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(coauthored by Gary Black Jr.)*

RENEWING *the* CHRISTIAN MIND

Essays, Interviews, and Talks

DALLAS WILLARD

Edited by Gary Black Jr.



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that he who gave himself for us also “redeems us from all iniquity and purifies for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (v. 14; cf. Eph. 2:10)? To such questions contemporary Evangelicalism has no answer. Its doctrine of grace and salvation prevents it from developing an understanding of discipleship that makes discipleship (“being with Jesus, learning to be like him”) a natural part of salvation. The basic genius of Evangelicalism as such, however, is never content to leave the matter there.

For Further Reading:

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- Michael D. Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997).
- Wes Howard-Brook and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
- Bill Hull, *Choose the Life: Exploring a Faith That Embraces Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2004).
- , *The Disciple-Making Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998).
- William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life: Adapted to the State and Condition of All Orders of Christians* (London: Griffith Farran & Co., n.d. Many editions).
- Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).
- Michael U. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
- . *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).
- Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).
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Discipleship How-To

The following piece identifies what Dallas believed were the essential qualities of a disciple of Jesus. He argues that intentional discipleship is a necessary predicate to living a Christlike life in our workplace, and here he uses the New Testament Gospels as a foundation for learning this practice.

Adapted excerpt first published in 1998 as “How to Be a Disciple” in *The Christian Century* from chapter eight of *The Divine Conspiracy*

BEING A DISCIPLE OR APPRENTICE OF JESUS IS A DEFINITE AND OBVIOUS kind of thing. To make a mystery of it is to misunderstand it. There is no good reason why people should ever be in doubt as to whether they themselves are his students or not. And the evidence will always be quite clear as to whether any other individual is his student, though we may be in no position to collect that evidence and rarely would have any legitimate occasion to gather or use it.

Now, this may seem very startling, even shocking, to many in our religious culture, where there is a long tradition of doubting, or possibly even of being unable to tell, whether or not one is a Christian. The underlying issue in some traditions has been whether or not one was going to “make the final cut.” And that has, in turn, often been thought a matter of whether God has “chosen you” and you are therefore “among the elect.” Or else it is a matter of whether or not you have sinned too much, or are good enough. Needless to say,

those would be difficult questions to answer with much assurance—perhaps impossible to answer at all, because we are in no position to inspect the accounting books of heaven.

It would take us far out of our path to enter into those hoary controversies. But fortunately there is no need. It is almost universally conceded today that you can be a Christian without being a disciple. Further, we can be assured that anyone who actually is an apprentice and co-laborer with Jesus in his or her daily existence is sure to be a “Christian” in every sense of the word that matters. The very term *Christian* was explicitly introduced in the New Testament—where, by the way, it is used only three times—to apply to disciples when they could no longer be called Jews, because many kinds of Gentiles were now part of them.

Now, people who are asked whether they are apprentices of a leading politician, musician, lawyer, or screenwriter would not need to think a second to respond, as would also be the case for those who are studying Spanish or a trade such as bricklaying. Formal apprenticeships are hardly something that would escape attention. The same is all the more true if asked about discipleship to Jesus.

But if we were to inquire as to whether one is a *good* apprentice of whatever person or line of work is concerned, they very well might hesitate. They also might say no. Or, yes with the qualification that they could be a better student. And all of this falls squarely within the category of being a disciple or apprentice. For to be a disciple in any area or relationship is not at all insinuating that one is perfect. One can be a very raw and incompetent beginner and still be a disciple or apprentice.

It is a part of the refreshing realism of the Gospels that we often find Jesus doing nothing less than sternly correcting his disciples. That, however, is very far from rejecting them. It is, in fact, a way of being faithful to them, just as chastisement is God’s way of showing that someone is his child (Heb. 12:7–10). A good “master” takes his apprentices seriously and therefore takes them to task as needed. Therefore, a good working definition of a disciple or apprentice is

simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.

How does this apply to discipleship to Jesus? What is it, exactly, that he, the incarnate Lord, does? What, if you wish, is he “good at”? The answer is found in the Gospels: he lives in the kingdom of God, and he applies that kingdom for the good of others and even makes it possible for them to enter it themselves. The deeper theological truths about his person and his work do not detract from this simple point. Discipleship is what he calls us into by saying, “Follow me.”

The description Peter gives in the first “official” presentation of the gospel to the Gentiles provides a sharp picture of the master under whom we serve as apprentices. “You know,” he says to Cornelius, “of Jesus, the one from Nazareth. And you know how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and curing all those under oppression by the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

Likewise, as a disciple of Jesus I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. This is the crucial idea. That means I am learning how to live within the range of God’s effective will, with his life flowing through mine. Another important way of putting this is to say that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in like manner to that in which he did all that he did.

My main role in life, for example, is that of a professor in what is called a “research” university. As Jesus’s apprentice, then, I constantly have before me the question of how he would deal with students and colleagues in the specific connections involved in such a role. How would he design a course, and why? How would he compose a test, administer it, and grade it? What would his research projects be, and why? How would he teach this course or that? That my actual life is the focus of my apprenticeship to Jesus is crucial. Knowing

this can help deliver us from the genuine craziness that the current distinction between “full-time Christian service” and “part-time Christian service” imposes on us. For a disciple of Jesus is not necessarily one devoted to doing specifically religious things as that is usually understood.

To repeat, I am learning from Jesus how to lead my life, my whole life, my real life. Please note, I am not learning from him how to lead his life. His life on earth was a transcendently wonderful one. But it has now been led. Neither I nor anyone else, even himself, will ever lead it in that particular manner again. And he is, in any case, interested in my life, that very existence that is me. There lies my need. I need to be able to lead my life as he would lead it if he were I.

So as his disciple I am not necessarily learning how to do special religious things, either as a part of “full-time service” or as a part of “part-time service.” My discipleship to Jesus is, within clearly definable limits, not only a matter of what I do, but of how, why, and from what resources I do it. And this necessarily would cover everything, “religious” or not.

Brother Lawrence, who was a kitchen worker and cook, remarks,

Our sanctification does not depend upon changing our works, but in doing that for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own. . . . It is a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times. We are as strictly obliged to adhere to God by action in the time of action as by prayer in the season of prayer.¹

It is crucial for our walk in the kingdom to understand that the teachings of Jesus do not by themselves make a life. They were never intended to. Rather, they presuppose a life. But that causes no problem, for of course each one of us is provided a life automatically. We know that our life consists exactly of who we are and what we do. It is precisely this life that God wants us to give to him. We must only be careful to understand its true dignity. To every person we can say

with confidence, “You, in the midst of your actual life right here and now, are exactly the person God wanted.”

The teachings of Jesus in the Gospels show us how to live the life we have been given through the time, place, family, neighbors, talents, and opportunities that are ours. His words left to us in the scripture provide all we need in the way of general teachings about how to conduct our particular affairs. If we only put them into practice, along the lines previously discussed, most of the problems that trouble human life would be eliminated. That is why Jesus directs his teaching in Matthew 5–7 toward things like murder and anger, contempt and lusting, family rejection, verbal bullying. This is real life. Though his teachings do not make a life, they intersect at every point with every life.

So, life in the kingdom of God is not just a matter of not doing what is wrong. The apprentices of Jesus are primarily occupied with the positive good that can be done during their days “under the sun” and the positive strengths and virtues that they develop in themselves as they grow toward “the kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world” (Matt. 25:34). What they, and God, get out of their lifetime is chiefly the person they become. And that is why their real life is so important.

The cultivation of oneself, one’s family, one’s workplace and community—especially the community of believers—thus becomes the center of focus for the apprentice’s joint life with his or her teacher. It is with this entire context in view that we most richly and accurately speak of “learning from him how to lead my life as he would lead my life if he were I.”

Let us become as specific as possible. Consider just your job, the work you do to make a living. This is one of the clearest ways possible of focusing upon apprenticeship to Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. New Testament language for this is to do it “in the name of Jesus.” Once we stop to think about it, we can easily see that not to find our job to be a primary place of discipleship is to

automatically exclude a major part, if not most, of our waking hours from life with him. It is to assume to run one of the largest areas of our interest and concern on our own or under the direction and instruction of people other than Jesus. But this is right where most professing Christians are left today: with the prevailing view that discipleship is a special calling having to do chiefly with religious activities and “full-time Christian service.”

Therefore, we must pursue how, exactly, one is to make one’s job a primary place of apprenticeship to Jesus. This is not accomplished by becoming the Christian “nag-in-residence,” or the rigorous upholder of all propriety, and the deadeye critic of everyone else’s behavior. This is abundantly clear from a study of Jesus and of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

A gentle but firm noncooperation with things that everyone knows to be wrong, together with a sensitive, nonofficial, nonintrusive, nonobsequious service to others, should be our usual overt manner. This should be combined with inward attitudes of constant prayer for whatever kind of activity our workplace requires and genuine love for everyone involved. As circumstances call for them, special points in Jesus’s teachings and example, such as nonretaliation, refusal to press for financial advantage, consciousness of and appropriate assistance to those under special hindrances or struggles, and so on would come into play. And we should be watchful and prepared to meet any obvious spiritual need or interest in understanding Jesus with words that are truly loving, thoughtful, and helpful.

I do not believe it is true that we fulfill our obligations to those around us by only living the gospel. There are many ways of speaking inappropriately, of course even harmfully—but it is always true that words fitly spoken are things of beauty and power that bring life and joy. And you cannot assume that people understand what is going on when you only live in their midst as Jesus’s person. They may just regard you as one more version of human oddity.

I once knew of a case in an academic setting where during the lunch hour a professor very visibly took his Bible and lunch to a

nearby chapel to study, pray, and be alone. Whereas another professor would call his assistant into his office, where they would have sex. No one in that environment thought either activity to be anything worth inquiring about. After all, people do all sorts of things. We are used to that. In some situations it is only words that can help clarify our understanding.

But, once again, the specific work to be done—whether it is making ax handles or tacos, selling automobiles or teaching kindergarten, engaging in investment banking or holding political office, evangelizing or running a Christian education program, performing in the arts or teaching English as a second language—is of central interest to God. He wants it well done. Assuming, of course, that the job is one that serves good human purposes, it then becomes work that should be done, and it should be done as Jesus himself would do it. Nothing can substitute for that. In my opinion, at least, as long as one is on the job, all peculiarly religious activities should take second place to doing “the job” in sweat, intelligence, and the power of God. That is our devotion to God.

Our intention with our job should be the highest possible good in its every aspect, and we should pursue that with conscious expectation of a constant energizing and direction from God. Although we must never allow our job to become our life, we should, within reasonable limits, routinely sacrifice our comfort and pleasure for the quality of our work, whether it be ax handles, tacos, or the proficiency of a student we are teaching.

And yes, this results in great benefit for those who utilize our services. But our mind is not obsessed with these benefits or perks alone, and certainly not with gaining appreciation from them. We do the job well because that is what Jesus would like, and we admire and love him. It is what he would do. We “do our work with soul [*ex psyche*], to the Lord, not to men” (Col. 3:23). “It is the Lord Christ you serve” (v. 24). As his apprentices, we are personally interacting with him as we do our job, and he is with us, as he promised, to teach us how to do it best.

If one does not know this way of “job discipleship” by experience, he or she cannot begin to imagine what release and help and joy there is in it. To repeat the crucial point: if we restrict our discipleship to special religious times, the majority of our waking hours will be isolated from the manifest presence of the kingdom in our lives. Those waking hours will be times when we are on our own on our job. Our time at work—even religious work—will turn out to be a “holiday from God.” On the other hand, if we dislike or even hate our job, a condition epidemic in our culture, the quickest way out of that job, or to joy in it, is to do it as Jesus would. This is the very heart of discipleship, and we cannot effectively be an apprentice of Jesus without integrating our job into the kingdom among us.

If, as we have seen, a disciple of Jesus is one who is with Jesus, learning to be like him, what is the condition of soul that would bring us to choose that condition? What would be the thinking—the convictions about reality—that would lead someone to choose discipleship to him?

Obviously we could start with a disciple having great admiration and love for Jesus—in fact, so much so that it would be appropriate to believe that Jesus is the most magnificent person who has ever lived. This would lead to becoming quite sure that to belong to him, to be taken into what he is doing throughout this world so that it becomes your life, is the greatest opportunity one will ever have.

Jesus gave us two parables to illustrate the condition of soul that leads to becoming a disciple. Actually it turns out to be a condition that we all very well understand from our own experiences. The parables also illustrate what he meant by saying that the “scribe” of the kingdom teaches from the ordinary things of life, “things both old and new.”

In the first parable, Jesus states, “The kingdom of the heavens is like where something of extreme value is concealed in a field. Someone discovers it, and quickly covers it up again. Overflowing with joyous excitement he pulls together everything he has, sells it all and buys the field” (Matt. 13:44, PAR). The second parable is

similar: “What the kingdom of the heavens is like is illustrated by a businessman who is on the lookout for beautiful pearls. He finds an incredible value in one pearl. So he sells everything else he owns and buys it (Matt. 13:45–46, PAR).

These little stories perfectly express the condition of the soul in one who chooses life in the kingdom with Jesus. The sense of the goodness to be achieved by that choice, of the opportunity that may be missed if not chosen, the love for the value discovered, and the excitement and joy over it all is exactly the same as it was for those who were drawn to Jesus in those long-ago days when he first walked among us. It is also the condition of the soul from which discipleship can be effectively chosen today.

Only with such images before us can we correctly assess Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous phrase “cost of discipleship” of which so much is made today. Do you think the businessman who found the pearl was sweating over its cost? An obviously ridiculous question. What about the one who found the treasure in the field—perhaps crude oil or gold? Of course not. The only thing these people were sweating about was whether they would be included in such a “great deal.” That is the appropriate condition of the soul in a disciple of Jesus. No one enters reluctantly or sadly into a discipleship relationship with Jesus. As he said, “No one who looks back after putting his hand to the plough is suited to the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). No one goes in bemoaning the cost. They understand the immensity of the opportunity. And one of the things that has most obstructed the path of discipleship in our Christian culture today is this idea that it will be a terribly difficult thing that will certainly ruin your life. A typical and often-told story in Christian circles is of those who have refused to surrender their lives to God for fear he would “send them to Africa as missionaries.”

Here is the whole point of the much-misunderstood teachings of Luke 14. There Jesus famously says one must “hate” all one’s family members and one’s own life also, must take one’s cross, and must forsake all one owns or one “cannot be my disciple.” The entire point

of this passage is that as long as one thinks anything may really be more valuable, and therefore misses a full appreciation of what fellowship with Jesus in his kingdom provides, one cannot learn from him. People who have not gotten the basic facts about their life straight will not do the things that make learning from Jesus possible and will never be able to understand the basic points in the lessons to be learned.

This is similar to a mathematics teacher in high school who might say to a student, "Verily, verily I say unto thee, except thou canst do decimals and fractions, thou canst in no wise do algebra." It is not that the teacher will not allow a student to do algebra because the student is a bad person. Rather, the student just won't be able to do basic algebra if they are not in command of decimals and fractions. Therefore, counting of the cost is not a moaning and groaning session that sounds something like, "Oh how terrible it is that I have to value all of my 'wonderful' things (which are probably making life miserable and hopeless anyway) less than I do living in the kingdom! How terrible that I must be prepared actually to surrender them should that be called for!" Instead, the counting of the cost is to bring us to the point of clarity and decisiveness. It is to help us to see.

Counting the cost is precisely what the persons with the pearl and the hidden treasure did. Out of it came their decisiveness and joy. It is decisiveness and joy that are the outcomes of the counting. This passage is about clarity, not misery or some incredibly dreadful price that one must pay to be Jesus's apprentice. There is no such thing as a dreadful price for the "pearl" in question. Suffering for him is actually something we rejoice to be counted worthy of (Acts 5:41; Phil. 1:29). The point is simply that unless we clearly see the superiority of what we receive as Jesus's students over every other thing that might be valued, we cannot succeed in our discipleship to him. We will not be able to do the things required to learn his lessons and move ever deeper into a life that is his kingdom.

Given clarity about the condition of soul that leads to choosing discipleship, what are practical steps we can take to bring strongly

before us the joyous vision of the kingdom? It is true that that vision can come to us at God's initiative, through experiences that may be given to us. In fact, God's initiative will always be involved, for to see Jesus in his beauty and goodness is always a gift of grace. And then, of course, there may also be a role that other people play. But these are factors over which we have no direct control. What we want to know is what I can do if I have come to suspect it would be best for me to apprentice myself to Jesus. How can we come to admire Jesus sufficiently to "sell everything we have and buy the pearl of great value" with joy and excitement?

The first thing we should do is emphatically and repeatedly express to Jesus our desire to see him more fully as he really is. Remember, a primary rule of the kingdom is asking. We ask to see him, not just as he is represented in the Gospels, but also as he has lived and lives, through history and now, in his reality as the one who literally holds the universe in existence. He will certainly be aware of our request, just as you would be aware of anyone expressing his or her desires to come and dwell in your house. We should make our expression of desire a solemn occasion, giving at least a number of quiet hours or a day to it. It will also be good to write down our prayer for his help in seeing him. We should do this privately, of course, but then we should share what we have done with a knowledgeable minister or friend who could pray with us and talk with us about what we are doing.

Second, we should use every means at our disposal to come to see him more fully. Several things might be mentioned here, but there are two in particular, and they are keyed to one of the most well-known statements Jesus ever made. In John 8 he says to those around him, "If you dwell in my word, you really are my apprentices. And you will know the truth, and the truth will liberate you." As the context makes clear, he is saying that we will be liberated from all of the bondage that is in human life through sin, and especially from that of self-righteous religion. Positively, we will be liberated into life in the kingdom of God.

It is then important to understand that “dwelling” or “continuing” in his word is to center our lives upon (a) his good news about the kingdom among us, (b) his wisdom regarding who is really well off and who is not, and (c) true goodness of heart and how it expresses itself in action. To dwell on these realities, we would need to fill our minds and souls with the written Gospels, devoting our attention to these teachings, in private study and inquiry as well as public instruction. On the negative side, we will refuse to devote our mental space and energy to the fruitless, even stupefying and degrading mess that constantly clamors for our attention. We will attend to it only enough to avoid it.

However, dwelling in his word is not just intensive and continuous study of the Gospels, though it is that. It is also putting them into practice. To dwell in his word, we must know it, know what it is, and what it means. Ultimately, we actually dwell in the teachings of Jesus by putting them into practice. Of course, we shall do so very imperfectly at first. At that point we have perhaps not yet come to be a committed disciple and are still at the level of only thinking about how to become one. Nevertheless, we can count on Jesus to meet us in our admittedly imperfect efforts to put his words into practice. Where his word is, there he is. He does not leave his word to stand alone in the world, for his loveliness and strength will certainly be personally revealed to those who will simply make the effort to do what his words indicate.

In these efforts to see Jesus more clearly we should not dabble but be thoughtfully serious and intentional. We should find a reliable and readable version of the four Gospels. If we can plan a week in a comfortable retreat, or at least several days, then we can read through the four Gospels repeatedly, jotting down notes and thoughts on a pad as we go. If over a period of several days or weeks we were to read the Gospels through as many times as we could, consistent with sensible rest and relaxation, that alone would greatly assist us to see Jesus with clarity and start the full transition into beginning discipleship. We can count on him to meet us in that transition and not leave us

to struggle with it on our own, for he is far more interested in it than we can ever be. He always sees clearly what is at issue. We rarely do.

There are also a few other things we can do that will help us toward discipleship to Jesus—not the least of which is seriously looking at the lives of others who truly have apprenticed themselves to him. Often Jesus’s radiance in such people gives us very bright and strong impressions of his own greatness. To look closely at Saint Francis, John Wesley, David Brainerd, Albert Schweitzer, or one of the many well-known Teresas, for example, is to see something that elevates our vision and our hope toward Jesus himself. We should, however, make sure to soak our souls in the Gospels before turning to lives of his other followers.

Perhaps the most overlooked yet crucial step in becoming a disciple is the act of decision. We become a life student of Jesus by deciding to. When we have achieved clarity on “the costs”—on what is gained and what is lost by becoming or failing to become his apprentice—an effective decision is then possible. But still it must be made. It will not “just” happen. We do not drift into discipleship.

This may seem a simple point, but today it is commonly ignored or disregarded, even by those who think of themselves as having a serious interest in Jesus and his kingdom. I rarely find any individual who has actually made a decision to live as a student of Jesus in the manner I’ve discussed. For most professing Christians, that is simply not something that has presented itself clearly to their minds. Current confusions about what it means, and the failure of leaders and teachers to provide instruction on it and to stress the issue of discipleship, make that almost inevitable. But in the last analysis we fail to be disciples only because we do not decide to be. We do not intend to be disciples. It is the power of the decision and the intention over our life that is missing. We should apprentice ourselves to Jesus in a solemn moment, and we should let those around us know that we have done so.

In William Law’s book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, the author asks “why the generality of Christians fall so far short of

the holiness and devotion of Christianity.”² To set the scene for his answer to this question, he raises a parallel question. Vulgarity and swearing were then an especially prominent feature of male behavior, even among professing Christians. So he asks, “How comes it that two in three of men are guilty of so gross and profane a sin as this is?”³ It is not that they do not know it is wrong, he points out, nor is it that they are helpless to avoid it. The answer is that they do not intend to please God in this matter:

For let a man but have so much piety as to intend to please God in all the actions of his life as the happiest and best thing in the world, and then he will never swear more. It will be as impossible for him to swear whilst he feels this intention within himself as it is impossible for a man that intends to please his prince to go up and abuse him to his face.⁴

And it is the simple want of that intention to please God, Law points out, that explains why “you see such a mixture of sin and folly in the lives even of the better sort of people.”⁵

It was this general intention that made the primitive Christians such eminent instances of piety, that made the goodly fellowship of the saints and all the glorious army of martyrs and confessors. And if we would stop here and ask ourselves why we today are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, our own hearts would likely tell us that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because such a life was never thoroughly intended.

Now, perhaps we are not used to being spoken to so frankly, and it might be easy to take offense. But on the other hand, it could well prove to be a major turning point in our life if we would, with Law’s help, ask ourselves if we really do intend to be life students of Jesus. Do we really intend to do and be all of the high things we profess to believe in? Have we decided to do them? When did we decide it? And how do we intend to implement that decision?

How to Live One Day with Jesus

In this presentation, intended for a conference on spiritual renewal, Dallas provides a practical guide for daily exercises and goals for living as a disciple of Jesus. It is unique in that it is anchored in personal experience and practice and is intended to be a helpful guide for beginners and those interested in renewing their faith.

Presented at the 1991 Renovaré National Conference on Personal Spiritual Renewal (previously unpublished)

THE SECRET OF THE BLESSED LIFE IS: GOD WITH US. WHEN GOD is with us we live and experience a life without lack. This is just as Psalm 23 describes: “I shall not want.” What an interesting possibility! There are other great passages that describe God “with us” such as Genesis 5:22; 21:14–22; 28:11–21; 39:3, 21–23; Exodus 4:1–15; 1 Samuel 18:12–16; 2 Chronicles 15:2, 15; Ezra 8:22, 31; Psalms 37 and 121; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16–17; and Hebrews 13:5–6. But of course, if God is really going to be with us, we should expect that our lives will be extremely different from ordinary human life. To which we should ask ourselves the question, Do we want this? Most of religion is organized around keeping God at a distance, allowing us to “go see him” when we want. We say things such as, “Lord, this morning we come into

This constitutes what older thinkers used to refer to as the “antecedent credibility” of Christianity (or other views).

This leads to the suggestion of a thesis regarding the nature of the faith required of unbelief: most of “the faith of unbelief” that exists today in the concrete form of individual personalities is morally irresponsible—because not rationally sustained—and would be recognized as the superstition it most often is, but for the fact that it is vaguely endorsed by the socially prevailing intellectual system. One might be rational, as above defined, and not believe, in my opinion. But I think this is highly unlikely, and am sure it rarely ever actually occurs. (This opens up another set of issues about belief in relation to evidence.)

If, now, one says that current belief is just as morally irresponsible as current unbelief, or even more so, we can only ask: “And how does that help?” Do we not, whoever we are, owe it to ourselves and those around us to be serious about questions of major importance to human well-being?

Lessons from the Life of Jesus

In concert with his investigations of soteriology, the study of salvation, Dallas’s theological reflections tended to focus most deeply on the subject of Christology. The following essay focuses on the means by which Jesus revealed life “from above” within his specific cultural contexts, and the unequaled ethical framework his life and teachings provide for all humanity to follow.

First published in 2011 as “Jesus,” chapter six of the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY HAS AT ITS CENTER JESUS OF NAZARETH, acknowledged by believers to be both savior and Lord. To be a Christian, then, is to follow this Jesus. To appreciate what this has involved, and must continue to involve, it may be helpful to consider very briefly the dynamics that explain and shape all human spiritualities. For spirituality, viewed broadly, is indeed a universal dimension of human life. It arises out of the human quest for a place, an identity, and powers that are more than the “mere facts” of human existence. It seeks to make meaningful contact with, and draw substance from, that “more,” that “higher power.” Such a quest is the source of religions as we find them in our world, but it is not limited to religion. It constantly overflows and renews religion—very often by opposing what religion has become.

In their origin and development religions are profoundly shaped by the spiritual journeys of individuals. In the case of Christianity, this has been supremely the life story of Jesus. In turn each religion, as a concrete social reality, makes a distinct spirituality available to those in significant contact with it, and that spirituality always has two main dimensions. These two dimensions are dependent upon and simultaneously in tension with each other. They are, first, the human forms, outwardly recognizable patterns of behavior, events, and equipage that yield the many different "spiritualities" familiar to us; and second, the transcendental interconnection that lies outside of and within human forms and institutions, inhabiting them but always challenging, correcting, and modifying them.

Through the centuries distinctively Christian spirituality has involved the endeavor to conform individual and social life to what Jesus did and said—more deeply still, to who he was and is. He lived out in his own person a spirituality that had both a human and a transcendental dimension. His followers through the ages, in adoration of him, have sought to penetrate to the core of his spirituality and to make it their own. Sometimes this has been a very explicit quest, as in the famous work of Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (1471), and in the *Imitatio Christi* tradition generally, but it has always been an implicit reality of the Christian life.

In its outward dimension (i.e., in the part necessarily expressed in human society and culture), the spirituality of Jesus was that of a serious Jewish young man—eventually a rabbi—living in the period of mature, post-exilic Judaism. He was brought up and lived for the most part in outlying areas of the Jewish homeland under Roman occupation; but he was thoroughly immersed from his youth in the teachings, traditions, and official practices of the Jewish religion of his day. He lived and died within the outward forms of that religion, even while, as a true son of Israel, he drew from "the law and the prophets" a vision of the whole world under God's rule (Isa. 49:6; Ps. 46:10).

Freeing human life from the tyranny of certain specific cul-

tural—especially religious—forms was one of the main thrusts of his life and ministry, and a major part of the task his followers inherited from him. Staying within the Jewish forms of his day, at many points he challenged those forms as practiced around him, but always from within the resources of the law and the prophets. He constantly contrasted the heart of the law, or God's intent with his laws, to the distortions and misapplications those laws had undergone at the hands of the "power people" or authorities of his day—"the scribes and the Pharisees." They used and abused "the law" to shut people away from God and to impose, for their own advantage, impossible burdens upon the masses of simple people they were supposed to serve. By critiquing them, Jesus continued the ancient prophetic tradition of Israel: that of the insider who is also an outsider, standing among people in the presence and power of God.

The spirituality of Jesus Christ was in that precise sense incarnational. To use that word, however, is not to refer only to the metaphysical nature of Christ, as is usually done. Rather, it is an indication of two different realms coming together to form a unique kind of life, in which human life in the world is an expression of divine life surpassing the world. The fullest expression of this "incarnation" is perhaps given in Jesus's prayer of John 17: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. . . . As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (vv. 14, 21, NRSV). Christ followers are, it is often said, "in the world but not of it." In the words of the apostle Paul, "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

The spirituality of Jesus Christ and of his followers is therefore a twofold life. It is, on the one hand, an ordinary human existence of birth, family and social context, work, and death, shared by all human beings, including Jesus himself. That is what it means to be "in the world." The spirituality of Jesus is not flight from the world.

But it is also a life of knowing God by interactive relationship with him as we live in the world. It is eternal living (*aiônios zoe*; John 17:3) here and now. It expresses itself within ordinary human life through understandings, events, and characteristics that cannot be explained by the natural capacities of human beings or the natural course of events in “the world.” It is accordingly “of the spirit and not of the flesh.” This distinction, along with the warfare of spirit and flesh, is a focal point of the spirituality of Christ and the Christ follower, and a direct consequence of its incarnational nature.

The language Jesus used to express the spiritual side of the twofold life was the language of “the kingdom of the heavens” or “the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God, which is exercised from “the heavens” around us, is the domain of God’s action: it is where what he wants done is actually done. Jesus worked and spoke in terms of the kingdom of God. He proclaimed or “preached” the direct accessibility to all of life in this “kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15), he manifested the presence of God’s action with him through deeds of power, and he taught about how things were done, what life would be like, for those living under the rule of God. (On this threefold ministry of proclaiming, manifesting, and teaching, see Matt. 4:23, 9:35.) Thus one of his most oft repeated phrases is: “The kingdom of the heavens is like . . .” After his resurrection he was in and out among his friends “during forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). The message of the kingdom’s presence and availability through faith in Christ was committed to the disciples and carries on through the book of Acts (28:23, 31) and beyond.

So the spirituality of Jesus was a twofold life: Jewish in outward form, but drawn, on the divine side, from the kingdom of the heavens, as a domain of reality in which one lives now. In the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, his spirituality was characterized by a number of traits that have also been prominent in the lives of his followers.

INDEPENDENCE FROM HUMAN AUTHORITY

That he had authority—that is, the power, and not just the right, to direct thought, action, and events around him—was never in doubt. The effects of his power were obvious, and that is repeatedly brought out in the Gospels. That it did not derive from human sources was also obvious, for human authority was mainly set against him, and eventually caused his death. He was questioned concerning the source of his authority (Luke 20:2), but no one doubted he had authority. His implicit reply to the question was that his authority came from heaven. John the Baptizer had authority from heaven, and his “endorsement” of Jesus put the stamp of “heaven” on Jesus.

Jesus was, however, not the disciple of John, or of any other prophet or rabbi. Jesus’s effects in speaking and acting manifestly originated from the God who was “with him” (Acts 10:38). That was an essential part of his spirituality. He endowed his followers with that same authority (Luke 9:1–2; Acts 1:7–8). Independence from human authority—so often exercised, unfortunately, in the name of God, yet in a manner contrary to his character and purposes—is nonetheless a constant factor in Christian spirituality, from Jesus and his first followers up to the present day. Its watchword in this respect is always, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29, NRSV; cf. 4:20).

THE GREAT INVERSION

“What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15, NRSV). And, it was also clear to Jesus that what is prized by God is often an abomination in the sight of men. The two sides of the twofold life offer very different vantage points on what is good and what is important—on what “success” in life really amounts to. This was a note often struck in the Old Testament, but Jesus relentlessly drives it home in every aspect of his life and teach-

ing. He repeatedly emphasizes that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt. 19:30, NRSV). His most remarkable statements on this point—and perhaps the most misunderstood—are the “beatitudes” of Matthew 5 and Luke 6. He himself was among the humanly “unblessables” in his birth, life, and death—as the great “kenosis” passage of Philippians 2:7–8 so clearly spells out. But he was blessed before God nonetheless. Down in the human order (poor, mournful, etc.) may well be up (among the blessed) in the divine order. Up in the human order (rich, popular) may well be down (“Woe to . . .”) in God’s order. Well-being is not at all what humans routinely take it to be. But anyone alive in the kingdom of God, no matter what their circumstances may be, is blessed, well off. The servant is regarded by human beings as among the lowest of the low. But in the spirituality of Jesus, “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:26–27, NRSV).

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The spirituality of Jesus is unthinkable apart from the presence of God with him. In the times when he was alone from the human point of view, God was with him (John 8:16, 29; 16:32). On the cross, apparently, he was allowed to experience being forsaken by God, as he “taste[d] death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). But his oneness with the Father was unbroken. The covenant people from Abraham onward had lived interactively with the God who was with them. That accounted for the manifold types of extrahuman effects and accomplishments that characterized individuals as well as the people of Israel together. The tabernacle in the wilderness was an arrangement made in order for God to dwell among the children of Israel and be their God: “And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might

dwell among them; I am the Lord their God” (Exod. 29:46, NRSV). God was so manifestly with Isaac, for example, that his powerful neighbors asked him to move away—and then came to ask him to move back, because “we see plainly that the Lord has been with you” (Gen. 26:16, 28, NRSV). Looking back upon the career of Jesus the apostle, Peter explains “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, NRSV). The “practice of the presence” is today one of the strongest themes in Christian spirituality.

COMPLETE SECURITY AND A WORRY-FREE EXISTENCE

Jesus taught and practiced a life of peace and joy in the knowledge of God’s complete nearness and care, and he offered that life to his disciples as well. Such life lay at the very heart of his own spirituality. His mastery over events and people through faith in God, at the presence of God with him, never left him at a loss, no matter the situation. Though sometimes saddened to tears, or exasperated by the ineptitude of his students, only in the supernatural struggle with evil in Gethsemane, on the way to the cross, and then upon the cross, do we witness his vulnerability—his “passion” (John 12:27). No doubt it was from him that Paul learned how to be “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair” (2 Cor. 4:8, NRSV).

He could enjoy the company of “publicans and sinners.” He could continue his nap in the storm, though the boat was filling with water and his disciples were scared out of their wits. After calming the storm he asked them: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40, NRSV). Surely his friends must have wondered at these questions. They simply did not yet see what he saw.

He knew that there was no reason to be afraid of those who can kill the body but after that have no more that they can do

(Luke 12:4). “Whoever keeps my word,” he said, “shall never see death” (John 8:51, NRSV). “Keepers of his word” will have already passed from death to life. There also is no need for them to worry about food or clothing or the material provisions for life (Luke 12:22–31). One has only to devote oneself to living in the kingdom, and every provision will be made—though perhaps not to the world’s taste. Provisions for this life and beyond are made by the Father, who watches over everything and is always with us. Joy, the pervasive sense of well-being, is the condition in which we live the kingdom life.

The early believers knew the secret: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5–6, NRSV). Writing to the Philippians from his prison cell, citing the fact that “the Lord is near,” Paul echoes the instruction of Jesus (Matt. 6:25–34) not to worry about anything. Rather, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4–7, NRSV).

SUBVERSIVE OF “THE WORLD”

The picture of Jesus’s spirituality that emerges from the above points naturally leads to appropriate subversion of merely human arrangements, which are largely based on fear. Subversion was the charge that led to the death of those early Christians who would not worship Caesar, and it is the charge that has been repeated through the ages, up to today in many parts of the world. The charge upon which Jesus was crucified was, essentially, that of subversion of the religious and political orders. In his encounter with Pilate, Pilate said to Jesus: “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus answered him: “You would have no power over

me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:10–11, NRSV). The source of governmental power is the same as the source of the “new birth” (it is *anōthen* [Greek, “from above”]).

Then Jesus proceeded through death to destroy the one who has the power of death, and thus to set “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb. 2:15, NRSV). The primary human instrument of repression and control—the fear of death—is set aside by Jesus and his good news about eternal living now in the kingdom of God. He “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10, NRSV). The Christ follower honors those to whom honor is due, but always “under God.” It is because they stand under eternal authority and power that they more than any others stand for what is good, whether with or against those who have responsibility in human affairs. This, too, is the spirituality of Jesus Christ, and it is radically subversive. The ultimate “subversion” would of course be at the coming of “the day of the Lord,” when the “kingdoms” of this world would have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

DEATH TO SELF

Unlimited abandonment to God is essential to the spirituality Jesus lived and taught. He did not have to go to the cross. No one made him. It was his choice when there were other paths he could have taken. Choice is sacred to God, but what is best to choose? Faced with options, he saw that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me” (John 12:24–26, NRSV). Abandonment to God is the fruitful way to experience good under God. It means relinquishing “our way.” It means not being angry or resentful when things do not go our way. It means that in God’s hands we are content for him to take charge of outcomes. And in that posture we make way

for him to occupy our lives with us, and achieve what is best for us and for others far beyond anything we can even imagine. "I am crucified with Christ." His abandonment becomes our abandonment. "Nevertheless, I live" (Gal. 2:19–20). His resurrection becomes our resurrection—even before our "physical" death (Col. 3:1–4). Death to self is not ultimately a negation, but a rising up into the very life of God (2 Pet. 1:4). Thus our life is saved by his life (Rom. 5:10).

The positive aspect of the "if it dies" is "bears much fruit." The death he chose was for the sins of the world. It was not just to lose life, but also to give life. This is what prevents his death, and Christian "death to self," from being morbid. It was for the "joy that was set before him" that he "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2, NRSV). According to the ancient prophecy, he "saw the work accomplished by his suffering and was satisfied" (Isa. 53:11). "He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor. 5:15, NRSV). The mark of his disciples, accordingly—that they "love one another just as he loved them" (John 13:34)—is simply the outflow of transcendent life that comes through self-giving death.

These are a few outstanding points in the incarnational spirituality of Jesus Christ, which he shares with us today. Many people will find them surprising, because they have come to think of him and his spirituality, roughly speaking, in "monastic" terms. This widely shared vision of him sees him as withdrawing from the world and from "natural" human existence in order to be "spiritual." But for all of the virtues that may be found in monasticism, Jesus and his students were not monastics. Theirs was a spirituality of engagement with the world—a spirituality of stewardship, which hears the words "Do business with these until I come back" (Luke 19:13, NRSV) and rises up, in the face of all opposition, to conduct normal human affairs in the power of God.

To succeed with this indeed requires a life disciplined under grace. We learn to follow Jesus by entering into the activities he practiced. Effectual spirituality in the manner of Jesus demands wise,

nonlegalistic spiritual disciplines that nurture spiritual formation in Christ. But practicing spiritual disciplines is not itself spirituality. Spirituality is the life from God flowing through our life, which spiritual disciplines, rightly used, can help to facilitate. Indeed, the kingdom walk with Christ is no life as usual among human beings, but an intelligent and spiritually informed course of regular activity that maximizes interactive relationship with the Trinity in the two-fold life.

For Further Reading:

- William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him: New Testament Interpretations of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978).
- Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1904).
- Otto Karrer and Nora Wydenbruck, *St. Francis of Assisi: The Legends and Lauds* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948).
- Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus, the Man Who Lives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1985).
- Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
- N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

3. Neale Donald Walsch, *Questions and Answers on Conversations with God* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Pub., 1999), and Helen Schucman, *A Course in Miracles: Original Edition* (Omaha, NE: Course in Miracles Society, 1993).

CHAPTER 16: Spiritual Disciplines in a Postmodern World

1. Lily Tomlin in Jane Wagner's book *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 18.

CHAPTER 17: Getting the Elephant Out of the Sanctuary

1. *The Divine Conspiracy*, 37–38.

CHAPTER 18: The Gospel of the Kingdom

1. In 2005, Keith Giles conducted an interview that was intended for the second issue of *Noise* magazine. However, a second issue never materialized. The interview instead appeared on Giles's blog (www.KeithGiles.com) and was later published by Giles in *Subversive Interviews Volume 1: Subversive Underground*.
2. The *Left Behind* books Dallas refers to are a set of 16 best-selling biblio-fiction novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. They articulate a Christian dispensationalist view of the end times (eschatology) which includes certain views of a pretribulation, premillennial rapture theory read into an interpretation of the New Testament book of Revelation.

CHAPTER 21: The Evolution of Discipleship

1. This threefold scheme is laid out in LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple-Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), which long served as an unofficial guide for the work of Navigators.
2. See Betty Lee Skinner, *Daws: A Man Who Trusted God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1974).
3. There are, of course, many individuals among evangelicals today who would not accept this. Charismatics and heirs of the various "holiness" traditions would find it hard to swallow. But then, what is emphasized by them is still not discipleship.
4. Keswick is a town in the district of Allerdale, Cumbria—in the "Lake District" of England, a center of tourism for centuries. Keswick

became the venue for an annual Christian Convention beginning in 1875 and continuing today. It was a well-known source of "higher life" teachings for more than a century, and has been influential around the world.

5. Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984).
6. Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959).
7. Thomas à Kempis and William C. Creasy, *The Imitation of Christ* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1990); Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, ed. Robert J. Edmonson and Hal McElwaine Helms (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010).
8. The work of Richard Foster and his Renovaré ministry was highly influential in this direction.
9. On this, consult Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1835), along with the works of Jonathan Edwards.
10. See the careful study of the history of the "disciple" in the world of the New Testament provided in Michael J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel, as Reflected in the Use of the Term Μαθητής* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
11. John McClintock and James Strong, eds., *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 8 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894), 870.

CHAPTER 22: Discipleship How-To

1. Brother Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God*, 17.
2. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931), 8.
3. Law, *A Serious Call*, 8.
4. Law, *A Serious Call*, 11.
5. Law, *A Serious Call*, 12.

CHAPTER 23: How to Live One Day with Jesus

1. Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (Romford, UK: Langford Press, 1970).