

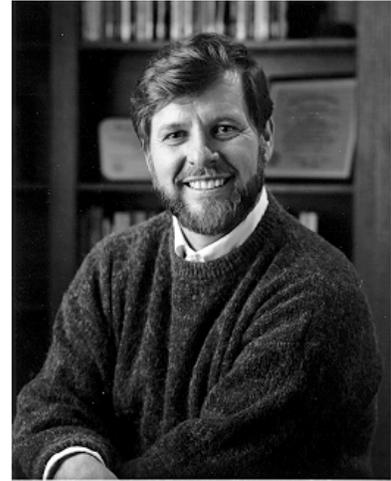
Growing Edges

October, 1995

Jesus Christ calls all peoples everywhere to be his disciples. And disciples are those who intend to live their lives as Jesus would live them if Jesus were them.

Shrouded in the Mists of History

But the practical doing of this is obscured to us today for Jesus is shrouded in the mists of history. By saying this I am not referring to the problem of the quest for the historical Jesus. Quite the opposite. Our problem is that the modern religious imagination is so stunted that we have effectively locked Jesus into first century Palestine with its robes and sandals and overall agrarian culture. We can hardly imagine what it would look like for Jesus to function as a computer programmer or lab technician or construction worker or graduate student, not to mention a mother or father, a husband or wife. Can you, for example, picture Jesus attending a NBA basketball game or playing softball with the local team or sitting in the break room with other Wal-Mart employees? Yet these are precisely the kinds of things we need to imagine if we expect to live as his disciples in the modern world.



An Overall Way of Life

In saying this, I am speaking of an overall way of life, not just about times when we are on the spot or are trying to make a critical decision. If I am a magazine editor and ask the question, "How would Jesus live if he were me?" I am not primarily asking about what kind of articles I will publish in my magazine though that question will be asked and answered. But more to the heart of the issue I am asking questions about my leisure time, about recreation, about sleep, about prayer, about solitude, about reading and relationships, and a host of other things. Then as a disciple I will order my life according to an overall pattern that conforms to the way of Christ.

"But how will I know the right pattern?" you may ask. Well, first of all there is no "right" pattern. Different personalities, situations, and needs demand different patterns. Besides, it is not nearly as hard as you think. A simple, unvarnished reading of the Gospels will give you an overall way of living that Jesus felt important while among us in the flesh. Of course, that was done in the context of first-century Palestinian culture, but with very little effort, you can easily make the conversion to your situation. Then, too, Jesus is truly alive and teaching his people. If, with humility of heart, you genuinely seek his way, he will guide you.

The Grace in Discipleship

And this is the great grace in discipleship to Jesus. When we seek him with all our heart, we are found by him. From our human perspective it seems like we are following hard after God: seeking, striving, pursuing. In reality, we are pursuing God only because he is first pursuing us. As Frederick von Hugel says, "God is always previous". So our discipleship is really one of reflex action, of God seeking us, of prevenient grace.

This reality is a great encouragement. Jesus is ever with us, our everliving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. His invitation to be his disciples is all grace and mercy for we are invited to be yoked to him. And as we learn to fall in step with him, he will show us the way and give us the resources to live that way.

Peace and joy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard J. Foster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "J".

Richard J. Foster

Growing Together

In our world today people hunger greatly for two things: spirituality and community. We long to be close to God and to one another. We long for a place where we can know and be known at the deepest levels.

For the most part, the reality of God and the spiritual realm have been banished from modern culture. In spite of the secularizing influences that surround us, we cry out from our alienation, longing for a deeper relationship with the One who created us.

We also experience the dehumanizing, depersonalization of everyone living on the face of the earth. As only a face in a crowd or a number on a computer screen, we belong to families, neighborhoods, and churches that no longer provide us with a sense of community.

The answer to these two needs can be found in Christian community. The interest in small groups in recent years is a sign that God is meeting these needs in the life of the Church. God is calling Christian men and women into small, face-to-face communities whose sole aim is to encourage one another in their spiritual lives.

Gareth Icenogle is right when he says, "Growth is the process and product of the community, not the isolated individual. Persons grow when they are in relationship with God and with one another. Persons remain in spiritual infancy when they refuse to participate in community (koinonia). Christians who cannot relate to one another in face-to-face situations are missing the reality, hope, and growth of *sanctorum communio*, the communion of the saints. To be together with other Christians in a small group is to open oneself to being formed in Christ."

Effective Groups

During the last few years I have been privileged to help form and nurture spiritual formation groups where people gather to discuss their spiritual lives, encourage one another, and make specific plans to grow in their faith, to become disciples of Christ. And through letters and telephone calls I have the opportunity to

share in the common joys and struggles that many groups experience. From them I have learned that effective groups have several things in common:

- Living in dependence upon Christ;
- Seeking renewal continually;
- Focusing on Christ together;
- Watching over one another in love;
- Working toward a common goal;
- Cultivating stronger relationships;
- Feeling greater security;
- Deepening their level of trust;
- Growing closer through prayer.

While this list is not exhaustive, it offers some of the important ingredients of an effective spiritual formation group. Often I hear members tell how one or more of these dimensions is experienced in their group and how meaningful it is.

I also hear the opposite. People complain, for example, that their group lacks an atmosphere of trust or cannot seem to stay on any kind of agenda or has a member who dominates the time. Whether coming from the positive or negative—the joys or the problems—these ingredients are important for all spiritual formation groups to understand and develop.

Healthy Growth

From my experience, I have learned that one or more of these dimensions has been lacking in every single group of which I have been a member. I have been in groups that were highly task oriented and successful at accomplishing goals but lacked relational harmony. Other groups had harmony in relationships but had trouble keeping Christ at the center. You, too, can probably point to experiences in your spiritual life and past or present groups which reflect strength in one area and weakness in another.

Let me encourage you to use the above list, turning the statements into questions: "Am I/we dependent upon Christ? Am I/ we seeking renewal continually?" and so on. If you think of other dimensions that are important, add them. Use them in your small group. Most of all, I encourage you to keep striving and inspiring each other to "be all that you can be" as disciples of Jesus Christ.

James Bryan Smith

Why Bother With Discipleship?

by Dallas Willard

If we are Christians simply by believing that Jesus died for our sins, then that is all it takes to have sins forgiven and go to heaven when we die. Why, then, do some people keep insisting that something more than this is desirable? Lordship, discipleship, spiritual formation, and the like?

What more could one want than to be sure of their eternal destiny and enjoy life among others who profess the same faith as they do. Of course, everyone wants to be a good person. But that does not require that you actually do what Jesus himself said and did. Haven't you heard? "Christians aren't perfect. Just forgiven."

Now those who honestly find themselves concerned about such matters might find it helpful to consider four simple points.

Vampire Christianity

First, there is absolutely nothing in what Jesus himself or his early followers taught that suggests you can decide just to enjoy forgiveness at Jesus' expense and have nothing more to do with him.

Some years ago A. W. Tozer expressed his "feeling that a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles—the widely-accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want to!"¹ He then goes on to state "that salvation apart from obedience is unknown in the sacred Scriptures."

This "heresy" has created the impression that it is quite reasonable to be a "vampire Christian". One in effect says to Jesus: "I'd like a little of your blood, please. But I don't care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won't you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I'll see you in heaven." But can we really imagine that this is an approach that Jesus finds acceptable?

And when you stop to think of it, how could one actually trust him for forgiveness of sins while not trusting him for much more than that. You can't trust him without believing that he was right about everything and that he alone has the key to every aspect of our lives here on earth. But if you believe that, you will naturally want to stay just as close to him as you can in every aspect of your life.

Locked in Defeat

Second, if we do not become his apprentices in kingdom living, we remain locked in defeat so far as our moral intentions are concerned. This is where most professing Christians find themselves today. Statistical studies prove it. People, generally, choose to sin. And they are filled with explanations as to why, everything considered, it is understandable to do so. But, even so, no one chooses to be a sinner. It is amusing that people will admit to lying, for example, but stoutly deny that they are liars.

We want to be good, but we are prepared, ready to do evil should circumstances require it. And, of course, they do "require" it with deadening regularity. As Jesus himself indicated, those who practice sin actually are slaves of it (John 8:34). Ordinary life confirms it. How consistently do you find people able to do good and avoid evil as they intend.

By contrast, practicing Jesus' word as his apprentices enables us to understand our lives and to see how we can interact with God's redemptive resources ever at hand. This in turn gives us an increasing freedom from failed intentions as we learn from him how, simply, to do what we know to be right. By a practiced abiding in his words, we come to know the truth and the truth does, sure enough, make us free (John 8:36).

The Way to Inward Transformation

Third, only avid discipleship to Christ through the Spirit brings the inward transformation of thought, feeling, and character that "cleans the inside of the cup" (Matt. 23:25) and "makes the tree good" (Matt. 12:33). As we study with Jesus, we increasingly become on the inside—with "the Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6)—exactly what we are on the outside where actions and moods and attitudes visibly play over our body alive in its social context. An amazing simplicity will take over our lives—a simplicity that is really just transparency.

This requires a long and careful learning from Jesus to remove the duplicity that has become second nature to us—as is perhaps inevitable in a world where to "manage" our relations to those about us we must hide what we really think, feel,

and would like to do if only we could avoid observation. Thus, a part of Jesus' teaching was to "avoid the leaven [permeating spirit] of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).

The Pharisees were in many respects the very best people of Jesus' day. But they located goodness in behavior and tried to secure themselves by careful management at the behavioral level. However, that simply cannot be done. Behavior is driven by the hidden or secret dimension of human personality from the depths of the soul and body, and what is present there will escape. Hence, they always failed at some point to do what is right and had to redefine, redescribe, or explain it away—or simply hide it.

By contrast the fruit of the Spirit as described by Jesus and Paul does not consist in actions but in attitudes or settled personality traits that make up the substance of the "hidden" self, the "inner person." "Love" captures this fruit in one word but in such a concentrated form that it needs to be spelled out. Thus, "The fruit [singular] of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22). Other such passages easily come to mind such as 2 Peter 1:4-11, 1 Corinthians 13, and Romans 5:1-5.

"Spiritual formation" in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed and permeated by such character traits as we walk in the easy yoke of discipleship with Jesus as our teacher. From the inward character the deeds of love then naturally—but supernaturally—and transparently flow. Of course, there will always be room for improvement so we need not worry that we will become perfect—at least for a few weeks or months. Our aim is to be pervasively possessed by Jesus through constant companionship with him. Like our brother, Paul: "This one thing I do! . . . I press toward the mark! . . . That I may know him!" (Phil. 3).

A Power Beyond Ourselves

Fourth and finally, for the one who intentionally walks as close to Jesus as possible, there comes the reliable exercise of a power that is beyond them in dealing with the problems and evils that afflict earthly existence. Jesus is actually looking for people he can trust with his power. He knows that otherwise we remain largely helpless in the face of the organized and disorganized evils around us and unable to promote his will for good in this world with adequate power.

He is the one who said, "I have been given say over all things in heaven and earth. So you go . . ." (Matt. 28:18). Of him it was said that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (Acts 10:38, emphasis added). We are called to do his work by his power.

However we may understand the details, there can be no doubt on the biblical picture of human life that we were meant to be inhabited by God and live by a power beyond ourselves. Human problems cannot be solved by human means. Human life can never flourish unless it pulses with "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (Eph. 1:19). But only constant students of Jesus will be given adequate power to fulfill their calling to be God's person for their time and their place in this world.

But, someone will say, can I not be saved—get into heaven when I die—without any of this? Perhaps you can. God's goodness is so great, I am sure, that he will let you in if he can find any basis at all to do so. But you might wish to think about what your life amounts to before you die, about what kind of person you are becoming, and whether you really would be comfortable for eternity in the presence of one whose company you have not found especially desirable for the few hours and days of earthly existence. And he is, after all, One who says to you now, "Follow me!"

¹I Call It Heresy (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), pp. 5f.



Dallas Willard is professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and an ordained Southern Baptist minister. He is the author of *In Search of Guidance* and *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

Going Deeper

Review of A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life by William Law

In 1728 William Law penned one of the truly great devotional books of all time . . . and one that is especially needed in our time. Such diverse leaders as John Wesley, Samuel Johnson, and John Henry Newman have expressed their indebtedness to Law and his book. Three things make this book stand out.

First, more profoundly than most, Law understood the place of "intention" in the spiritual life. He forces us to search our hearts to see if we have "the intention to please God in all (our) actions" (p. 56). Are we intending—that is, are we making specific, measurable, personal plans—to stop sinning? If not, then we are intending to sin. So runs the logic of Law, and it is a logic with a sting in it. He rightly understands that intention intently pursued will produce "holy habits" and, in time, transformed persons. He writes, "Christianity supposes, intends, desires, and aims at nothing else but the raising (of) fallen man to a divine life, to such habits of holiness, such degrees of devotion as may fit him to enter amongst the holy inhabitants of the Kingdom of Heaven" (p. 208).

Second, Law presses us again and again to bring this eternal kind of life into our daily experience. "Thus it is in all the virtues and holy tempers of Christianity; they are not ours unless they be the virtues and tempers of our ordinary life" (p. 52). "Devotion," says Law, "is a life given or devoted to God" (p. 47).

Third, for an eighteenth-century writing, Law is amazingly contemporary in his use of story and illustration. In this book we meet a vast array of people: Flavia and Miranda, Eugenius and Cognatus, Mundanus and Classicus, and many more. Law is a good story teller for each time as we are engaged with the character, we find ourselves.

This edition by Paulist Press is the best one on the market today. Its more than five hundred pages contain a superb introduction and a second work by Law entitled *The Spirit of Love* which is an excellent essay on the spiritual life in its own right.

A Serious Call is not a quick read. I have been slowly working through it since last May and will probably continue with it until Christmas. The good news is that if you will stay with this book, it will do more for your spiritual development than twenty contemporary "devotional" books.

Richard J. Foster

Going Places

Date	Event	Location	Staff	Contact & Phone
10/6/95-10/8/95	RENOVARÉ Retreat	Olympic View Friends Tacoma, WA	Marti Ensign	
10/13/95-10/14/95	RENOVARÉ Regional Conference	Walla Walla Valley Academy Aud. College Place, WA	Richard Foster Roger Fredrikson	Henning Guldhammer— 509-527-2800
10/16/95-10/25/95	Academic Teaching	Azusa Pacific University	Richard Foster	
11/10/95-11/11/95	RENOVARÉ Regional Conference	Pioneer Drive Baptist Church Abilene, TX	Richard Foster Emilie Griffin	Don Mattingly—915-692- 6776 (Secretary-Anita)
12/23/95-1/1/96	Christmas/New Year's Holidays	Office Closed	Everyone!	
1/11/96-1/13/96	Faculty/Staff/Graduate Student Retreats	Azusa Pacific University	Richard Foster	
1/26/96-1/27/96	RENOVARÉ Regional Conference	Cashion Building 5th Floor Baylor University, Waco, TX	Richard Foster Jim Smith	Brent Peery—817-752-3000 (Secretary-Lydia)
2/10/96	RENOVARÉ Local Conference	Trinity United Methodist Church Salina, KS	Jim Smith	Vicki Price—913-823-2455
2/10/96	RENOVARÉ Local Conference	Moreland Presbyterian Church Portland, OR	Marti Ensign	Nancy Gaston—503-234- 8404
2/12/96-2/15/96	Academic Teaching	Azusa Pacific University	Richard Foster	
2/16/96-2/17/96	RENOVARÉ Regional Conference	First United Methodist Church Bartlesville, OK	Richard Foster Donn Thomas	Keith Cressman—918-336- 3361 or Bob Bogue—918- 336-5762
3/2/96	RENOVARÉ Local Conference	First Presbyterian Church Boulder, CO	Jim Smith	Valerie Hess—303-442- 2895
3/8/96-3/9/96	RENOVARÉ Regional Conference	First Baptist Church Shreveport, LA	Richard Foster Jim Smith	Robert Guffey—318-865- 8414
3/10/26	Preach	First Baptist Church Shreveport, LA	Richard Foster	Robert Guffey—318-865- 8414
3/14/96-3/16/96	Hawaiian Islands Ministries Conference	Sheraton Waikiki Waikiki, HI	Richard Foster	Dan Chun—808-988-9777

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