

**"Transformed by the Renewal of the Mind"**  
Dallas Willard, Trinity Seminary - Interview 2011

**Scribe's Comments** - The session was transcribed from the recording in good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The **bold** and underline offer the scribe's emphasis and the [brackets] refer to other Willard teachings.



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**Interviewer:** Your story as a Pastor & schooling & career as a philosopher?

**Dallas:** I was terminally ignorant on God and the Soul. I found it in the Bible but not a lot of teaching about it. Philosophers spent more time talking about those two things than anybody. I decided to spend a couple of years studying philosophy then go back into the pastorate or evangelism or the sort. Within a few years I wound up with a PhD. I stayed to teach a few courses and served as a pastor as a couple of small churches in the countryside in Arena, WI. God said to me, "If you stay in the Universities, the churches will be open to you. If you stay in the churches, the Universities will be closed to you." In the middle 60's the church was still the center of culture.

I had no plan of being a university professor. It has worked out wonderfully well. More or less, I said we'll take it a year at a time and see how it goes. I don't mean to be self-laudatory but it has gone very well. It has worked out in my perception wonderfully well. My colleagues are just wonderful. I was able to do all the things your supposed to do.

The kind of work one does in philosophy in the traditional pattern is very close to ministry work. Philosophy asks the questions Jesus Christ provides the answers to. I don't be defensive or anything. I'm open to any question, any comment and I try to communicate that spirit to the students.

I find my work in philosophy very useful to me. My work that I do is very important to me, both at USC and in my writing.

**Interviewer:** [7:20] Your studies are more than anything else on epistemology. How has that influenced your studies in the Life of God and the Soul of Man?

**Dallas:** The first book I published and all of the books in religion basically come of a series of talks I gave. I never really sought to publish a book in religion.

My first writing in Christianity - Article in "Christianity Today" about "Discipleship" that is in the appendix of ***The Spirit of the Disciplines***. I had never intended to write in philosophy and you can see how far off I was.

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The first book I published is **Hearing God** (originally titled *In Search of Guidance*.) was requested by an editor. The heart of that book is about knowing what's it like for God to speak to you. That's a highly contested issue. It doesn't make much sense to people but there is a reality about it. We need to know when it's real and when it's not. That is a problem in the theory of knowledge.

[10:00] ***The Spirit of the Disciplines*** is an attempt to answer the question of classical philosophy - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle - *How do you become a good person?* Christ answers to that is, "Become my disciple." **The practice of the disciplines are the means the disciple uses to become the kind of person that really everyone knows we ought to be.**

That was the unsolved problem of Greek civilization - Plato, Aristotle, Socrates - they knew what kind of person you should be but they didn't could not figure out how you got people like that. In 310 B.C. the Greeks were so busy killing each one another that they had to call in the Romans to keep them from killing one another. Of course, the Romans never left.

That was the unsolved problem. That's where Christianity comes on the scene. By the second century A.D., the leading thinkers of the Graeco-Roman world realized Jesus Christ and his followers answered the questions they had been trying to answer for 800 years. That's why in the 2nd century there was a mass conversion of the intellectuals to Christ and it built from there.

[12:05] Four Main Questions in Human Life

1. What is real?
2. Who is well off?
3. Who is a good person?
4. How do you get to be a good person?

Those are the questions that the Bible and Jesus Christ and His people through the ages have answered. The answers they have provided are very clearly superior to the answers of any other group of people, East or West. When I say that, I always say, "Show me something different." I present Jesus Christ as someone who would say, "If you can find a better way than what I've got, you should take it." That's the kind of person He is. He is a person of truth.

**Interviewer:** [13:00] Are you able to do that in the classroom?

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**Dallas:** Absolutely. The only issue is relevance. I teach philosophy. I don't go into preach or convert people, I teach philosophy. You see,

**Interviewer:** Something greater than Solomon is here.

**Dallas:** Jesus Christ is the most intelligent person who ever lived on Earth. I'm very painstaking to say I'm ready to hear any argument and I will listen and I'm open to change. If you've got it, I want it. Unfortunately that's no longer the general attitude on the campus. It's close minded.

**Interviewer** [14:00] What is **truth** and can we know it? The church is debating not what extend we can know truth.

**Dallas:** This is one of the amusing things in our ordinary universities from the East and the West - one of the most common statements written in stone not in spray paint is "*You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.*" That's on the Philosophy Building at USC, but they let a tree go up where you can't see it. **Truth** is embarrassing to people now on campus. Truth is a very simple thing. Your beliefs are true if what they are about is as you believe it to be. That's truth. It's very simple. Children know it. You don't have to teach them [children] to lie. They know about truth. If you say, "Johnny, did you steal the cookie?" and they say, "What is truth?" you know they've been corrupted.

Pilate was not wanting to know the answer to the question. He was trying to get off the hot seat. He knew better. What is called Tarski's (1933) definition of truth, "*Grass is green, if and only, grass is green.*"

"*God is love.*" That statement is true if God is love.

Truth is simple but it's embarrassing because it is totally merciless. I challenge my students when I get on this. I have to talk about this in almost every class. "Why are we having this course?" You should watch the contortions to get around this. "We want to gain knowledge." **Knowledge** is important because it embodies truth. Truth is important because it helps us have a pleasant relationships with reality as distinct from unpleasant ones. Reality is what you run into when you are wrong. Reality is also what you can count on. People are so embarrassed they won't talk about truth. Research has replaced knowledge and truth. We have research universities, right? That's the most common way to describe them. You don't have knowledge universities. You can't get a grant for knowledge. You can get a grant for research.

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**Interviewer:** [17:35] How do our answers to that question of truth effect our spiritual lives?

**Dallas:** Profoundly. I am so glad you asked that question because **one of the crusades I have been on for years is to help people understand the difference between having knowledge of truth than just having belief. This is a big problem for our churches. Many of them have accepted the repositioning of Christian teaching outside the domain of knowledge into something called faith.** The Bible and the tradition of Christ is not a tradition of faith if you take it as something distinct from knowledge. It is a tradition faith embodied, surrounded in knowledge. Just read the biblical stories.

\* Abram by faith knew who was going with him.

\* David vs. Goliath - He knows what will happen. It was from past experience. When he went out against Goliath, he knew what He was doing.

**Faith environed in knowledge is what stabilizes our lives.** [19:38]

**Knowledge** gives you the right and responsibility to:

Act

To Supervise Actions

To formulate policy and supervise it's implementation  
and to Teach.

Faith does not give you any of those. You begin to realize the situation we've got ourselves into in this country. The Church basically gave knowledge, I would not say just to the devil, but actually in our traditions in America, lot of people feel that way. They turned it over to the secular world and the secular world said, "We can take that." The Universities progressed and by and large away from faith into something call knowledge. But the way they handled knowledge put God away and we know where that leads from Romans 1. That's the story of what happens and that's what has happened. Many people if they knew what is taught in some of our classes and Universities, they'd burn the place down.

All these social issues that we talk about constantly, and they are legitimate issues, but they are not open to truth. Diversity, for example, is something that came into the educational system hoping to enable people to have conversations. The effect of it has been to cut off conversations because each little group has backed up to itself and said, "Well you know, we are diverse and we are diverse. You can't attack us because we are diverse." Everyone just shuts up. There is almost no discussion about fundamental matters now on the campus.

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**Interviewer:** [22:00] You made a big plea for corporate scripture memory - What are some practical steps we as Pastors might take to lead our congregations on corporate scriptural memory?

**Dallas:** First of all, one has to realize the human mind and transformation. The real question is - *What are we to occupy our minds with?*

The answer of our tradition is with the truth about God, and about human life under God. Where are we to get that? The answer is the Scriptures.

The point of all this is to occupy the mind with the truth about God and about His relationship to us. One reason I recommend **Colossians 3** it is such a compact and yet clear portrayal with what you do with your mind. That's why **Joshua 1:8 & Psalm 1** is so important in all this. **Colossians 3:16** - "*Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly.*"

How do you this? Well, you teach and preach but it becomes an individual project of embedding the scriptures in our minds in whatever our situation, wherever we are. The way you do that is by memorization. Now, you can get a lot of it by attending good teaching. There's a lot of it in our songs. My point that I have learned by my experience, both for myself and teaching others is that there is nothing that will replace memorization of passages of scripture.

Now if you are going to do that as a Pastor, you have to get through the barriers that are already there in the minds of your people. You have to teach how to memorize. Then you have to get people to commit themselves to it. That's why doing it together becomes so helpful and so important. It's almost true in any project, if you get people in to it together, then it goes better. I do this in retreats. It works in a church if you will teach and lead it. You want to have people to meet purposively to say their memory verses to one another and then you leave time for them to discuss - how did memorization help you? For a while you may have to teach how to memorize. A lot of people think they can't memorize. It's a sad way of thinking. Anyone can memorize if they will Repeat ~ Concentrate ~ Understand.

**John 14** is a good one to start on. You'll learn you'll have to re-memorize the scripture. After a period of time it will be like the back of your hand because it will be in your body. You will say it without struggling because it is just there. That's where you want it. That's the picture of the man in **Joshua 1:8** murmuring the scripture day and night. It's in his mouth and his mouth is part of his body. What's interesting is what comes out of our mouth without thinking.

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- \* Have a memorization party.
- \* Retreats for memorization
- \* The Bible Memory Association - now called "[Scripture Memory Foundation](#)"

Take it into your congregation, talk about it, hold it up. It has wonderful ways of helping children and old people memorize. I will tell you the difference it makes in human life is unbelievable. It's one thing to have a high view of scripture and say, "It's the Word of God." It's another thing to have it embodied in yourself, and that's where we want it.

**Q** [29:15] These kind of disciplines is not any kind of new thing. Has this been something the church has always done but never essential or has it been lost recently?

**Dallas:** I think it has been lost. If you go back to the early centuries of the Church, in many parts of the world where the church was, ministers and deacons has to memorize whole books of the Bible. For various reasons in the last 75 years or so has dropped away.

[Dallas speaks of his grandmother's memorization of scripture.]

We have moved away from it. When we organized services, and we see how little in many of them we actually present the Word of God, the scriptures, it's no wonder people leave their Bibles at home and read a few lines off the screen and that's all the Bible they get. We know from statistics, most Christian homes have 7 or 8 Bibles, usually different versions. There used to be an old preaching theme, "Dust on the Bible". It's not the same to have recordings of it or see it on the screen. You need to take it in the bodily form of the book. It needs to be near to you. You need to know where to find things on the page. You know when you get a new Bible, you're lost for two years because the verses are in a different place. That's where we need to be with the Bible. It needs to be like an appendage to the brain. We know where it is, whatever we are looking for, because we are so familiar with the physical incarnation of the scriptures.

**Interviewer:** I think it was John Owen who said of John Bunyan, "If you prick him, he bleeds the Bible." Bunyan was relatively uneducated but so saturated with the Word of God. Might it be said of us too.

**Dallas:** CS Lewis has this wonderful statement, "*The reason you don't need to be educated as a Christian is because being a Christian is an education.*" Bunyan spent his time in jail very well. He became a marvelous writer and his command of the English, that came from him studying the Bible.

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**Interviewer:** [33:30] You talked a lot about the heart yesterday and you offered a definition of the heart in the lecture and you've written a book called ***Renovation of the Heart***. In these interviews we want to address pastoral issues as well as other issues. I wonder how you might encourage us as pastors to preach in a way that touches as the old Puritans would say, "our affections" or really reaches the heart. How might God rally use our preaching to touch and transform the heart and increasing Christlikeness?

**Dallas:** The affections follow thoughts. Thoughts don't follow the affections in the same degree. If you want to change people's feelings, you want to change their thoughts. That's where the will, or the heart as I call it, becomes involved. You bring people to a knowledge of Christ by bringing the gospel, the good news to them - that's thought. "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...*" That's knowledge I would say to which it is the power of the living Word and the Holy Spirit solicits the will to surrender to God. You have to go there first. When you have a will that's un-surrendered to God, it's subject to all kinds of bad thinking and bad affections, bad emotions.

[35:35] I hope to talk a good bit about **anger** in the period to follow here. Where does anger come from? Anger comes from a misunderstanding of who one is and their world, and where God is, and who other people are.

So you have to have clear teaching about God, about our soul, about how to live for Christ and who Christ was and what He is doing in the world now. That teaching can transform our affections from hate to love, from fear and anger to confidence and joy, and so on down the line. These are not actually just feelings, they are more like dispositions like joy, love and so on. They are really dispositions, a character that take over a person but they have these terrible feelings with them. If you just try to deal with the feelings without changing the thoughts, you'll become slave to your feelings. There is a real danger of that in religion because people are apt to go for the feelings and use that for a basis for decision without going through the mind. That makes what we have in this country where as many people come forward in meetings and you never see them again. They don't become disciples because they are...

Paul merciless phrase for this is, "*Their god is their belly.*" They are belly worshippers, by that he means they worship their feelings. You don't go for the feelings, you go for the clear apprehension of truth. That lays a basis for decision and provides the feelings that are appropriate for it that can overcome habits that keep you away from God. So, we have to work with

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the content of the Word and bring it to bear as clearly as we can. You can't do that without the assistance of the Holy Spirit but we are not waiting on the Holy Spirit. He is ready to do this. The task that we have is to speak clearly. And this goes back to the point about if we don't think of ourselves as conveying knowledge of God in reality, then we will think of ourselves as exhorting people hoping divine lightning will strike them and something will happen.

This is where we get the embarrassing position of pastors and teachers as motivators. I think this is one of the greatest tragedies presently is that we have our leaders in a position to motivate people to do things they don't want to do. The standard of success is how well you get people to do this. Whereas we should be teaching in such a way that the motivation changes because the understanding changes. If I clearly understand that the house is on fire, I don't need someone to motivate me to get out. If you are driving your car, you don't need motivate to turn the wheel, speed up, that's knowledge. We've lost our confidence in knowledge. Then we turn to feeling and that's the source of all addiction. An addict is someone who has abandoned their will to feelings. They will tell you, "*I can not resist.*" Everyone knows that you can resist. You have to have find out how to have a knowledge that will fortify your will so you can resist. There is no addiction you can not resist unless it has moved into the area of demon possession or something of that sort, then you have to have ministry in a different way for that.

The main thing we have to do for people in all areas is...the problem in religion is matched by so many things in our society. For example, abuse in families. Where does our epidemic in diabetes come from? And, now this is really dangerous, but the addiction of so many people to sports; where does come from? It comes from a lack of knowledge about life. If that knowledge is not provided, there is really no remedy. **You can not motivate people into salvation. You have to communicate truth which is the Word of the gospel.** That as Paul knew so well because he saw it work in so many situations, "*It is the power of God in salvation.*"

That's real power. **Knowledge communicated in power is the secret to solving the problems of humanity.** We as ministers and teachers have the responsibility of bringing that to bear. We are in great opposition to a world system which denies that. So, we really have to understand the significance of this idea of knowledge and power. Paul's great statement,



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*"We war not against flesh and blood. The weapons of our warfare are powerful to casting down strongholds." II Corinthians 10:4*

That's where we as ministers must stand today in our communities and realize the dignity of our calling. We bring something no one else can bring, the most important thing happening in any community is meant to be what is going on in the church. We have to reclaim that and move back to that. I am afraid I preached a sermon to you.

**Interviewer:** [42:35] I have been exposed to Asian Christians. I find so much similarity in the ways in which they talk about faith, they talk about the spiritual walk, the spiritual life, I want to ask you if you are both drawing from the same source? Obviously you are.

**Dallas:** We read from the same book.

**Interviewer:** Have you had any exposure to the writings of Asian Christians or practices?

**Dallas:** Not really. Years ago I was attracted by the title by Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*. By that time I had read that, I had spent so much time reading Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and a big man or me was Charles Finney, that I didn't find anything new in that. I loved that title - The Normal Christian Life because the normal Christian life is what you see in Colossians 3:1-3 and any other great passages. That's the normal Christian life. We need that reaffirmed. And that reaffirmation in him did help me. I read other writings by him and some others and I certainly applaud what they are saying. Circumstances have forced them to the reality.

I can't say I would ask for it but probably the best thing that could happen to the American and the Western Church is persecution...if we really had to pay a price.

Kind of interesting on the University campuses. A lot more faculty on campuses are more Christians that you would think. I assure you if word went out that all the Christians had to show up at center campus and they were going to be shot, many of these people would show up. But, they don't know how to live it in that context. There's something about the press of circumstances under God. It is like Jeremiah says in the Lamentations, "It's a good thing to bear the yoke in your youth." To really know what it is like to have only God. A wonderful phrase that shows up over and over again in the Old Testament like Psalm 16, "The Lord is my portion." What I've got is the Lord is what that is saying and it's often said, "It's all I've got." It's a very interesting thing in church history I believe is that the church has always

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done best in godly terms as well as in cultural terms when they had the least.

The guys standing on the hillside in Galilee hearing Jesus say to them, "*I have been given say over everything in heaven and earth, as you go therefore, make disciples.*" Put yourself inside of them, they were guys that had a sense of reality. You can almost hear them leaning back and saying, "In light of our recent successes if Jerusalem, we're ready to take on the world." But they did. They did! They actually did it and they did it with nothing except the Lord.

I think that's where we stand. That's where I stand in what I do. Really all I've got is the Lord. If I'm a pastor or a large church or a small church, that's all I got and that's what I have to count on. I believe the truth of the matter is when we count on it, we will see the reality of the Kingdom breaking forth all around us. The reason I believe is not just because that's what Scripture will lead you to believe but because it actually happens. When you look at church history, you see it over and over and it's happening now in many parts of the world.

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