

Implications of the Teachings of Dallas Willard for the Vineyard Church

by David Takle

David Takle has a Master of Divinity from Fuller Seminary, and has been studying the works of Dallas Willard for over 20 years. David has written five books on spiritual formation, drawing largely from the inspiration of Dallas, and has also developed a 12-week experiential, interactive course in spiritual formation that has been experienced by nearly 5,800 participants, with many saying it was life-changing and transformative. He has been a Vineyard member since 1997 and was ordained by the Vineyard specifically for the ministry in the area of spiritual formation.

Abstract

Throughout his life and ministry Dallas Willard masterfully presented the message of the New Testament in terms that few Christians have ever heard. His work has been highly instrumental in reintroducing the Christian world to its original mission and launching the current movement in spiritual formation. On close examination, his work is nothing less than a call to re-evangelize the Western world with the good news that Jesus is now taking on apprentices who wish to learn from Him how to live their life the way He would have lived if He were them. This is the gospel of the New Testament, as Willard saw it. And this gospel has monumental implications for every Christian organization that hopes to assist people in their spiritual lives.

This paper will reflect on one of Willard's most salient points – that of making disciples – and identify the primary implications that Willard's theology has for the Vineyard movement.

Full Article

When we consider the teachings of Dallas Willard and what implications they might have for the Vineyard Church, it is worth noting at the outset the extraordinary quality of his work. As a gifted world-class philosopher, he was able to delve into many of the problems facing the Christian world today and offer ground-breaking insights of such depth and clarity that it literally launched an entire movement in spiritual formation.

For example, in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard carefully explains what differentiates life-giving spiritual practices from those that feel empty or pointless. In doing so, he breathes new life into a great number of time-honored practices for spiritual development. With his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas fleshes out his vision of transformation, touching every aspect of the soul and explaining how it is possible to engage with God in ways that help us reliably and confidently take on the character of Jesus. And in *The Divine Conspiracy*, he masterfully weaves together a Kingdom worldview that is breath-taking in both its wisdom and scope.

Most importantly, Dallas succeeded in recovering and restoring for us a vision of Kingdom living and the abundant life that has largely been lost to the modern Church. The message he taught was so refreshing and compelling that for many Christians, encountering Willard's work has been like hearing the gospel clearly for the first time. For example, during the years when Dallas led an annual two week retreat for the doctoral students at Fuller seminary, many would return from that experience profoundly changed. Whereas one might think that students working on their D.Min. would have a firm grasp on fundamental aspects of Christian growth, a few days with Dallas Willard challenged and transformed many of their basic assumptions for the better. And as we acknowledge the tremendous impact Dallas had on the lives of so many, including Richard Foster, John Ortberg and others, it becomes incumbent upon us to look closely at what it was that Willard had to say, as well as how and why it has been so impactful for thousands of people.

In truth, Dallas' work inevitably inspires us to re-evaluate many of our presuppositions about how life works in the Kingdom. In his book *The Great Omission*, Willard discusses the present condition of the Church and finds it to be lacking almost entirely in its *single most important mission* – that of training Christians to become authentic apprentices of Jesus.

In his view, the evangelical right is preaching a truncated version of the gospel that is almost entirely focused on how to go to heaven when we die, while the gospel of the left is primarily concerned with correcting social injustices from the top down,¹ and the charismatic elements of the Church tend to view the apex of the Christian life in terms of how we can experience the gifts of the Spirit today.

1 Dallas Willard, Gary Black, *The Divine Conspiracy Continued* (HarperCollins, 2014), 47

These are all well and good – in so far as they go. But something vital is missing from all three approaches, and that is the New Testament emphasis on a form of discipleship that results in transformation of human character from the inside out. In fact Dallas would say that we cannot live the kind of life we see in the New Testament unless we are first formed into the kind of person who lives that way by nature. We cannot follow Jesus' commands by direct effort, because He raised the bar far beyond what was required by the Old Covenant. According to Dallas, following Jesus means learning how to learn from Him to become a different kind of person. And it is *that process* of spiritual formation that is largely missing from our churches.

Evidence of this problem is visible in nearly every survey of American Christianity. For example, sometime around 2007, the Willow Creek association courageously released the results of their research study titled *Reveal*. Canvassing nearly half a million attendees throughout their extended association of churches, the study brought the leadership to the startling conclusion that *the various ministries of Willow Creek were having almost no impact on the overall spiritual development of their people*. Greg Hawkins, who was Willow Creek's executive pastor at the time, stated that despite having been on staff for over 20 years, he discovered that what was missing from his relationship with God was ... *relationship*.²

Now even though the Vineyard does not follow the Willow Creek model, one has to wonder how an evangelical organization with so many resources at their disposal could miss something so vital as how to help people grow spiritually. At the very least, their study tells us a great deal about how easy it is to substitute busyness and programs for genuine spiritual development, and how we must be willing to engage in serious self-examination from time to time to see what it is we are actually doing.

One of Willard's many striking observations was the fact that we do not really have a choice about whether or not to engage in spiritual formation. We are all being formed all the time, by everything we think and do, everything we encounter, and everything that happens to us. We are even formed by things that we need from God but which are missing in our life. Spiritual formation is simply something that happens to all of us as we live day to day. What Jesus intends for His followers is for us to intentionally direct the ways in which we are being formed, so that over time we actually take on more and more of the character of Jesus.

2 Greg Hawkins, presentation at Life Model Works Annual Gathering 2017

To quote Dallas: "Everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education. The only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one. We need to take a conscious, intentional hand in the development process. We need to understand what the formation of the human spirit is, and how it can best be done as Christ would have it done."³ Anything less than an intentional strategy for spiritual formation will miss the heart of God's purposes for His people, which is for every one of us to grow up in all things. Becoming a true disciple of Jesus is not an intuitive process, nor is it something that we can leave to time and chance. That is why careful training of disciples is so important.

David Benner often asks his audiences what they imagine God feels when He thinks about them. The number one answer that people give is "disappointment".⁴ The fact that this is how a great many Christians believe God perceives them is a major problem, because such perceptions form and shape our soul and place tremendous barriers in our relationship with God. But more to the point, this problem suggests that something is missing in the way the average church is training their people. Because it is simply not possible to learn from Jesus how to live while harboring such false perceptions of God. And it was just these sorts of problems that concerned Dallas greatly.

Most of the discipling efforts we do see in churches are often quite mistaken in regard to the basic nature of discipleship. For example, in most places the ideal Christian life is treated as if it were an ethical or moral standard that we are supposed to live up to, something we can achieve with enough dedication and determination.

I can personally attest to a few rare instances where a very robust approach to inductive Bible study was being taught well. Many of the people in the classes were greatly aided in their efforts to study Scripture, and the insights they gleaned from the text were often quite revelatory. But the last step in the process was always one of trying to figure out how to apply that insight to one's life, as if one could simply choose to do whatever the Bible said to do.

But Willard rejected these kinds of approaches to discipleship. We simply cannot by direct effort do what Jesus asked us to do. Rather, we need to engage with God in ways that shape our inner life so that we actually *become* more like Jesus on the inside, which in turn will enable us to live

3 Willard, *The Great Omission*, 69.

4 David Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 15

differently by nature. As Christians, our hope is to live out of a transformed character rather than by attempting to override our malformed character.

The New Covenant did not simply give us new standards to live up to; it actually did away with the whole process of attempting to conform to basic principles written on paper or stone. The Holy Spirit was not given to enable us to conform to a standard of holiness. Rather, God intends to join relationally with us and personally mentor us in order to reshape us into a different kind of person who lives out of a transformed nature.

Perhaps more than anything else, this is what separates the New Covenant from the Old – the work of God within us to do what we cannot, to write His laws on our heart; to free us from the bondage of evil and self-will, and transform our heart and mind to be more like Christ. Willard actually defines *grace* in those terms. That is, “Grace, is God acting in our lives to accomplish what we cannot do on our own.”⁵ Rescuing a drowning person is an act of grace. Caring for one who is too sick to care for themselves is an act of grace. And God acting to change us from the inside out is an act of grace.

Our task as disciples is to learn how to engage *with* God in ways that allow Him to do what only He can do, to literally change our heart and mind to become more like Jesus. It is through *participating* with God that we can become the kind of person who can love our enemies, return good for evil, be anxious for nothing, and forgive seventy times seven.

To the modern evangelical mind, this talk of spiritual formation leading to transformation often sounds like a foreign language. The Christian world has been teaching and practicing human-driven efforts at spiritual growth for so many generations that we no longer even have a meaningful vocabulary for sanctification or transformation. The very words we use to describe that process have been watered down until we hear something the apostles never imagined; something that has more in common with behavior modification than spiritual formation.

On the other hand, the practical means for engaging with God in ways that actually *do* change our heart and mind are rarely if ever taught in our churches. Again, Dallas takes note: “I know of no current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan and practice for

5 Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (HarperCollins, 2009), 159

teaching people to do 'all things whatsoever I have commanded you.' Very few even regard this as something we should actually try to do, and many think it to be simply impossible."⁶

More than anyone else in the last hundred years, Dallas Willard carefully articulated the nature of this problem of discipleship and what must be done in order to correct our present course. He wrote and taught extensively about authentic apprenticeship to Jesus and how it differs significantly from the common beliefs and practices of our day. His work caught the attention of many very able theologians and Christian educators who are now carrying on this mission of re-evangelizing the Western Church. Yet surprisingly, much of the Christian world is still unfamiliar with either Dallas or the renewed message that he taught.

Clearly, Willard's teachings have *enormous* implications for every corner of the Christian world. We sometimes view Vineyard theology as an amalgamation of the best of evangelical theology and the best of charismatic theology. But if both of those sources were weak in their approach to spiritual formation, then a great deal of work still needs to be done in order to rebuild what was largely missing from those contexts.

According to Dallas, *Kingdom Life is all about engaging with God in an authentic relationship, learning from Jesus how to live my life the way He would live it if He were me.*⁷ More than anything else, the mission God assigned to the Church was to make this way of life known and available to everyone.

Summary

If we stand back and look at the larger picture, Dallas Willard's writings are arguably some of the most powerful and brilliant thoughts ever articulated about the Kingdom of God. And no one else in the last hundred years has so ably and eloquently described the reasons behind the spiritual decline that is taking place within the modern Church. In many respects he was a major prophet for our time.

Yet amazingly, no Christian denomination has significantly altered its course to correct this deficiency. A few churches here and there have made attempts to do so, and a powerful para-

6 Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 73.

7 Dallas Willard, *The Renovation of the Heart*, 241

church movement has risen up as a result of Willard's work. But we have yet to see a single protestant denomination incorporate Willard's teachings into its core values and to provide their members a clear and accessible path toward inner transformation.

The Western Christian Church as it stands today is desperately in need of a Second Reformation. And if the Church hopes to survive the next hundred years, we must make every effort to take on the work of training Christians everywhere how to become active apprentices to Jesus. To that end, Willard has blazed a trail and pointed us back to the practices that lead to life.

Jesus came to earth to destroy the works of the enemy, and that includes the work that needs to be done in each and every one of us. Jesus went far beyond relieving the suffering caused by evil; His intent was *to destroy evil itself*, and to involve all of His followers in that process, both within their personal lives as well as in their surrounding contexts. And as Dallas observed, that vision has all but disappeared from our churches.

My prayer is that the Vineyard would not only embrace the teachings of Dallas Willard, but that we would eventually become a Christian denomination known primarily for helping people discover a way of life that goes deeper than we could ever ask, imagine, or think, that leads to on-going, life-long spiritual development and transformation.