

Dallas Willard

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Dallas Willard (1935–) was born in Buffalo, Missouri, on September 4, 1935, and grew up in comparatively poor surroundings. He was married to L. Jane Lakes in 1955, and they have reared two children, John Samuel and Rebecca.

Early on, a life of teaching and scholarship drew Dallas into his chosen field of philosophy. He has taught at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Southern California (his present position) and over the years has distinguished himself as a foremost interpreter of the philosophy of Husserl and, in particular, that philosophic system known as “phenomenology.”

Dr. Willard is a distinguished philosopher with over thirty publications. He is also a man of deep faith and Christian conviction. While he can hold his own among any of the great thinkers of our day, I (R. Foster) am most impressed watching him share gospel truths with ordinary folk. For example, when I was pastoring a small church in southern California (where Dallas and Jane attended), I was moved to observe the deep and abiding spiritual friendship that Dallas had with an unschooled but godly construction worker. Even more moving is to be with Dallas Willard at prayer. His intimacy with the Father, his humility of spirit, his compassion for the world is a beautiful thing in which to participate.

The following selection is taken from an appendix to his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. The book seeks to lay a foundation for understanding how God changes the inward personality, bringing us into deeper conformity to the way of Christ, and the part we play in that process. This passage deals with the problem in the contemporary church of “undisciplined disciples.”

EXCERPTS FROM *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

1. Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?

The word “disciple” occurs 269 times in the New Testament. “Christian” is found only three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to the disciples. . . . The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the point is not merely verbal. What is more important is that the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and the benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not

the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian—especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.

2. Undisciplined Disciples

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or a local church. Any exception to this claim only serves to highlight its general validity and make the general rule more glaring. So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional. . . . Churches are filled with “undisciplined disciples,” as Jess Moody has called them. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to follow Christ.

Little good results from insisting that Christ is also supposed to be Lord: to present his lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the white-wall tires and stereo equipment for the new car. You can do without it. And it is—alas!—far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the salvation presented in recent versions of the gospel.

3. Great Omissions from the Great Commission

A different model was instituted in the Great Commission Jesus left the church. The first goal he set forth for the early church was to use his all-encompassing power and authority to make disciples. . . . Having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. With this twofold preparation they were to be taught to treasure and keep “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” The Christian church of the first century resulted from following this plan for church growth—a result hard to improve upon.

But in place of Christ’s plan, historical drift has substituted: “Make converts (to a particular faith and practice) and baptize them into church membership.” This causes two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples or enrolling people as Christ’s students, when we should let all else wait for that. We also omit the step of taking

our converts through training that will bring them ever increasingly to do what Jesus directed.

The two great omissions are connected. Not having made converts disciples, it is impossible for us to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught. That was not part of the package, not what they converted to. When confronted with the example and teachings of Christ, the response today is less one of rebellion or rejection than one of puzzlement: How do we relate to these? What have they to do with us?

4. Discipleship Then

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being a disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter exclaimed: "Look, we've left everything and followed you!" (Mark 10:28). Family and occupations were deserted for long periods to go with Jesus as he walked from place to place announcing, showing, and explaining the governance of God. Disciples had to be with him to learn how to do what he did.

Imagine doing that today. How would family members, employers, and coworkers react to such abandonment? Probably they would conclude that we did not much care for them, or even for ourselves. Did not Zebedee think this as he watched his two sons desert the family business to keep company with Jesus (Mark 1:20)? Ask any father in a similar situation. So when Jesus observed that one must forsake the dearest things—family, "all that he hath," and "his own life also" (Luke 14)—insofar as that was necessary to accompany him, he stated a simple fact: it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.

5. Discipleship Now

Though costly, discipleship once had a very clear, straightforward meaning. The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with him in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions—the heart or inner attitudes—of disciples are forever the same. In the heart of a disciple there is a desire, and there is decision or settled intent. The disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him. . . .

Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already in The Way, there is yet a decision to be made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his "faith and practice," systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these actions, even today, one who enrolls in Christ's training, becomes his pupil or disciple.

And if we intend to become like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves. Of course, attitudes that define the disciple cannot be realized today by leaving family and business to accompany Jesus on his travels about the countryside. But discipleship can be made concrete by loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, walking the second mile with an oppressor—in general, living out the gracious inward transformations of faith, hope, and love. Such acts—carried out by the disciplined person with manifest grace, peace, and joy—make discipleship no less tangible and shocking today than were those desertions of long ago. Anyone who will enter into The Way can verify this, and he or she will prove that discipleship is far from dreadful.

6. The Cost of Nondiscipleship

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on “easy Christianity” or “cheap grace,” but it did not set aside—perhaps it even enforced—the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world’s coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. But the cost of nondiscipleship is far greater—even when this life alone is considered—than the price paid to walk with Jesus.

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul. . . . The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane.

BIBLE SELECTION: MATTHEW 28:16–20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.

1. Dallas Willard makes a strong plea for churches to emphasize discipleship (teaching new converts how to live as Jesus commanded) and not merely membership (letting new Christians alone once they have joined the church). Describe your church experience in light of these two approaches.
2. According to section 3, what are the two great omissions from the Great Commission? Read the passage from Matthew 28:16–20, noting the exact words that Jesus used.
3. Willard says that the disciple of Christ “desires above all else to be like him [Christ].” Who are some of the people you have desired “to be like,” and how did you go about becoming more like each of those people?
4. There has been a lot of discussion about how costly it is to be a disciple. According to section 6, what is the cost of *nondiscipleship*?
5. Willard writes, “If we intend to become like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves.” What would change about your life if you were to focus all your energies on becoming like Christ? What kind of reaction would you get from those around you?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. This week commit to memory Willard’s powerful sentence about the cost of nondiscipleship (“Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, . . .”). Write it on a card and carry it with you. Allow yourself to yearn for peace, love, faith, hopefulness, power, and abundance of life.
2. Willard lists a few things we can do today that are both commanded by Christ and are Christ-like actions (section 5). This week make an effort to love your enemies by praying for them, blessing those who curse you, and walking the second mile with someone who might be oppressing you.
3. Jesus instructed his followers to “obey everything that I have commanded” (Matt. 28:16–20). Go through the Gospel of Matthew and list all the things Jesus commanded us to do. Your list will make up a mosaic of what the basic Christian life should look like according to Jesus.

4. Meditate on the lordship of Christ. Examine your life to see how much of it actually falls under Jesus' authority. Instead of focusing on the cost of giving these areas over to Christ, focus on the high price you have been paying by keeping them under your control.

REFLECTIONS

Perhaps the greatest malady in the Church today is converts to Christ who are not disciples of Christ—a clear contradiction in terms. This malady affects everything in church life and in large measure accounts for the low level of spiritual nutrients in our local congregations.

To counter this sad state of affairs we must determine that, regardless of what others do, our intention is to come under the tutelage of Jesus Christ, our ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. We seek to undertake the general pattern of life that he undertook—not in slavish mimicking but in overall lifestyle. Disciplines of prayer, solitude, simplicity, and service will mark our overall pattern of life.

There is much more we can do to overcome our “discipleless Christianity”—Jesus, our ever-living Teacher, will show us the way.

—RICHARD J. FOSTER

GOING DEEPER

Willard, Dallas. *Hearing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999. Helps us to live beyond the anxious quest for what God wants us to do and focuses on our becoming the kind of people God wants us to be, which ultimately answers the question of what we are to do.

Willard, Dallas. *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984. A study and critique of Edmund Husserl's “phenomenology,” which Willard significantly differentiates from “linguistic analysis.” Only for those interested in serious philosophy.

Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002. Discusses how we can experience growth in our Christian walk, shed sinful habits, and increasingly take on the character of Christ. Willard calls the divine process that “brings every element in our being, working from inside out, into harmony with the will of God or the kingdom of God” the transformation of the spirit.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991. This book shows us how in practical terms we can be conformed to the image of Christ. It explains salvation not only in terms of the forgiveness of sins but also as part of the total transformation of our lives. It makes “following Christ,” far from an empty phrase, a vibrant reality filled with specific content. It invites us to undertake the easy yoke and light burden of Christ, which stands in direct contrast to the hard yoke and heavy burden of nondiscipleship.