

## DALLAS WILLARD

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The following is excerpted from the book *CONTEMPLATIVE MYSTICISM: A POWERFUL ECUMENICAL BOND*, which is available from Way of Life Literature. Contemplative mysticism, which originated with Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox monasticism, is permeating every branch of Christianity today, including the Southern Baptist Convention. In this book we document the fact that Catholic mysticism leads inevitably to a broadminded ecumenical philosophy and to the adoption of heresies. For many, this path has led to interfaith dialogue, Buddhism, Hinduism, universalism, pantheism, panentheism, even goddess theology. One chapter is dedicated to exposing the heresies of Richard Foster: "Evangelicalism's Mystical Sparkplug." We describe the major contemplative practices, such as centering prayer, visualizing prayer, Jesus Prayer, *Lectio Divina*, and the labyrinth. We look at the history of Roman Catholic monasticism, beginning with the Desert Fathers and the Church Fathers, and document the heresies associated with it, such as its sacramental gospel, rejection of the Bible as sole authority, veneration of Mary, purgatory, celibacy, asceticism, allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and moral corruption. We examine the errors of contemplative mysticism, such as downplaying the centrality of the Bible, ignoring the fact that multitudes of professing Christians are not born again, exchanging the God of the Bible for a blind idol, ignoring the Bible's warnings against associating with heresy and paganism, and downplaying the danger of spiritual delusion.

A major section of the book is entitled "A Biographical Catalog of Contemplative Mystics" which deals with dozens of the current-day contemplative promoters as well as the ancient "saints" and mystics that are being resurrected today, including the following:

Angela of Foligno, Anthony the Great, Augustine, Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ken Blanchard, Bonaventure, Brother Lawrence, Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Siena, Larry Crabb, Anthony De Mello, Dominic, Meister Eckhart, Tilden Edwards, James Finely, Richard Foster, Matthew Fox, Frances de Sales, Francis of Assisi, Alan Griffiths, Madame Guyon, Hildegard of Bingen, Ignatius of Loyola, Willigis Jager, John of the Cross, William Johnston, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Keating, Morton Kelsey, Thomas a Kempis, Sue Monk Kidd, Peter Kreeft, John Main, Brennan Manning, Thomas Merton, J.P. Moreland, Henri Nouwen, Basil Pennington, Eugene Peterson, Karl Kahner, Thomas Ryan, William Shannon, Henri Le Saux, Philip St. Roman, David Steindl-Rast, Henry Suso, John Michael Talbot, Johann Tauler, Wayne Teasdale, Pierre Teilhard, Teresa of Avila, Teresa of Lisieux, Majorie Thompson, Phyllis Tickle, Robert Webber, Dallas Willard, and John Yungblut.

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DALLAS WILLARD (b. 1935) is a philosophy professor who has had an influence on the emerging church and evangelicalism at large through his writings on contemplative spirituality and the kingdom of God. Brian McLaren has called Willard and Richard Foster "key mentors in the emerging church."

Willard is a professor in the philosophy department at the University of Southern California. He has taught at Fuller Theological Seminary and elsewhere.

He is also an ordained Southern Baptist minister.

Willard graduated from Tennessee Temple College in 1956 with a B.A. in psychology, but has moved far beyond his fundamentalist roots. Even then, according to his wife, "He did have rebellion in him" ("A Divine Conspirator: Dallas Willard is on a quiet quest to subvert nominal Christianity," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 2006).

Strangely, it was at fundamentalist Tennessee Temple that Willard had a mystical experience that changed his life. He met his wife, Jane, there, and after they prayed to surrender their lives to Christ during one of the services a man named R. R. Brown laid hands on Willard and prayed over him. Jane told *Christianity Today* that "Willard lost consciousness, later describing the experience as being enveloped in a cloud." She added, "A spiritual reality became tangible for Willard in that moment" (*Christianity Today*, Sept. 2006).

We don't know what happened to Willard that day, but the fruit of it is that he has walked away from a solid biblical position. He falsely labels the strict biblicist position "legalism."

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard describes how that as a young assistant pastor in a Southern Baptist church he was convinced that he was ignorant of God and the soul, so he decided to study philosophy, of all things! He claims that God spoke to him and said, "If you stay in the churches, the university will be closed to you; but if you stay in the university, the churches will be open to you." Yet, the apostle Paul issued a very plain warning about the danger of philosophy. "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ*" (Col. 2:8).

Willard's extensive journey into the depths of humanism and philosophy has corrupted his thinking as the Bible warns. "*Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners*" (1 Cor. 15:33).

He rejects the infallible inspiration of Scripture, saying, "Jesus and his words have never belonged to the categories of dogma or law, and to read them as if they did is simply to miss them" (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. xiii). In fact, Jesus' words are dogma and law and much more.

Willard says that during his fundamentalist days he would shock his classmates with statements like this:

"If you could find a better way, Jesus would be the first one to tell you to take it. And if you don't believe that about him, you don't have faith in him, because what you're really saying is that he would encourage you to believe something that is

false” (Christianity Today, Sept. 2006).

In reality, this is not a shocking statement so much as a ridiculous one. Jesus claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life and said that no man comes unto the Father but by Him (John 14:6). Thus, there is no “better” way, and if one finds a “better” way, then Jesus was wrong.

**Willard is confused about salvation itself.** He asks:

“Why is it that we look upon salvation as a moment that began our religious life instead of the daily life we receive from God?” (The Spirit of the Disciplines).

The biblical answer to this question is that Jesus Christ described salvation as a new birth, and a birth is not a lifelong process. Willard confuses justification with sanctification.

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard rejects the gospel of believing in Christ’s atonement.

“When all is said and done, ‘the gospel’ for Ryrie, MacArthur, and others on the theological right is that Christ made ‘the arrangement’ that can get us into heaven” (p. 49).

Willard rejects this gospel. Consider the following statement:

“In replying to MacArthur, Charles Ryrie states that ‘the Gospel that saves is believing that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead.’ ... Ryrie does not try to support his claim that removal of sin-guilt ... to secure entrance into heaven after death, is the problem or issue. ... But in the face of Christian history and of the biblical record, that claim does need support--support it can never find. The Christian tradition certainly deals with guilt and the afterlife, but by no means does it take them to be the only issues involved in salvation” (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 44).

Thus, Willard rejects the gospel that Paul preached.

“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Paul preached much about holy Christian living and discipleship, but he did not confuse this with the salvation of one’s soul and of the justification of the sinner before God and the reconciliation of the sinner with God. Paul preached that salvation is a gift of God’s grace in Christ and that good works follow as the fruit thereof.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

These are Bible truths that even children can understand, but Willard makes everything complicated, which is typical of false teachers.

The apostle Paul said that if a man preaches any other gospel than the one that he was given by divine revelation, he is cursed of God.

“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

Paul did not preach a kingdom gospel or a discipleship gospel. If I were Dallas Willard, I would not be able to sleep at night for Galatians 1:8 ringing in my mind.

Willard sets up a strawman of a gospel of justification that does not change the individual's life. He presents a distorted caricature of the gospel that is commonly preached by Bible believers, and his proposed solution to this alleged problem is a kingdom gospel.

“On a recent radio program a prominent minister spent fifteen minutes enforcing the point that ‘justification,’ the forgiveness of sins, involves no change at all in the heart or personality of the one forgiven. It is, he insisted, something entirely external to you, located wholly in God himself. His intent was to emphasize the familiar Protestant point that salvation is by God's grace only and is totally independent of what we may do. But what he in fact said was that being a Christian has nothing to do with the kind of person you are” (The Divine Conspiracy, pp. 36, 37).

Willard doesn't tell us what “prominent minister” he is referring to, but it is certainly *not* typical among evangelicals and Baptists even in this apostate day to preach that salvation has no impact on one's life. It is more typical to preach that one is saved by God's grace through the gift that Christ purchased, and this, in turn, results in the new birth which changes the life.

That is certainly what the Bible teaches. The person that is truly saved has repented of his rebellion before God and has turned around to face in a new direction. He has been regenerated and all things are new.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (1 Cor. 5:17).

“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

This is exactly what was taught at Tennessee Temple in the 1950s when Willard attended there and is what most independent Baptist churches preach today.

But what Willard promotes is a kingdom gospel that confuses salvation with discipleship, justification with sanctification, reconciliation with Christian living. He bases this on Christ's preaching in Matthew, rejecting the proper dispensational interpretation which sees this as an announcement of the kingdom promised to David's Son.

Willard's error on the kingdom of God is one of the central errors of the emerging church, as we have documented in *What Is the Emerging Church?*

Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy* is intended for the general public and even for college and university students, but nowhere does he give a clear statement on the new birth and how a person can be born again. Nowhere does he warn of God's judgment or of eternal hellfire. Nowhere is there any sense of urgency about the necessity of individual's being saved before it is too late.

If Willard believes these essential things, he needs to publish a new edition of the book that includes them and he should issue an apology for such a gross oversight.

Willard teaches that Christian living is building the kingdom of God in this present world. He says:

"As far as the content of what I try to present is concerned it focuses on the gospel of the kingdom of God and becoming a disciple of Jesus in the kingdom of God. So it doesn't merely have an emphasis on the forgiveness of sins and assurance of heaven as you are apt to find in most evangelical circles. I think that is vital but it is not the whole story" (Kingdom Living).

He says that the kingdom of God is in the world today and all men walk in it.

"To be born 'from above,' in New Testament language, means to be interactively joined with a dynamic, unseen system of divine reality in the midst of which all of humanity moves about--whether it knows it or not. And that, of course, is 'The Kingdom Among Us'" (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 68).

This is not what the apostle John said.

"And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5:19).

For more about the kingdom of God see <http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/kingdom-of-god.html>.

**Willard even allows room for salvation apart from faith in Christ.** In an interview

he was presented with the following question:

“I still struggle with how I should view those who have other beliefs. I’m not sure I am ready to condemn them as wrong. I know some very good Buddhists. What is their destiny?”

To this he replied:

“I would take [this individual] to Romans 2:6-10: God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. What Paul is clearly saying is that if anyone is worthy of being saved, they will be saved. At that point many Christians get very anxious, saying that absolutely no one is worthy of being saved. The implication of that is that a person can be almost totally good, but miss the message about Jesus, and be sent to hell. What kind of a God would do that? I am not going to stand in the way of anyone whom God wants to save. I am not going to say he can’t save them. I am happy for God to save anyone he wants in any way he can. **IT IS POSSIBLE FOR SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT KNOW JESUS TO BE SAVED.** But anyone who is going to be saved is going to be saved by Jesus” (“Apologetics in Action,” Cutting Edge magazine, winter 2001, vol. 5 no. 1, Vineyard USA, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=14>).

In Romans 2 Paul is not saying that someone can be saved by doing good. The theme of Romans 1:18 - 3:23 is that all men are under God’s wrath because all are sinners. Paul summarizes this section in Romans 3:9 by saying, “We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, **THAT THEY ARE ALL UNDER SIN.**” He wouldn’t contradict this by saying that it might be possible for some to be saved by good works. If a sinner *could* continue in well doing, he would be saved in that way, but no sinner does this nor can do this. Paul says in Romans 3 that none are righteous, none seek after God, none fear God, all are gone out of the way, “*there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*” In Romans 2 Paul says, “*For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law*” (verse 12). Since he says in chapter 3 that “all have sinned,” this means that all will perish unless they obtain salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ.

And the idea that someone might be saved who doesn’t know Jesus might sound wise and compassionate, but it is plainly refuted by Scripture and is therefore a fool’s dream.

Jesus said, “*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). The new birth is a very real spiritual event, and it happens only when a sinner consciously puts his faith in Christ. In the same passage Jesus explained how to be born again. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16). He plainly stated, “*He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God*” (John 3:18).

Therefore, if a person does not consciously believe in Jesus Christ he is condemned. Jesus concluded that sermon by saying, "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him*" (John 3:36). Words could not be clearer.

Jesus said further:

"I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9).

A man can enter in through Christ and find acceptance with God, but any other door leads to destruction. And to say that an individual could enter into salvation through Christ and not know it is as ridiculous as it is unscriptural.

John said:

"He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John 5:10-12).

The person that "hath the Son" is the person who believes on him, and the person that "hath not the son" is the one that does not believe. There is no such thing as "unconscious saving faith."

There is simply no other way of salvation than to put one's faith in Jesus Christ and to receive Him in such a manner that one is born anew.

**Willard rejects the doctrine that God is wrathful.** He believes it is wrong to see God as "a policeman on the prowl" (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 64). He rejects the idea that God hates or that God "in a moment of rage" will destroy the earth (p. 267).

He says that the true idea of God is that He is only loveable.

"The acid test for any theology is this: Is the God presented one that can be loved, heart, soul, mind, and strength? ... If it fails to set a lovable God--a radiant, happy, friendly, accessible, and totally competent being--before ordinary people, we have gone wrong" (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 329).

In fact, the acid test for any theology is whether or not it is Scriptural! And the Scripture describes God not only as loving and compassionate and patient, etc., but also as holy and just and as having wrath toward all sin, and that is not only God in the past but also God in the present. The redeemed heart loves God in all of His facets, but the unredeemed heart loves only a god of its own creation.

It appears to me that Willard rejects the God of the Bible.

“Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him” (Psalm 2:12).

“God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day” (Psalm 7:11).

“Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him” (Psalms 50:3).

“For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many” (Isaiah 66:15-16).

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18).

“And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).

“For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

“For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

If he believes in the God described in these and hundreds of other verses, he needs to go back and revise his books.

**Willard calls the doctrine of substitutionary atonement a “theory”** (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 42). This is one reason why the emerging church heretic Brian McLaren likes Willard. Addressing the issue of the atonement, McLaren says:

“I think the gospel is a many faceted diamond, and atonement is only one facet, and legal models of atonement (which predominate in western Christianity) are only one small portion of that one facet. Dallas Willard also addresses this issue



in 'The Divine Conspiracy.' Atonement-centered understandings of the gospel, he says, create vampire Christians who want Jesus for his blood and little else. He calls us to move beyond a 'gospel of sin management'--to the gospel of the kingdom of God. So, rather than focusing on an alternative theory of atonement, I'd suggest we ponder the meaning and mission of the kingdom of God" (<http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000149.html>).

For more about the substitutionary atonement see the book *What Is the Emerging Church?*

**Willard appears to hold to a post-millennial doctrine** that the kingdom of God will be established gradually through the transformation of men and society.

"God's way of moving toward the future is, with gentle persistence in unflinching purpose, to bring about the transformation of the human heart by speaking with human beings and living with and in them" (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 380).

He describes the future kingdom of Christ as "gentle" and "nonviolent" (p. 381). This denies the Bible's teaching that Christ will come in wrath and judgment and will rule with a rod of iron.

**Willard promotes contemplative spirituality.** His books *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, *Hearing God*, and *Renovation of the Heart* deal with this theme.

He recommends the Catholic-Buddhist Thomas Merton and the Roman Catholic mystic saints such as Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Dominic, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Brother Lawrence, Francis of Assisi, Thomas à Kempis, and Henri Nouwen.

He recommends the Rule of Saint Benedict, *The Imitation of Christ*, and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 370).

We have documented the deep theological heresy associated with these people and practices in the chapters "A Description of Roman Catholic Monasticism" and "The Error of Catholic Monasticism." All of the Catholics that Willard recommends held to a false sacramental gospel, venerated Mary, prayed to a piece of bread, pursued an asceticism that Paul condemned in Colossians 2, believed in purgatory, etc.

Willard has been associated with Richard Foster since he attended Foster's Quaker church in California in the 1970s. Willard was the song leader and sometimes a teacher in the church and his wife played the organ. Foster is the most influential promoter of Catholic contemplative mysticism alive today.

**Willard is an ecumenist.** He is a Ministry Team member with Foster's radically ecumenical Renovaré organization. Foster describes the breadth of his ecumenical vision in these words:

"I see a Catholic monk from the hills of Kentucky standing alongside a Baptist

evangelist from the streets of Los Angeles and together offering up a sacrifice of praise. I see a people” (Streams of Living Water, 1998, p. 274).

Willard favorably quotes a wide variety of heretics with no warning to his readers. In *The Divine Conspiracy* he quotes Malcolm Muggeridge, Hans Kung, C.H. Dodd, David Yonggi Cho, B.F. Westcott, Helmut Thielicke, Gustave Martelet, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Henry Newman, Rudolf Bultmann, Brennan Manning, J.R.R. Tolkein, plus the aforementioned Catholic mystic saints.

Willard rejects biblical separation and mischaracterizes and slanders those who seek to practice it.

“These are the perfectionists. They are a pain to everyone, themselves most of all. In religion they will certainly find errors in your doctrine, your practice, and probably your heart and your attitude” (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 118).

Willard does not explain how it is possible to obey God’s Word and NOT find errors in doctrine (e.g., Acts 17:11; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Tim. 1:3; 6:13-14; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 2:7; Jude 3).

Willard grossly misinterprets 2 Corinthians 3:6-10 to support his doctrine that it is wrong to judge.

“Then there is a warning about trying to control others by ‘judging,’ blaming, condemning them. The apostle Paul later contrasted the ‘ministry of condemnation’ with the ‘ministry of the Spirit’ or ‘ministry of righteousness’ (2 Cor. 3:6-10)” (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 137).

In truth, 2 Corinthians 3 contrasts the Law of Moses with the Gospel of Grace, the Old Covenant with the New. The “ministration of condemnation” of verse 9 is the same as the “ministration of death” in verse 7 and it refers to what Moses wrote “in stones” on Mt. Sinai. Paul was not warning about a Christian ministry that contends for the faith once delivered to the saints and carefully tests everything by Scripture and marks and avoids false doctrine. He was warning about Judaistic legalism that preached salvation through works.

Willard claims that God is not concerned about doctrinal purity. In fact, he says that God loves theologians of all types.

“Theologians on both the left and the right, and those on no known scale of comparison, are all loved by God, who has great things in mind for every one of them” (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 329).

This is contrary to the Bible, which says that those who preach false gospels are cursed (Galatians 1) and those who preach false christs are of the devil (2 Corinthians 11; 2 Peter 2; 2 John).

**Willard holds the New Thought, Word-Faith doctrine that mind affects matter.**

“This opens up a deep truth about our universe as a whole. It is a world that responds to desire and to will, and in many ways. ... this central fact of life shows that matter is not indifferent to personality. It is influenced by it and influences it in turn. This is an actual fact about our world and our place in it. Within a narrow range, then, desire and will directly influence physical reality by simply desiring and willing it to behave in certain ways. ... One would not, at present, want to venture greatly on the reality of psychokinesis, the alleged ability to move things by thought and will alone. But recent scientifically organized studies strongly indicate a power very like it” (The Divine Conspiracy, p. 247).

In February 2006 Willard returned to Tennessee Temple University to conduct a seminar, which demonstrates unequivocally that Tennessee Temple has rejected its former position.