

Spiritual Formation – Knowledge & Apologetics

Willard @ Biola's 10th EPS Apologetics Conference (2010?) [51:35]

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



["Knowledge & Apologetics" by Dallas Willard YouTube](#)



More Dallas Willard on Apologetics:



[["Apologetics" Grace Church, So CA, 1990](#)]



[[The Allure of Gentleness Study Guide & 7 Session Course](#)]

[Start @ 2:22] I want to talk to you about spiritual formation tonight and I mean Christian Spiritual Formation. Spiritual formation is like an education. Everyone gets one, it's just a question of what you get. Hitler had a spiritual formation. So did Mother Theresa. Every person you meet has had one and you have had one.

Christian Spiritual Formation (def.)...

"The process of becoming like Jesus Christ in all dimensions of your personality."

The spiritual life is the life you live interactively with God. Sometimes we talk about as just as if it was inward and secret, part of it is. If you think it is only inward, you haven't got the idea yet. The transformation is absolutely obvious, absolutely outward. You can't keep it in.

I want to talk to you about the Role of Knowledge in the Spiritual Life.

Faith Not Knowledge

Not all that many years ago the phrase "Evangelical Philosophical Society" would have been treated as an oxymoron. They are words that don't go together. There are many people who still think that...inside and outside the church.

[4:40] Christian spiritual life is not commonly thought of one involving or providing knowledge. It is often thought of as involving "Faith" but that is thought of as opposed to knowledge, grace, gift or divine upholding, possibly some enthusiasm. But it is not a life conducted in terms of knowledge of realities involved, of how they work, or thought of as providing such

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knowledge shared with others aspiring to live a spiritual life nor indeed with those who are skeptical of the spiritual life or who perhaps deny if there is anything as a spiritual life...

There's a problem with bringing this into the domain of knowledge. I want to make sure to present this as a part of an apologetical work. You can think of some outstanding cases of people who had an outstanding cases of people who had a spiritual life. You might think of Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, Bonhoeffer. The Catholic Churches talk of saints - you have to have a certain number of demonstrative miracles. That's interaction with the supernatural being of God. That idea of interacting with God as you go through the process of change and growth towards Christlikeness is vital to understanding the spiritual life and spiritual transformation.

Many people have turned away from the Christian Church in to other spiritualities. Go to the book store and go the section labeled "Spirituality" and look at what is there. Google "Spirituality & _____ [add almost any word you want to add] and you will get hundreds of thousands of hits like "Spirituality & Sports...& Business...& Dating. The hunger for another world, another source of life is something that is ever present around us and a lot of it comes from the sense that Christians really aren't into spirituality. You have a common saying, "*I'm not religious, but I'm very spiritual.*" That points to a huge hunger and vacuum in the lives of people. I hopeful to help us move us away from a non-cognitive attitude towards spirituality, towards the spiritual life in the Christian tradition. I need to say this is not new. It's only new in the recent past.

Faith & Knowledge in Christian History

[9:10]

Knowledge of the spiritual life is standard for the history of the Christian church. It is because in the recent past there has been a progressive negotiation of Christian teaching & life out of the category of knowledge and reality into the category of something called "faith". Faith is a way of dismissing the teachings of the Christian church and its history — Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley and the great 19th Century & early 20th Century American theologians and you see them presenting not just Christian doctrine generally, but the understanding of spiritual life as a place that operates by knowledge and provides knowledge to those who wish to know.

We have to acknowledge that much that has been claimed by Christians to be knowledge was actually not knowledge and the discovery and omission of this fact was a major factor in the massive social and historical displacement that I just mentioned. This was common in the denominational distinctives

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that tend to separate Christians into groups tend not to qualify as knowledge but as tradition. The discovery of this in the American past is one of the things that has pushed Christianity out of the intellectual context that we have to recover if we are going to think about Apologetics in any sense. It concerns knowledge. If you don't have knowledge on the basis of which you do Apologetics, I ask you, what are you doing? That is something worth exploring and watching how people conduct themselves in the context of Christian leadership and teaching.

Knowledge is Vital

[11:45]

Knowledge is important in any endeavor. It matters because the role of knowledge in human life is vital and irreplaceable. When we come to talk about faith as Christians, we don't want to understand that as something opposed to knowledge. It has a different role and is very important but certainly if you look at the Biblical employment of faith, it is the kind of confidence that is envired in knowledge.

The Prophet said, "*My people perish for the lack of knowledge.*" Hosea 4:6

Knowledge is essential and it is important because in all the activities of life we need to be able to confidently access truth. Truth is what enables us to interact successfully with reality.

* Truth is like the aim of a gun to hit your target. If you don't have truth, who knows what you will hit.

Knowledge is important because it involves Truth & Open Method. [13:00]

That is not the case of mere belief, commitment, power or anything else but knowledge.

Truth, knowledge, open method allows us to find common ground.

I ask you again, if when you do your Apologetic work and you can not work on common ground with people, what are you doing? Some people believe only divine lightning changes people so when you are preaching or working in apologetics, you are just making an occasion in which God might strike. I want to say for my part **in apologetics, we are bringing knowledge to bear on genuine questions from people who really want to know.**

So...Knowledge is vital.

[14:09]

Knowledge of the Spiritual Life is a sub-category of that.

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Evidence drawn from the life of Christians who are growing in their relationship to God and becoming more and more equipped to live in God's Kingdom with Him - that kind of knowledge is among the most precious knowledge on Earth.

So...we want to talk about the **knowledge** of the spiritual life. We want to of course, stand on solid ground. We don't fake knowledge. We don't pretend we have it when we don't. We want the real thing. That is why a key to all of our work in apologetics is openness. We come to meet people with the idea,

"I am here to learn if there is something for me to learn. I'm not here just to tell you how it is. I may do a little of that to. I'm open to an exchange with you as we operate on the basis of knowledge and common ground."

One of the things that makes the unbeliever really nervous is the idea that there is a common ground where they can meet with those who disagree with them and have beliefs about Christ and it begins to show itself in there life and the question arises, *"How can people be like that?"*

That is the initial impulse of apologetics in the New Testament.

Knowledge of the Spiritual Life

[16:00]

How does this work - the idea of knowledge of a spiritual life - knowledge in terms in which I live the spiritual life and then knowledge of what happens in the spiritual life that is available to others?

Knowledge & Apologetics**

How does knowledge of spiritual life that expresses itself in spiritual formation fit in with the task of the Christian apologist?

What is it that we do in apologetics? Answering this is not a simple manner.

A.B. Bruce, *Apologetics - Christianity Defensively Stated*
Is apologetics an essentially a defensive project or is it a helping ministry?



** [[See Willard's "Jesus - Logician & Apologist"](#)]
- and -
** [["Apologetics" - Grace Church, 1990](#)]

Christians evidences is a crucial field to work in. We need good people who do that who lay the evidence out and make it public. I think apologetics is more answering questions. There is a time for defense. We are admonished by the New Testament to, "contend earnestly for the faith that was once for

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all handed down to the saints." (Jude 1:3) I wonder if we should not keep this work of the apologist out of the category of the defending. There is a job of defending. It may well be the work of the apologist is most effectively done not in response to someone who is attacking but when someone is inquiring,

"Why are you hopeful when you are suffering unjustly?"

"What makes you tick?"

That's a question not an attack. Apologetics providing insight and knowledge to questions posed by serious inquirers who genuinely wish to understand what followers of Christ believe and practice and why they do that.

"If you suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed... Hold Christ as Lord in a special place in your hearts. Be always prepared to explain to everyone who asks why you have the hope that is with you."

I Peter 3:14-15

Imagine what would it be like if the primary task or the large part of the apologist was to explain why Christians are so happy and so full of righteous deeds and love that people say, *"What's going on there?"* And then the task would be to come and explain what is going on in the person who is joyful under unjust persecution. There is a place in that question Christian evidences for dealing with people who genuinely wants to know. There is a place for the defense to speak to people who don't want to know. There is a man who is powerful doing that — Bill Craig. He speaks to people who don't want to know and he makes them wish they did.

When you look at this passage, let's think in terms of someone who is looking at a person with a spiritual life of such presence and power that they really want to know. That's where knowledge of how the spiritual life is vital. How would you explain to someone who really wanted to know why a person who is suffering unjustly, why are they so happy?

Jesus, *"Blessed are you when people persecute you for righteousness sake."*

How do you get to the place to where doing things that are wrong aren't even attractive?

You can get to that place and we need to get to that place. Knowledge of the spiritual life concerns that process of spiritual formation by which Christians stand out like "lights in a darkened world." (Philippians 2)

Where you have people who are standing out like that, it changes everything...It changes evangelism...Christian teaching...apologetics.

How do you get to that place?

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Knowledge concerns two things:

[25:00]

1.) Knowledge of the Process of Spiritual Living

Books in History like - *The Christian Secret to the Happy Life*

If you don't present knowledge you are left in a position of trying to get people to do things. I really think that is not a good position to be in. If you get people to do things to become Christians they will go to church where there has to be a man or woman who keeps getting them to do things they don't want to do. If you bring knowledge of a reality that they are able to enter into and make it a part of their lives, they will come to you saying, "What shall I do?"

A Christian walk based on knowledge of the spiritual life is an entirely different kind of thing than one that based on being persuaded to do things. To provide knowledge is to lay an entirely different foundation.

2.) Knowledge of the God who is active in and around the experience of the one leading this life in interaction with God. [26:55]

Lives of the saints present themselves of something worthy of inquiry, a subject matter to be understood by themselves and others. It is at least an interesting hypothesis that such lives are lived on the basis of knowledge gained by engaging with the spiritual realm of God, His Kingdom, His Word.

What does the Bible actually do to you and how do you make it work? We have multitudes of people in our churches that take the Bible like they take pills. Many take it like they take little nibbles hoping it will do them some good but it doesn't do them much good at all if any because they are not entering it as a domain of knowledge about their lives that they are living that can be checked and verified by anyone who wishes to do it.

This knowledge can be communicated to others because knowledge is that sort of thing. It is open, it is available to those who wish to know. One thing about knowledge is if you don't want to know, you don't have to. It won't chase you down the street and jump down your throat. If you want to have the knowledge of Algebra, you have to seek it. Seeking is the nature of gaining knowledge. If you have a person who is not seeking it, they won't get it. In classes they will say what you want them to say and then they will forget it. Knowledge comes into possession of the life. It gives direction if a person wants it. Knowledge of God and His Kingdom comes with knowledge of the spiritual life.

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* *Spirit, Saints and Immortality* by Patrick Sherry

"The fruit of religious faith in human life and the production of the spiritual and moral giants whom we call saints must constitute important religious evidence."

I want to argue that in the absence of that kind of evidence, everything else that is offered will be weak in its effect. You have to see the reality in the lives of people.

What we now call "Spiritual Formation" is an area of spiritual activity that must be either be a field of actual and potential knowledge or not. To regard it as not subject to knowledge and not yielding knowledge it to deprive it of all or almost all significance for human endeavor and Christian practice.

When I speak of knowledge of the spiritual, non-physical spiritual world, I mean... [31:00]

(def.) *"The ability to represent, speak of, deal with that life and the world as it is [truth] on an appropriate on a basis of thought and experience...
...not to exclude knowledge on a basis of good authority."*

Knowledge on a basis of good authority is the most common knowledge.

* Most of us we believe the Multiplication tables on authority.

There is nothing wrong with knowing things by authority if it is good authority. Good authority is always open to question and further examination.

—> The spiritual life is actually a process of coming to know.

Prayer is theological research when you come to know God, how God acts and how He works. You learn you can introduce others into that. Prayer does not mean you already have great faith. Sometimes the most effective prayers is a cry of despair. The Atheist's prayer:

* *"Oh my God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul."*

It is amazing how many people come to know God from that prayer. They were a position is where they really wanted to know. You can think **God's address is at the end of your rope**. When you get there and you really want to know, you'll come to know.

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Knowledge is not esoteric and it is not rare. It is one of the most common things in life. A large part of the intellectual establishment as it now exists and what it does is to undermine people's confidence that they can know.

The Nature of Faith

[34:20]

[Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness*, p. 28-29]



There are domains in the spiritual life that can not be known. There is a place for faith. Faith means you're ready to act as if what you believe is true. You don't have to know in order to do that. Belief is picked up like lint and viruses by little children and by big children. Sometimes they are good and sometimes they are not.

One of the task of an Apologist is to help people get over the beliefs they picked up and are controlling their lives and they can't get rid of. Most people live at the mercy of their ideas. That's where the Apologist comes. Perhaps they start out just by listening and they find out what genuine questions the person has. It would be wonderful if some of the questions were,

*"My roommate is full of hope and joy and totally honest.
How do you get that way?"*

There's a place to start in.

Knowledge & Faith

[36:00]

If we can acknowledge the role of knowledge, and leave the room for faith and put them together in such a way that faith is operating in a context of knowledge and knowledge in a context of faith.

You can know what you believe and you can believe what what you know.

- * Some people don't believe what they know
- Gamblers & Cheerleaders

We need to put our knowledge and our faith together. We do that when we approach the Christian life experimentally watching how our faith develops, how our knowledge develops. Learning things like Christian disciplines actually do change your life.

* Fasting - Is really an important discipline because it trains you to be strong and sweet when you don't get what you want. It trains you out of the habits of having to have what you want.

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That is a crucial element in the spiritual life and there are disciplines that help you get there. If you get to where you don't have to have what you want, that's going to solve a lot of other problems for example depression and disappointment. You don't have to live in disappointment and depression. But if you are not able to surrender your desires to God, you will and you will probably wind up up being mad at God.

[38:19] As Christian thinkers, apologists, philosophers, this means we have to rework the idea of knowledge and help people rework it - knowledge as it really works in life. I have already given a description I think is adequate to knowledge as it really works in life. [\[see 31:00\]](#)

There are the philosophical issues and we have to go back to those. Thank goodness we have a lot of people that can help us in coming to an appropriate understanding of what it is to know, getting us over this bland and pervasive skepticism that effects nearly all of our atmosphere in the world we are in today and cuts the sinew of knowledge to the satisfaction of the many people who would like to manipulate us.

Wonderful people like Al Planigan and Bill Alston, *Perceiving God* - deals with the issue of the perception of God in the spiritual life.

There is that level. We need to go that level for pole who have questions. We need to dig deeper and come to an understanding of knowledge of the spiritual life and then we need to be able to present it as something to others who want to know. These are totally different cases when you've got someone who does not want to know and someone who does want to know. We need to have a ministry to both of those groups. The experiences of the realities of the spiritual life are things we can have knowledge of and we can open the door to knowledge on the part of others.

* "Pascal's Wager" [#233] - Smart to bet on God's existence [41:00]

"Simple steps that can be taken...not by proofs of God but by an abatement of your passions. Learn of those who have been bound like you and now stake all their provisions on God. These are people that know the way of which you would follow and were cured of an ill that you are now ill. Follow the way by which they begin and acting as they believe...Even just this will naturally make you believe and deaden your scruples."

Can we, as apologists for Christ, give people information about how they begin to experience the spiritual life? Or perhaps we're so bound up on various points of doctrine that we think if they don't pass that, they can't go in? We underestimate the readiness of God to meet people where they are.

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The way of experience is open to everyone. It is a way of **grace**. Probably without grace you would never do it. You don't have to worry about that. The grace is available. If we step into it, then we begin to experience grace because grace is God acting in our lives to accomplish what we can't accomplish on our own.

"At each step you take on this road you will see so great certainty of gain that you will gain and so much nothingness that you will risk..." Pascal

That will come through the progress of your experience when you put what little faith you may have managed together with the grace of God to move forward in the spiritual life.

Many people will never accept it and we have to accept that. I believe we can be of great service to people if we begin to encourage them on the basis of our knowledge on how the spiritual life works to step into the spiritual life as best they can and make a start. We have knowledge of that or we can't do it and we have to be confident in that knowledge or we can't do it.

The Spiritual Life of the Christian

[45:25]

"If you dwell in my teachings, then you really are my apprentices and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." **John 8:31-32**

This does not say *"the truth will make you free."* Never say that Jesus said that. Jesus did not say that. The truth will more likely make you flee.

You don't come to the truth head on, you come to Jesus and you take His teaching and His life as best you can and you step into it as His student.

* USC Elevator plaque - *"The Truth will make you free..."*

Jesus said, "If you dwell in my words..." that is not a non-stop Bible Study, that's taking what He said and living it in life. "If you dwell..." then you will go through a course of experience and you will come to know the truth and the truth known will set you free because you will be able to deal with reality as it is.

What's good you will be able to appropriate and what's bad you'll can avoid. That passage is about being free from sin. If you smarten up a bit, sin will really look different. Your habits can change in the course of experience and you will be made free. That's the course of the spiritual life. That's knowledge about how the spiritual life works and it is available to everyone who wants to know.

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Spiritual formation - Churches and institutions of higher education recognize the deplorable condition of Christian character or maturity.

What accounts for this condition? In a large part, in terms of the failure to approach the spiritual life as a area of reliable knowledge which we can own and act on and which we can offer to others who wish to know.

There are others factors - Satan is always on the job, there are all kinds of opposing forces. But, until we have provided what Christ is talking about as dwelling in His word and made sense of it in the spiritual life, we have another way of explaining it than just, "*The devil made me do it.*"

Close

[50:05]

Suppose there were abundance evidences in the lives of Christians of the reality of God and of the spiritual life they are living with Him, do you think that would make the task of the apologist easier, more effective?

In the absence of that aren't we fighting an uphill, and often a losing battle as we try to minister to people at the whole range of evangelism, evidences, apologetics and Christian teaching?

The ultimate evidence of the reality of God and the kingdom of God in our lives is a person who is living the life.

It means no matter what else you do, you're going to be fighting a very difficult, if not impossible battle without the evidence of the life of God in the soul of human beings.

~ ~ ~ End of Teaching @ 51:35 ~ ~ ~

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