

What Makes Spirituality Christian? A conversation with Dallas Willard

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Dallas Willard leads two lives. In academic circles he is known for teaching philosophy at the University of Southern California, where he has been since the sixties. However, in the evangelical community, he is best known for his work in the area of spirituality. An ordained Southern Baptist minister and an adjunct professor of spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary, he has been addressing the subject of the spiritual disciplines throughout his adult life. He has also been a mentor to many in this area, including noted author and minister Richard Foster.

Willard's 1988 book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (HarperSanFrancisco) generated fresh thinking on spirituality among evangelicals and led to the 1993 republication of his earlier work *In Search of Guidance* (HarperSanFrancisco). Here Willard talks about the state of spirituality today and its meaning for the church.

WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THE CURRENT WIDESPREAD INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY?

People hunger to do more than just believe the right things. There is a hunger for some experience of God in their lives. Whether or not this new interest in spirituality leads to much good remains to be seen. There is a danger of spirituality becoming "the new legalism" of our day, so that one of the criteria for advancement in our society will be that you must "be spiritual."

But there are two directions spirituality can take: Christian or general human interest. A great question in our day is whether it will be defined as Christian or non-Christian spirituality.

HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

Much modern thinking views spirituality as simply a kind of "interiority"—the idea that there is an inside to the human being, and that this is the place where contact is made with the transcendental. In this view, spirituality is essentially a human dimension.

Christian spirituality is centered in the idea of a transcendent life—"being born from above," as the New Testament puts it. This idea of spiritual

life carries with it notions like accountability, judgment, the need for justice, and so on. These concepts are less popular, and they certainly are more difficult, than a conception of spirituality that simply focuses on one's inner life.

MANY PEOPLE HAVE SUGGESTED THAT EVANGELICALISM LACKS A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUALITY. DO YOU CONCUR?

That has been largely true in the twentieth century, but it's not true if we go back to earlier periods. Believers in the nineteenth century, for example, were not shallow in this regard. If you look at the practices of the leading figures in that time, you will find that they did not separate their daily life from their faith in the way that has evolved in the twentieth century.

As liberal theology began to degenerate into a mild form of social ethics, the fundamentalist-evangelical movement came to stress the notion that if you believe the right things, it will get you into heaven. So in an effort to preserve the faith, we came to emphasize that what *really* matters is what you profess. This left believers very little help on how to actually enter into the life that Jesus himself modeled and taught.

MOST CHURCHES AT LEAST OFFER AN OCCASIONAL CLASS ON SPIRITUALITY.

But it's still in the category of the optional. I believe this reflects a widespread misunderstanding about the true nature of the gospel. What has come down for us historically is that the center of the gospel is sin. With the manner in which we treat the gospel, you'd almost get the idea that if it were not for sin, we'd have no use for God.

It also reflects a misunderstanding about faith. Faith has been redefined by social and historical processes so that you can profess to believe in Christ while being deeply doubtful about the wisdom of what he says. This is really central to the whole issue of spirituality. If you see faith as

merely a mental shift in your mind that God sees, and thereby determines you will get into heaven, then spirituality has no place. Once you see that faith is not simply believing certain things *about* Jesus but also believing that what he taught about life was right, then you see that faith is much more than taking advantage of a convenient accounting procedure to get into heaven.

WHAT IS A "SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE"?

It is a practice undertaken with the aid of the Spirit to enable us to do what we cannot do by human effort. And that's the essence of Jesus' teachings, because if you succeed in obeying Christ, it's a manifestation of grace. You can never do that on your own.

HOW DOES ONE BEGIN THE PURSUIT OF THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

First, you must have a clear definition of faith: To trust Christ is to believe that he was right. This has much deeper implications than merely believing certain things *about* Jesus—though, of course, that is important, too.

Second, you must have a working definition of what makes a disciple: One whose goal is to live the way Jesus would if he were confronted with your circumstances.

Third, you must realize that the Bible simply does not recognize a separate category of "Christian" over against "disciple."

PEOPLE SOMETIMES EQUATE DEEP INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY WITH THE ABSENCE OF SOLID THEOLOGY. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN SPIRITUAL LIFE?

It depends on how you approach theology. Students in my philosophy classes know that their task is to get the right answer. If you were to ask them if they actually believe the things they wrote on the test or if you were to say, "I'm going to give you a C on this test because you didn't believe this," they'd think you had lost your mind. They're not graded for *believing*, just for getting the right answers.

Likewise, if we're studying theology so that we will know what the right answers are, it is of very little relation to spirituality. If I study a subject like the Virgin Birth so that I'll know the right answer to give on a test, God probably won't be very impressed. But if I'm interested in it because I realize that believing in it totally changes the meaning of human history and life, that's the difference. Being able to give the right answer is

not particularly important if, at the level of your "mental map," you don't actually believe it's true.

WHAT ABOUT ARGUMENTS THAT FOCUSING ON SPIRITUALITY LEADS TO A LACK OF CONCERN ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES?

There actually is a connection between spirituality and concern for social issues. If you look at the journals of someone like Walter Rauschenbusch—father of "the social gospel"—you will see that he thought of personal spiritual concern and social concern as inseparable. An authentic spiritual life always pushes one back into the world.

HOW HAS RESPONSE TO YOUR WORK ON SPIRITUALITY CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

In the sixties, evangelicals thought of my work as dangerous: Teachings on the spiritual disciplines were thought to be teetering on the edge of Catholicism and salvation by works. Today there is an enormous hunger for this material, and I believe it is evidence of the church's hunger for the reality of God.

By John Ortberg, a pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago.

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