

104: Dallas Willard and V.I.M.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.
(Colossians 1:28-29)

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, become like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)

Dallas Willard is a Christian philosopher whose primary area of interest is spirituality. His influence on the evangelical world in this field, is enormous. In his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard offers a model of spiritual formation using the acronym: V.I.M.

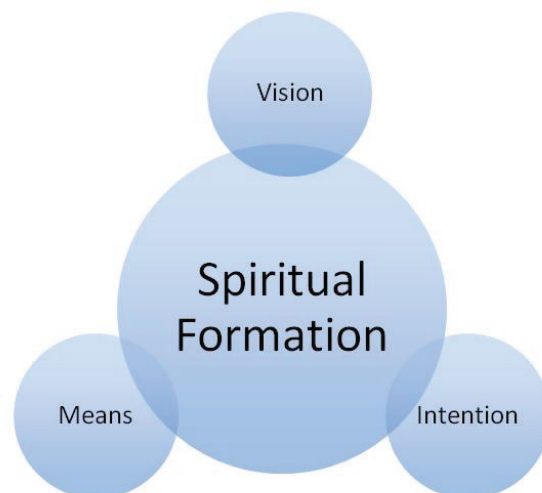


Figure #2: Dallas Willard and V.I.M.

VISION

Vision is a popular idea in the evangelical world. Churches and organizations now have vision statements. It is also quite common to find leaders who have a personal vision statement that is guiding them through life. In most cases, these Vision Statements are geared around accomplishing certain tasks. They describe what we want to do and accomplish.

My personal vision/mission does this. My vision/mission is to empower, develop and resource the least resourced leaders and facilitate a viral movement of spiritually formed leaders.

There is nothing wrong with having this kind of Vision Statement. But this is not what Willard means by vision. He believes another type of vision is equally necessary. Willard wants you to envision the kind of person you want to become. What kind of Christian do you want to become? What kind of leader do you want to become? What is your vision of the kind of Christian life you will live? What does the authentic Christian life look like to you?

I read quite a bit about Ignatius of Loyola who was the founder of the Roman Catholic missional order known as the Jesuits. Ignatius wrote *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* to establish the standards and policies for this organization. In one section he provides the guidelines for all future Secretary-Generals of the Jesuit orders. These qualifications are found in sections 719 – 735 of the Constitutions. Here is a summary of that list provided by Antonio M. de Aldama in *Introductory Commentary on the Constitutions*.

The person who is elected as general is to be above all a man of prayer (723) and a man of great virtue (725, 735). He must have controlled and mortified all his passions so that interiorly they do not disturb him in the right judgment of affairs and outwardly permit him to be very composed and self-controlled in speaking (726). Among the virtues particularly indicted are humility, charity, and love for the Society (725, 735), meekness and kindness, along with rectitude and holy zeal for the divine will and service (727, 728), magnanimity in initiating great undertakings, constancy in persevering

in them, and fortitude and patience to bear “the weaknesses of many” and contradictions even from persons of high rank and power (728).

I am struck by how little description there is of the talent needed for this position and by the strong emphasis on having a right kind of character. Ignatius has provided a vision statement that describes the kind of Christian life a leader must possess. This is what Willard is promoting. In terms of who you will become, you need an attractive, compelling, guiding vision that provides both motivation/energy and the direction/orientation for your journey.

Many of us have a vision of the Christian life that is either deficient or distorted. Deficient means something is lacking. Distorted means something is wrong. At times, deficiency and distortion overlap so much, it is hard to tell which one is present. Both are at work.

For example, many Christians do not have a vision of the Christian life that includes: the experience of God’s love, a deep surrender to the love of God, real friendship with Jesus Christ, and a life of imitating Christ, so we progressively become like him. These things are not included in our vision of the Christian life. They do not provide the motivational energy or the directional guidance for how we make our way on the journey of faith. When our Christian life is essentially a belief system but has little relational experience of God – then it is both deficient and distorted.



Reflection Pause

Turn to Philippians 3:7-11 and do a reflective and prayerful reading to discover the Apostle Paul’s vision for the Christian life. What do you think about the “kind of Christian life” Paul desired to experience? How strongly do you desire the kind of Christian life that Paul longed to have?

Take some time and consider the “kind of Christian life” you want to experience. Whether you make a list or do this in paragraph form, write a compelling description of the kind of person you want to become.

Once you have your essential list, think about why you chose these particular things.

Why are they important to you?

How close or how far away does this kind of life seem to be?

INTENTIONALITY

The second component needed is intentionality. Highly intentional living is the theme of an Exercise in *Volume Two: Invitations*. This kind of intentionality has a major role in my own understanding of life and leadership. So, when Willard includes this in his model, it resonates with me in powerful ways.

Intentionality has to do with the strength of your desire and will, with the consistency of your commitment and dedication, and with the degree of your passion and enthusiasm. Intentionality involves the decisions and choices you make.

How intentional will you be about pursuing your VISION for your Christian life? You are responsible for living a highly intentional Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 Paul describes his own highly intentional focus on finishing well. Then in 1 Timothy 4:15-16, Paul gives advice to his protégé Timothy, encouraging him to be highly intentional as well. *“Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*

It is your responsibility to live with intentionality about the Christian life. At the same time, the ability to do this is also the gift of God to you. Paul reminds Timothy, *“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline”* (1 Timothy 1:7). The Christian life always involves the dynamic tension of God’s gracious activity in your life that empowers and enables you with resources, gifts and energy you do not possess on your own, AND, your personal responsibility to do everything God has commanded you to do (Philippians 2:12-13).

I suggest that Paul’s great intentionality is rooted in and emerges out of a profound love for Christ and grateful awareness of all that Christ has done for Paul. Such knowledge leads Paul to a life of ruthless trust, relentless pursuit and even reckless surrender to the ways and will of God. His love and gratitude lead to a large generosity that is directed toward God. Christ is the pearl of great price for Paul that fuels his greatest commitment to become the kind of person Christ wants him to be.

In just a minute, you will take time for another reflection. Before you do that, I want to talk for a moment about the importance of this work. It is one thing for you to be exposed to ideas and perspectives. In five short paragraphs, I gave you a few central ideas about intentional living. But, knowing that information does not mean you are “one bit closer” to actually being highly intentional. All you have is some more information. You do not have any transformation. Transformation slowly begins to take place as you engage with ideas. If you remember J. I. Packer’s comment that our Christianity is 1/2 inch deep, I believe this is why we remain shallow, untransformed people. We hear ideas, we may even affirm them, but we do little to incorporate these ideas in to our life.

Reflection, prayer, discernment and response are needed for the truth to actually penetrate and form your life. The goal is not to simply read through the ideas in this workbook. The goal is to move into the process of transformation, using the ideas as stepping stones for spiritual growth.



Reflection Pause

There are several passages used in the previous paragraphs. If you did not turn to those passages and read them, take a few minutes to do that. How do these words of Paul speak to your own experience of living (or not) with high intentionality?

In Philippians 3:12-14, Paul gives what I think is a “high water mark” description of highly intentional living as he pursues the fullness of life in Christ. Do a thoughtful, prayerful reading of this passage and allow Paul’s intentionality to inspire and move you.

(cont on next page)



Reflection Pause (cont)

Why do you think Paul had this kind of commitment to pursuing the fullness of life in Christ?

What works against you being highly intentional about pursuing your desired vision and making the necessary choices to do this?

How can you sustain a greater intentionality in your life?

MEANS

Willard believes that first you need an inspiring vision of the Christian life. Then you need the desire and discipline of intentionality to seek after that kind of life. Vision provides the orientation and motivation. Intentionality is the inner will that perseveres in the pursuit of the vision. Vision and intention, however, are not enough. Willard believes there is one more thing you need. That is the “means” to get to where you want to go, or the means to become who you want to be. The means are the practical and useful ways of spiritual formation.

The essential New Testament word used to describe followers of Christ is the word – disciple. Disciple and discipline are closely related. A disciple is one who has embraced the disciplines necessary for the path they have chosen. The means of Christian growth and maturity are often referred to as the spiritual practices. Yet, it takes discipline to do these practices, and so, they are also referred to as the spiritual disciplines. A discipline (in any field of learning and interest) requires dedication and effort. As disciplines are practiced over a period of time, they become routines that define one’s life. Routines eventually take on the nature of habits. When something has become habitual for you, it is a natural and regular part of your “way of life.”

Without discipline, you don’t become or remain a disciple. If you are not a disciple of Jesus you are not following Jesus. If you are not following Jesus, at the least, you should have some serious consideration as to the implications of that reality.

Conversations is a workbook that is designed to guide

you in these means of spiritual formation. Therefore, I’ll only make a few brief comments about the means/disciplines/habits of spiritual formation.

First, many of us do not practice many of the wide variety of spiritual disciplines. We are simply not familiar with (much less accomplished in) the wide repertoire of biblical spirituality as it has been developed over the 2000 years of Christian faith.

Second, when we do practice the disciplines, it is uneven and infrequent. Most of us struggle with consistency when it comes to the life of devotional practices.

Third, when we do practice the disciplines, we don’t know how to do them the way they are meant to be done. Like so many other areas of interest, we may “pick something up” that appeals to us and start to practice it. But without guidance and instruction, we may do it the wrong way. I taught myself how to play tennis. There came a point when I wasn’t getting any better and so I took lessons. My teacher had to help me “unlearn” the wrong way I was gripping my racquet and correct my wrong swinging motions. For my serve, I had to unlearn all the wrong motions and learn new ones.

In a similar way, the spiritual disciplines may be “practiced incorrectly.” *Conversations* will help you assess how you are using these disciplines, provide correction where it is needed and then guidance for new ways of spiritual formation.

I find it useful to think of the spiritual disciplines/pathways as either access pathways or alignment pathways. An access pathway is one that enables you to “access”

or connect with the life of Christ. These pathways are the various approaches to the Bible, prayer, worship, silence and solitude, self-examination and so on.

An alignment pathway is a spiritual approach you use to respond to God. These pathways are for recalibrating your life. They include disciplines like confession, repentance, mortification, cross-bearing, obedience, sacrifice, surrender, trust and so on. It is my experience that evangelicals have focused more on access path-

ways (albeit in rationalistic ways - or incorrect ways of doing the disciplines) and much less on the alignment processes.

As you build a collection of spiritual disciplines/pathways (both access and alignment), you are developing a rhythm and a *Regula* of spiritual formation. The word *regula* refers to a pattern or system of practices. You'll learn more about this later in *Conversations*.



Reflection Pause

Here is an open ended reflection that will guide you in assessing your current starting point for spiritual disciplines. These questions are closely connected and you do not have to fully reflect on each one. Use them as a collage of stepping stones to consider your own practices of spiritual formation.

What is your typical week of spiritual formation like?

What are your rhythms of spiritual discipline?

What spiritual practices do you do, when, and how often?

What resources do you use as a part of your *regula*?

If you have some other spiritual practices that are important, but which are not done on a weekly basis, make a note of those.

What is most beneficial and fruitful for you in your spiritual practices, and, what does not seem to be as meaningful and useful for connecting you with God and his transforming presence?

❖ **My Take-Away Is...**