reminds us this is one particular direction in which the human spirit can be formed—and if not in this direction, it will certainly be formed in another direction. There are many lords and spirits and powers, after all. Sanctification simply does not convey this same universal scope; however, it bears repeating that Christian spiritual formation and sanctification refer to the same reality but from different vantage points. Therefore, to stress the ubiquitous experience of spiritual formation—and because I am

¹³For an earlier example, see Aaron Milavec, *To Empower as Jesus Did: Acquiring Spiritual Power Through Apprenticeship* (Edwin Mellen, 1982). Willard also uses the more common nomenclature of *disciple* but prefers *apprentice* since (in his view) the contemporary meaning of *disciple* often denotes merely an assent to particular doctrines about Jesus—roughly the equivalent of *believer*—rather than an intentional and persistent learning to live like Jesus through being with Jesus. As he explains, “I like the word *apprentice* because of the connotation of *applied knowledge*. So we have apprentices in practical fields because we all know that it's one thing to have it in your head and another thing to have it in your hands.” Dallas Willard, “The Good Life and the Good Person Made Real by Jesus: Rethinking the ‘Sermon on the Mount’” (October 10, 2008), MP3, 20:45.

¹⁴Steven L. Porter, “On the Renewal of Interest in the Doctrine of Sanctification: A Methodological Reminder,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 3 (2002): 416.

chiefly concerned with its Christian expression—*spiritual formation* and *formation* in this book imply Christian spiritual formation, unless otherwise specified.

In summary, *spirituality* refers to how a person or community relates to and interacts with transcendent reality. For Christians, this transcendent reality is understood as the triune God. *Spiritual formation*, a narrower term, pertains to how a person's or community's spiritual core (inner life) and character are being shaped. And *Christian spiritual formation* pertains to how this spiritual core and character are being shaped in the image of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the glory of God, which takes place through discipleship to Jesus.

CHARTING THE COURSE

Since I have described this book as a journey, allow me to guide you through what lies ahead. To begin, I provide a brief biographical sketch of Willard (chap. 2) to shed light on the unique shape of his vocation, the distinctive character of his theological writings, and his impact on the church. Given the rather unusual source materials we have at our disposal for researching his thought, I also describe and categorize his corpus to help the reader comprehend its diverse parts.

The heart of this book (chaps. 3–10) delves into the core themes within Willard's formational theology and missional vision. More specifically, I critically examine eight themes of his theory of spiritual formation, teasing out its latent missional logic. These themes are not isolated but interwoven, reflecting the holistic nature of his thought and its implications for personal transformation and the church's mission; they are thus clustered together in three parts.

Part one lays the groundwork with the teleological and epistemic convictions that anchor Willard's theory. Central to his approach, and running throughout, is the eschatological concept of training for reigning (chap. 3), which suggests the ultimate purpose of Christian formation. From there, we turn to the deeply relational and epistemic

foundations of his theory (chap. 4), which might be described as “intelligent mysticism.”

Part two focuses on Willard’s view of formation proper—the theological and phenomenological dynamics at the core of spiritual transformation. We open with his theological anthropology (chap. 5) and its significance for his approach to formation. This sets the stage for us to explore the dynamic relation between God’s sovereign work and the disciple’s obedient participation in the sanctifying process (chap. 6)—a theologically complex area where Willard’s insights shine. Finally, we consider the pedagogical tools and strategies he developed to help people actively engage in this transformative process (chap. 7).

Part three addresses the broader consequences of spiritual formation, including Willard’s views on the direction and flow of social redemption (chap. 8), the nature and calling of the church (chap. 9), and the logic of evangelism when recast as an invitation to active discipleship (chap. 10).

This journey concludes (in chap. 11) with reflections on how Willard’s formational theology speaks with urgency and clarity to the challenges facing the church in our cultural moment. By the end, I hope you will see not only the depth of his insights but also the transformative potential they hold for both individuals and communities seeking to follow Christ faithfully.

At times in my descriptive treatment of his paradigm, I reference historical theology or contemporary philosophical or theological works for the purpose of comparison or to situate his views within the larger intellectual landscape. But on the whole, I try to keep this to a minimum as my main goal is to describe his theology from the inside out, allowing him to speak for himself before analyzing it by means of others’ views. The bulk of chapters three through ten is devoted to this task. Yet before we approach Willard’s formational theology head-on, we should know more about the man himself and what formed him.

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