

A RELUCTANT PROPHET: HOW DOES PROFESSOR WILLARD PROPOSE TO TAKE OVER THE WORLD?



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Dallas Willard calms me down. His demeanor is relaxed; he does not seem worried. I recently congratulated him on his birthday; I wished him many more good years. He answered, “Oh, I don’t think about more years. I don’t have any control over that; I just take them as they come.” Part of what makes Dallas appealing is that he seems to live out of the riches of his person. He is the embodiment of the antidote for what ails the church and the culture in which it lives.

The church is in a hurry, addicted to short cuts, frantic to be hip and to make it with those who already are. The hipsters are of the Google generation; newer is better, and faster is best. Google’s mission statement includes making all the information in the world free on the Internet. In 1984 George Orwell worried about information being withheld from the public; in *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley warned that the problem was too much information. Huxley feared that people would come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think. The church gets swept away in this fast moving, superficial locomotion; it does not slow down to think, reflect, pray, and wait. It is the sign of an unsatisfied soul.

By way of contrast, Dallas is at peace, he is non-competitive on his own behalf, and he does not even know how many books he has sold. Any author who does not know such a thing is suspect. Possibly he is on a mood-altering drug, or could it be that he knows something the rest of us do not? That is his charm, which is why he interests us; we keep chasing his secret as to why so many things that bother us do not bother him.

When Dallas speaks, his hearers have smiles on their faces; they are disarmed by his way. It does not seem to matter that he has no PowerPoint or nifty outline, or tear-jerking story; they camp on every word, and their fingers hurt from typing or taking notes. If he says something cryptic or if he does not make sense, they think it is their fault. They will let him tell them off and thank him for it.

He is a reluctant prophet whose avuncular nature creates receptiveness in the multitudes who read his work and would love to meet him. They

would not only like to meet him; they want to sit on the front porch and listen as he explains the mysteries of the ages. Here is a man who is determined “not to make anything happen.” He does not seem to be on a mission, but few have more influence. He has great influence, yet it seems incidental to his life. He is the accidental prophet. His intention was to teach from the university; his reality has been that his university has become universal.

He seems a rather benign figure for a revolutionary as he strolls across the University of Southern California campus where he has taught philosophy for over forty years. He is unaccompanied by the press; a casual wave at a student or fellow faculty member is as exciting as it gets. He ambles along with books under his arm; he hardly looks the part of a man who has crafted a scheme to take over the world. On a clear day you can see the Hollywood sign from the campus, yet no film mogul has pitched a movie to him. Federal agents have not knocked on his door; he is not even under surveillance. His plan is not hidden; you can buy it or download it onto your iPod. You might see it on a pastor’s bookshelf or spy a college student reading it at Starbucks. It is called *The Divine Conspiracy*, a book written by Professor Willard, an outlandish plan to change the world.

No one is threatened by this *Conspiracy* because it seems so unlikely, so impractical, so not *news*. Realists believe that the way of Jesus is nice for people, but lacks the power to penetrate the real strongholds of culture: it cannot tackle injustice, hatred, and political tyranny. But Dr. Willard contends that ordinary people who change from the inside out can, given enough time to multiply, transform the power structures of the society in which we live. How does Professor Willard propose we change the world, and what would it look like if we did?

I. HE STARTS WITH DISCIPLESHIP.

My affection for Dallas Willard began with his commitment to what is commonly called discipleship. He was different from most who consigned it to a post-conversion basic training for converts. He saw it as the heart of the gospel; without it, the gospel and the world mission would be debilitated. Discipleship was to be a normal part of salvation, not an option, an afterthought, or a class for newbies meeting in the fireside room. In this regard, he was in the tradition of Bonhoeffer, who, upon taking on the directorship of the Confessing Church’s Preachers’ Seminary in the summer of 1935, devoted the first two hours of the day to his lectures on discipleship. Bonhoeffer was developing an integration of justification and sanctification under the single rubric of discipleship. It proposed that the command to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 was the core work of the church. The commitment to teach them to obey everything Christ commanded was the primary method. I have believed this since I first read the Scripture as a 21-year-old, and my life has been dedicated to teaching it to the nations. In

Willard I found a partner, someone with an international congregation that added gravitas to the cause.

Dallas, the philosopher, and Michael Wilkins, the theologian, have been two great pillars in establishing discipleship as a central theme, getting it into the conversation. In fact, Dallas seems to think that we cannot take over the world without making discipleship the centerpiece of our work. I am sure many Christian leaders do not believe this. I know this because they do not talk about it and they do not participate. To them I recommend the question Professor Willard asks: “Why bother with discipleship?”¹ and ask them to consider his proposal:

Jesus told us explicitly what to do. We have a manual, just like the car owner. He told us, as disciples, to make disciples. Not converts to Christianity, nor to some particular “faith and practice.” He did not tell us to arrange for people to “get in” or “make the cut” after they die, nor to eliminate the various brutal forms of injustice, nor to produce and maintain “successful” churches. These are all good things, and he had something to say about all of them. They will certainly happen if—but only if—we are [his constant apprentices] and do [make constant apprentices] what he told us to be and do. If we just do this, it will little matter what else we do or do not do.²

Truly radical, he is proposing that we demote from its first rank getting people into the fold.

The Law of Indirection

Adding people to the flock, like so much that is valuable in life, works via the law of indirection. Just as you do not find joy by pursuing it directly, neither will people be joined to the fold through numerical growth schemes. Both come through spiritual exercise, which puts us into situations where we are being transformed through serving others. This is that “something more,” the vitality that has been lacking, the key that will multiply our meager efforts to gain new followers.

The key to getting things done for Christ in this world is to consider the kind of people we are creating. Think of efforts to correct injustice, to help the homeless, to reach out to the needy as good but not essential. Even the importance of starting and maintaining churches must take a back seat to being disciples and making disciples.

Making disciples transcends the church; it is bringing the reality of Christ to the world as an ordinary follower of Jesus. If the church could do

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 13.

² *Ibid.*, xii.

only one thing, it would be to make disciples because only disciples, people who are formed in Christ, will have what it takes to sustain the mission to the needy and to correct injustice. The enemy's strategy is to distract us from such work with good deeds that would delay transformation. This is not a call to stop organized efforts to the needy; it is the voice of Christ recalling us to put first being disciples who are making other disciples.

If you have ever watched the Super Bowl pregame show, which is longer than the game itself, you will notice a rather benign activity on the field. The players come out and start running, stretching, and doing an array of calisthenics. The commentators do not mention it; in fact, they have their backs turned to the activity. Yet it is this pregame warm-up that makes it possible for the players to perform at a high level over a long NFL season. When they reported for training camp in July, they started with sit-ups, leg-lifts, push-ups, wind sprints, and other drills that made their muscles sore, their breathing labored; each player was in his own level of pain. Now in February, at the pinnacle of their game, they are running and jumping without pain, their legs and lungs filled with energy and air. They are in condition for the game; no one is worried about his body not being able to do what he needs to do. There are no awards for calisthenics, but indirectly they are the foundation of the game. The disciplines of the Spirit are the same: when they are practiced, they make it possible for each person to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done as it needs to be done.

2. HE IDENTIFIES THE EXACT PROBLEM AND HOW TO CORRECT IT.

The Great Omission from the Great Commission is not obedience to Christ, but discipleship apprenticeship to him. Through discipleship, obedience will take care of itself. Some might be shocked to hear that what the "Church"—the disciples gathered—really needs is not more people, more money, better buildings or programs, more education, or more prestige. Christ's gathered people, the church, have always been at its best when it had little or none of these. All it needs to fulfill Christ's purposes on earth is the quality of life he makes real in the life of his disciples.³

It is easy to miss the heart of the statement, "The Great Omission from the Great Commission is not obedience to Christ, but discipleship apprenticeship to him." The normal mistake is to think of the Great Omission as primarily a lack of emphasis on mission work or obedience in everyday life. There is no shortage of preaching on the importance of obedience, the vital nature of mission, or even the call to discipleship. Willard says that what is

³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

missing is the critical process of apprenticeship, which makes it possible to teach others to do what Jesus commanded.

People do not become able to do what Jesus commanded merely by being told to do it. Churches are crammed with guilty and frustrated members who have tried *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam* and have failed to make progress. Most of this failure can be attributed to the absence of an environment conducive to apprenticeship, where both leaders and followers enter into relationships that provide the venue for the transformation of their character. Where it is lacking, apprenticeship is lost. When you lose apprenticeship, you have lost the ability to teach someone deeply. “Deeply” here means basic character change.

Teaching others to do everything that Jesus commanded is a process embedded in a relationship. Again, this is what Bonhoeffer set out to demonstrate in the seminary he led for two years before the Nazi SS closed it. His little book *Life Together* is about the experiment of discipleship in community. A community based on relationships of trust gets you permission. When a person feels safe, he invites you into his life; the necessary bonus is submission.

Much of current discipleship is superficial; by superficial I mean without the depth of human relationship. The results we are presently getting are directly related to this superficiality. It glosses over the real reasons for timidity, dropouts, and resistance to change. You may get a very knowledgeable, highly skilled person who has excelled in the apprenticeship system, but is still very much living a self-willed life. This is why Willard and others believe that fulfillment of the Great Commission is more about depth than strategy. By depth we do not mean academic prowess, but agape love. As Paul so aptly put it to the Corinthians, “But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church.”⁴

3. HE BELIEVES THAT A TRUE SPIRITUALITY BEGINS ON THE INSIDE AND CANNOT STAY PRIVATE.

Most of us want a strategy that looks good on a chart with steps and measured milestones. This is what Dr. Willard calls the “exaltation of the practical.”⁵ The way of Christ seems impractical; as Eugene Peterson declared, “American culture is stubbornly resistant to the way of Jesus.” This means more than Christ’s way of life; it is about methods, about the way the spiritual life on the inside is to be presented and preached to the culture. Jesus’ method is too slow, taking great patience and faith to stick with it. “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be

⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1c, *The New Living Translation*.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 220.

hidden.”⁶ What we are is evident to the watching world; that is why Dr. Willard’s strategy is to create bigger Christians; bigger churches are not the point. He makes his case:

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as “Christians” will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence. Will they break out of the churches to be his church—to be, without human force or violence, his mighty force for good on earth, drawing the churches after them toward the eternal purposes of God? And on its own scale, there is no greater issue facing the individual human being, Christian or not.⁷

A fifth column, if you will, a clandestine army behind enemy lines, strategically placed by the Holy Spirit and divine providence . . . “From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall and he determined their boundaries. His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any of us.”⁸

What will Christians become? This again strengthens the argument that the secret to fulfillment of the Great Commission is not strategy as much as depth. But God does have a strategy, and it is quite simple. When we become disciples, apprentices--when we take on Christlikeness as a habit—it makes the strategy work. The reason it is not working now is the lack of spiritual animation of the army. It is as if the soldiers are in place, but are distracted by other, mundane matters, so the mission has been forgotten. The soldiers now think that the important work is to return to headquarters for very stimulating training and speeches about the mission. It seems all the praise, honor, and money go to the large rallies and speeches, but their leaders do not go to the field. If you want to see them, you will have to go to headquarters. The leaders have not led the troops into the field to activate the mission.

But we have been recruited into a different kind of army; we take off the uniform and assimilate into the culture, into, as Dr. Willard says, “every corner of human existence.” We are not spies, nor do we march lockstep through the streets. Rather, we live in very ordinary circumstances but do so in an extraordinary way, such that observers are able to tell we are different. That is the promise: “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁹

⁶ Matthew 5:14, *The New Living Translation*.

⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, xv.

⁸ Acts 17:26, 27, *The New Living Translation*.

⁹ John 13:34, 35, *New International Version*.

He goes on to ask, “Will they break out of their churches to be the church?” This is what so many advocate, but they cannot seem to figure out how to program inner revolution. Is that not the catch? You cannot program it, you cannot count it, and you cannot make your church bigger because of it. That is why it does not hold long-term appeal for the impatient church. The irony is that a church so impatient to get results has been so patient with its own failure to produce any.

The church is the church only when it exists for others. That is almost true; we are only the church when in practice we exist for others. Jesus was a man for others; as his disciples, we are to live for others, and the church is at its glorious best when it exists for others. The breakout is usually not led by the clergy, but by those who dare to go first to create the fifth column, those who “without human force or violence, his mighty force for good on earth, drawing the churches after them toward the eternal purposes of God.”¹⁰ The force of it is magnetic as it pulls other members in the same direction. It can be easily pictured, the slivers of people pulling a growing number of members into the “world” as a mighty force of love and kindness that attracts all within their path. This takes time; it does not make for captivating headlines, but it can work; it is the divine conspiracy.

But there remains a very sticky issue: how does personal Bible study, prayer, fasting, and extended times of silence and solitude change the world? Have not these religious practices been around for centuries? Do not people do them daily, and they do not seem to make much difference? Dr. Willard believes that such private and sometimes solitary practices can change the world, really change it. The most concentrated apology for how private spirituality can change structures and institutions is found in Dr. Willard’s 1988 work, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. In the chapter entitled “The Disciplines and the Power Structures of the World,” he insists that:

4. THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AND THE LAW OF INDIRECTNESS ARE THE KEYS TO WORLD REVOLUTION.

. . . A widespread transformation of character through wisely disciplined discipleship to Christ can transform our world—it can disarm the structural evils that have always dominated humankind and now threaten to destroy the world.”¹¹ There is the declaration; private practices can bring down structural evil, the temples of greed, the cathedrals of self-aggrandizement, the ideologies that destroy human desire and achievement.

He goes on:

¹⁰ Willard, *The Great Omission*, xv.

¹¹ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, xi.

We have one realistic hope for dealing with the world's problems. And that is the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now, in people who are his by total identification found through the spiritual disciplines. Why? This faith and discipline yields a new humanity, one for which "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" or "Our Father who art in heaven" does not express a resolve, a hope, or a commitment, but vision in whose firm grip Jesus' people live with abandon.¹²

I doubt any serious Christian would argue against the hope being "the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now . . ." More than a few, however, could be found to resist the idea that a "new humanity" is created through the spiritual disciplines. This is because of the natural evangelical resistance to all things "Catholic."

Spiritual disciplines have a monastic history; the monastic movement is under-appreciated in many conservative circles. This resistance comes from two strands of evangelical thought, first from the educated class, the well-educated, well-read evangelicals. Its resistance is rooted in the finer points of theology. At the street level, the resistance is a built-in aversion to "works righteousness" or a fear of legalism. This finds its roots in a misguided view of grace, a grace that breeds passivity, a notion that there is nothing I can do for my salvation or to participate in my salvation. The protest is that spiritual disciplines are not listed in Scripture like spiritual gifts. They are not commanded as clearly and at the same level. At another time and place an extended answer should be given, but for now, let it be said, Jesus practiced them in a healthy and regular way. Since Jesus is our leader and teacher, should we not look to his life and adapt such practices to our lives? Jesus fasted, prayed, and spent extended periods of solitude and silence. He served, he gave, he was chaste, he was frugal, and these practices were all found in his life.

For Dr. Willard the process is simple in this way; it is transforming people through the spiritual disciplines from a readiness to do evil to a readiness to do good. This is the quest of any serious disciple: to be an apprentice of Jesus, to be in training to become a new kind of person in practice, not just on paper. And this quest is to be led by pastors who teach it by example, by their apprenticeship, not just in elocution.

5. HE BELIEVES THE CHURCH AND ITS PASTORS SHOULD MAKE TEACHING DISCIPLES TO OBEY WHAT CHRIST COMMANDED THEIR PRIMARY WORK.

The logical conclusion is that beginning with leaders, the church should be primarily focused on learning and practicing these disciplines. Dr.

¹² Ibid, 237.

Willard calls out the pastors: “Ministers pay far too much attention to people who do not come to services. Those people should, generally, be given exactly that disregard by the pastor that they give to Christ. The Christian leader has something much more important to do than pursue the godless. The leader’s task is to equip saints until they are like Christ, and history and the God of history waits for him to this job.”¹³

Has not the pastoral priority in the past fifty years been “to be more relevant” to the unchurched community? And the foremost reason given by pastors to their congregations for dismantling traditional programs has been “to better reach the surrounding communities.” Everything—from changes in service time, music styles, media technology, and evangelistic methods—has been driven by the Great Commission mandate. But because of the great omission in the commission, namely, the failure to teach people deeply through apprenticeship, we have been focused on the end product while ignoring the process that creates it. It is much as if a football team dons their uniforms, the band plays, and the cheerleaders lead the team onto the field. The crowd is cheering, the broadcasters are in place, and the game is on, but the team did not prepare. No one is in shape; they know the plays, but their bodies are not able to execute them effectively because they have not been conditioned to do so. Their coaches would be fired. Pastors have led many an unprepared team onto the field.

There should be no argument against the idea that the church should focus on becoming a new humanity. This transformation is the key to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It is just that we skipped the “new humanity” part, and set out to work our plan. Dr. Willard tells us how the revolution is to work.

Those who think that the cultivation of inner Christlikeness through personal discipleship to Jesus amounts to a “privatization” of our faith in him [“quietism” and “pietism” are words often used in that connection] simply do not understand how the spiritual life in Christ works. You cannot privatize the fire of God that burns through the life of a disciple of Jesus. This was Jesus’ point in saying that “a city built on a hill cannot be hid,” and that one does not light a candle and put it under a bushel.¹⁴

Pastors as the teachers, then, lead the congregation through the transformative process. It begins with the desire to follow and learn; second, the willing members engage in spiritual exercise; third, this creates new habits, which in turn form a person’s character. Desire, exercise, habit, character: kindness is a habit; self-control is a habit; returning good for evil is a habit—all habits formed by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with a community.

¹³ *Ibid*, 246.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 228.

6. HE BELIEVES IN SOMETHING, DARE WE SAY, GREATER THAN THE CHURCH?

Yes he does, but not greater in importance, only greater in quality and scope than what is normally thought of as the church. The words of a non-churched person, Peter Berger, can help us here: “The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is something very different from Religion.”¹⁵

Can it be that Jesus is not confined to his Church? If this question is pondered but for a moment, we must answer yes. The first chapter of Colossians alone would require such a conclusion. “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.”¹⁶ Just this short statement gives warrant to the reality of Christ outside time, space, and institutions, even the church. He is the head of the church, but not confined to it. He was before the Church; he will reign after the institution of the church has expired.

This is why Peter Berger’s statement is so vital; Jesus rises above all things cultural. He is bigger than Christianity itself. This means that he is free to roam and work wherever he decides. He started the church, he is the head of the church, he has gifted the church, and he has instructed its leaders in what to do in order to participate in the revolution. They are to be and make disciples, equipping the congregation to do the “work of ministry.” When the church decides to do something else, it limits its participation. The Church becomes a welfare state that must be sustained, but does not contribute. Christ, however, continues to orchestrate his people who are available and are at work in all segments of society.

For the divine conspiracy to work, Jesus must permeate the power structures of the world. This is going after “big game”; it is not the trivial goals of higher church attendance and building programs that so often occupy the church. Because the church has made other choices, it is criticized, as Dr. Willard explains:

That criticism is largely justified when applied to the form usually taken by Christian faith throughout our history. More often than not, faith has failed, sadly enough, to transform the human character of the masses, because it is usually unaccompanied by discipleship and by an overall discipline of life such as Christ himself practiced. As a result, when faced with the real issues of justice, peace, and prosperity, what is called faith in Christ has often proved of little help other than the comfort of a personal hope for what lies beyond this life.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009), 146.

¹⁶ Colossians 1:15, *New Living Translation*.

¹⁷ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 221.

The Church has not taken the creation of apprentices of Jesus seriously; therefore, we have not had the people in place who could do what needed to be done when it needed to be done. The general society approaches justice, peace, and love in a negative way, by placing restraints on people so they will not harm others. This is a temporary fix intended to restrain the readiness to do evil lodged deeply in the human soul. But the real revolution is to create a “new person” for whom the creation of justice, peace, and love comes from inside.

What is Jesus Doing Outside the Church?

When one speaks of “outside the church,” it should be said that it means outside the orbit of the organized church’s plans and programs. For a follower of Christ is a member of the church even if not on any local registry. There is a force field of the church, which is centripetal, or center seeking. This is when the actions of its members are to draw friends and associates toward their local congregation. This is a normal effort of the church, and it has its place, but falls far short of a different kind of force. The opposite force is centrifugal, or center fleeing; this occurs when the energy and speed at the center flings people out.

The church energy is most often center seeking because its teaching and instincts are preservational. The early church stayed in Jerusalem too long; only persecution flung them out; only then did they begin to evangelize. It is just our nature to be slow about the hard things. But we know that the people to be reached are not in church. And here is the kicker—if we do not focus on being disciples, we will be slow to make disciples. The energy of the church will be center-seeking. For the church to get out of the church to be the church, it must take on apprenticeship as its normative first priority. It is counter-intuitive, but by being patient in the building of apprentices, you build an energy that will make everything go faster in due course.

There are seminars on how to get Christ into the marketplace. Many of you reading this have been trained to do evangelism and have participated in formal campaigns. But we all know that such efforts fall short of the natural or organic systems of society. Another way to put it is the often-asked question, “How do I get Christ into my office?” The answer? “Go in and sit down.”

When you as a disciple of Christ arrive at work, the kingdom has arrived because you are there. You might protest, “I am here, but now what do I do, sit around and look holy, start a Bible study, leave a few gospel tracts in the lunch room? Some direct efforts have their place, but what is really needed is the transformed life of Christ present in that space. Enter into the community at work, social clubs, and other associations as a person willing to take actions for the benefit of others. Begin to train to live as Jesus lived, with humility, with others in mind.

How Does This Change Society?

How does this make the world a more just place? How does this change the social structure of the world and bring down strongholds of greed, hate, and tyranny? The first order of business is to reject the idea that today's normal, nominal Christian can do it. Dr. Willard puts it this way; "There are those who do not see personal virtue as an answer to social ills. The effect of this saying is to keep people working at changing society without attempting radical transformation of character. It pleads for a continuation of 'life as usual' which is precisely the source of the problem. Often they think of themselves as radicals; the only true radical is one who proposes a different character and life for human beings."¹⁸

May I be so brazen as to use Dr. Willard's question? "If Jesus were a schoolteacher, what kind of schoolteacher would he be?" Fill in the blank: parent, plumber, president, police officer, bank president, stockbroker—you get the idea. Would government be the same if the Christians working in it were transformed rather than nominal? What about the United Nations, the leaders of media, universities, and unions? This seems impossible, does it not? It seem so only because we know there are Christians in very high places, and it has not seemed to help that much. Yet Dr. Willard believes that transformed disciples in the harvest field where we live, work, and play can create communities of justice and peace. The church thinks of community as internal to the church. Dr. Willard espouses transformed disciples to live in community with the people in real community.

The real communities of living are neighborhoods, recreational associations, schools, businesses, and friendships—living in these communities as Christ would live, because most of the members are not disciples. There are no planned meetings or curriculum. There is only the "Big Curriculum," the living of life. Churches have not shown much interest in this because it is hard to measure; it does not make them bigger and more successful. He believes there are enough Christ-followers to receive the reign of Christ. "Their leaders have only to bring them to the fullness of life which Christ has provided."¹⁹

The reason we know it can work is that it has worked before. Tertulian in his first *Apology* answered the critics who were concerned about Christians overrunning the world:

Men cry out that the state is besieged; the Christians are in the fields, in the ports, in the islands. They mourn, as for a loss, that every sex, age, condition and even rank is going over to this sect; we are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled every place belonging to you—cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camps, your tribes, compa-

¹⁸ Ibid, 238.

¹⁹ Ibid, 249.

nies, palace, senate, forum; we leave only your temples. . . . All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the martyrs is their seed.²⁰

Sociologist Rodney Stark in his groundbreaking work, *The Rise of Christianity*, begins with a question: “How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement move from the edge of the Roman Empire to dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?”²¹

In 100 A.D. the church was between 7,000 and 10,000; three hundred years later they were 350 million. It should be stipulated that acceptance and assimilation of the Christian faith in the Edict of Milan in 311 did inject a deadly dye into the church’s bloodstream. Every missional movement becomes an institution, and then it must be challenged and revitalized. The monastic movement led by Saint Anthony was the beginning of the needed revolt. But the rising movement of the Christian faith in the first three centuries was miraculous. It was not pretty, easy, or very well organized, but it was potent because so many of them decided actually to follow Jesus, to be his disciples.

So Dr. Willard’s conspiracy is not a new idea; it is a very old idea that has already worked. But would it work now? There are many who assume that if the Church were to take over the world, the world would be better off. Dr. Willard’s point is that the Church is not ready to take over the world and that we may never be. Dr. Willard is suggesting that the Church is only valuable to the world if Christ takes over the Church. That means we intentionally choose to be his disciples in practice. He must be allowed to be more than a figurehead; he must be our leader. This is what Bonhoeffer meant when he said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”²² Otherwise, we will only make things worse. Oh, by the way, when the takeover is complete, there will be no throne for the good professor; he will gladly disappear into that great chorus to harmonize with those who sing the same song.

²⁰ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 228.

²¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 3.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan) 1937, 64.

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