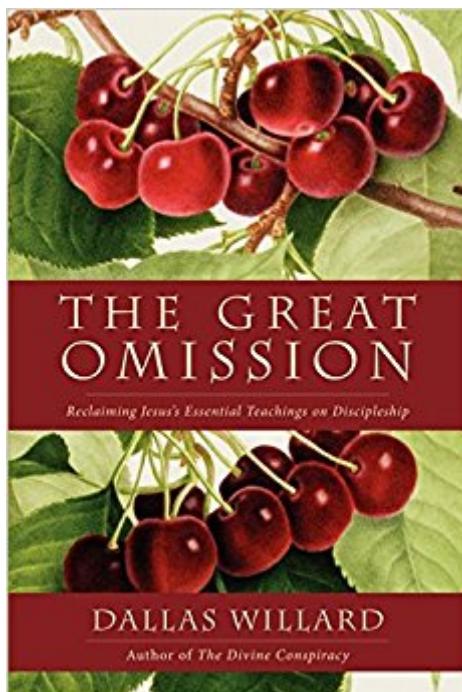


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# The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings On Discipleship



## Synopsis

Jesus's Last Command—Ignored! The last command Jesus gave the church before he ascended to heaven was the Great Commission, the call for Christians to "make disciples of all the nations." But Christians have responded by making "Christians," not "disciples." This, according to brilliant scholar and renowned Christian thinker Dallas Willard, has been the church's Great Omission.

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## Customer Reviews

“Dallas Willard keeps calling us to take this life of Jesus seriously as disciples, as apprentices to a Master.” (Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*) “There is NO one like Dallas. Finding more of his words is like getting hidden treasure. Read and grow!” (John Ortberg, author of *God Is Closer Than You Think*) “This is vintage Willard, and it must be read by all who hunger to grow as Jesus’ disciple.” (J.P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, and author of *Love Your God With All Your Mind*) “If you have any desire to find the life God offers you, read this book.” (John Eldredge, author of *Captivating*) “Every leader, whether professional or lay, who cares about the church of Jesus Christ, should read this book.” (Paul D. Robbins, President, Christianity Today International) “I know no one like Dallas Willard who can express profound things so simply and simple things so profoundly.” (Os Guinness, author of *The Call and Unspeakable*) “Dallas Willard reminds us that a relationship with Jesus only makes sense when we choose to become his apprentices.” (Alan Andrews, U.S. President

of the Navigators)“The Great Omission may be Dallas’ most important work yet.” (Ruth Haley Barton, president, Transforming Center, author of Sacred Rhythms)“Another classic from the pen of this remarkable writer. Incisive and insightful...” (Alister E. McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology, Oxford University)“The Great Omission is, simply put, great. I recommend it highly.” (Richard J. Foster, author of The Celebration of Discipline)“There are few better thinkers or students of Jesus than Dallas Willard.” (Ken Blanchard, co-author of The One Minute Manager and The Secret)“It is no accident that one of the most fruitful lives I’ve been privileged to observe offers this valuable resource.” (J. Stanley Mattson, founder and president, C.S. Lewis Foundation)“...Willard speaks his truth in such an eloquent, passionate, and powerful way...” (Library Journal)“Dallas Willard is a brilliant, modest, immensely experienced Christian older brother, calling to us.” (Christianity Today)

In his earlier books Dallas Willard has laid out the principal ideas for a revolutionary understanding of what the Christian life is really about. This volume collects articles, talks, and interviews where Willard explains the practical application of his ideas. He answers such questions as what does it mean to be Jesus’ disciple? How does God teach us? How do we know what God wants for us? How do we explain Jesus to others? And much more. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Pretty much everything Willard wrote was gold. This book addresses the lack of discipleship in the church today, which Willard believed would 'solve most of the church's problems.' Probably true, but we may never know. Today we can't even get people to show up for corporate worship more than twice a month, and such folk think they are really committed, or as committed as their lives will allow. Now, they may be fasting, praying, studying the Bible, witnessing, involved in acts of compassion, pursuing social justice and so on in all the free time they have as a result of only giving two hours or so a month to public worship. I doubt it. If more people would read Willard it would help, in my view.

From the start, Dallas Willard pulls no punches in defining and staying on point with his subject, which in essence is that the church has not made discipleship an essential and critical part of Christianity, but they rather have made it an option for those so inclined or interested. Yet the heart of the Great Commission could not be more clear, to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). In

Willard's succinct words, "he told us as disciples to make disciples" (xii) and "The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ" (3)--which stands in great contrast to the church's big problem, which is that it is "filled with undiscipled disciples" (4). Rather than adhering to the Great Commission, the general state of the church, to its shame, has in effect translated it as the Great Omission. Such "easy Christianity" is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than half a century ago called "cheap grace," and it has extolled an individual and collective price: "Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace . . . [it] costs you exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring" (9).A gospel that offers easy forgiveness of sins with optional discipleship is not the gospel of the Bible. On this point, Willard quoted A. W. Tozer, "salvation apart from obedience is unknown in the sacred scriptures" (14), and in fact Tozer described it as heresy and "vampire Christianity," which asks of Jesus, "I'd like a little of your blood, please" (ibid.). Willard makes the point that without discipleship the Spirit cannot conduct inward transformation of one's heart and character, drawing from Jesus' analogy of cleaning only the outside of the cup but not the inside (Matt. 23:25). This essay focuses on the critical aspect of the Spirit's inner transformation, which alone defines true Christian spirituality, and which only happens within the hearts of true disciples or apprentices of Christ. While the world spins endless pseudo-definitions of spirituality, and the church spins watered down versions, Willard's words seem impossible to misunderstand. After listing the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22, he states, "'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 our teacher" (16).Inextricably connected with all phases of both discipleship and spiritual formation (which the student sees as synonymous) are the classic spiritual disciplines. Recently, I found out the hard way that not all Christians are "on board" with the spiritual disciplines, and in fact can be sharply and heatedly opposed. The fierce objections I encountered--which drove me to change churches--were vaguely defined as being too closely associated with "medieval mystics," which I took to mean as consisting of some kind of less than Christian spirituality or perhaps even being inspired by or containing elements of the occult. It was never fully explained, but what was abundantly clear was that Richard Foster's teachings on the spiritual disciplines in his world-renowned book Celebration of Discipline were soundly and unequivocally rejected--along with me for trying to bring such "heresy" to the church. I have since found a church that embraces the spiritual disciplines--in fact, it was my first question of my new pastor."As disciples (literally students) of Jesus," says Willard, "our goal is to learn to be like him" (24). Indeed, scripture could not be clearer on the subject: "therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1); "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14); "But we all, with unveiled

face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18), and many others. Believers also are to "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25), from whom they will receive gifts and grow in fruit. Putting these together, Willard is insightful: Both gifts and fruit are the result, not the reality, of the Spirit's presence in our lives. What brings about our transformation into Christ-likeness is our direct, personal interaction with Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit makes Christ present to us and draws us toward his likeness (28). Willard captures the transformational process in a "golden triangle" with "faithful acceptance of everyday problems . . . interactions with God's spirit in and around us . . . [and engaging in] spiritual disciplines (26-28). Throughout his extensive discussion on the disciplines, Willard continually reinforces the difference between Christian and worldly spiritualities, for example, "Zen spirituality is one form of idolatry of the human self . . . spirituality as now generally understood usually refers to a human dimension, not to the power of God" (49). In sharp contrast, "biblical spirituality has to do with obedience to Christ" (51). Those who preach only justification and not discipleship, thus engaging in the great omission, have created the situation today with too many Christians convinced that discipleship is optional, when in reality it is the only bridge from faith to transformation. In Willard's words, "you have faith over here and obedience and abundance over there, and no way to get from here to there because the necessary bridge is discipleship" (62). He uses three phrases to help define spiritual formation: "training in . . . spiritual activities [disciplines] . . . shaping of the inner life, the spirit . . . shaping by the . . . Holy Spirit" (70-71), which distantly resembles some key words of the Constitution, "of the people, by the people, for the people." Spiritual formation involves engagement with the human spirit by the Holy Spirit through the means of the spiritual disciplines (see also 106, "formation of the spirit . . . by the Spirit"). Since the Spirit always points toward Christ, it should come as no surprise to hear that "Spiritual formation is the process through which those who love and trust Jesus Christ effectively take on his character" (80). Unfortunately, the church as a whole has not found it necessary or popular to introduce self-discipline into their spiritual programming, as Willard describes, "the task of becoming Christ-like is rarely taken as a serious objective to be thoughtfully planned" (84). The problem with such an easy gospel is that it breeds not only a lack of interest in true spiritual maturity but it creates an indifference and even apathy toward it. The child who is undisciplined is well known to grow up spoiled and unable to properly cope with trials as an adult. So the spiritual child who is undisciplined grows up without the inner resources to properly face trials with faith as potential sources of strength and maturity. This leads directly to problems of every sort, as Willard expresses, "We are seeing that the human soul hungers for transformation, for wholeness and holiness, is sick and dying

without it, and that it will seek it where it may--even if it destroys itself in the process"

(110).Throughout his masterful work, Willard does not mince words, and it would seem difficult to misunderstand him, for example, "The aim of spiritual formation is obedience to Christ from inner conformity to Christ" (113) or "The fruit of the Spirit . . . is the outcome of spiritual formation" (115). Breaking one's bad habits, says Willard, is not the impossible dream, because after all, they "are habits--not the law of gravity--and can be broken." Besides, he continues, "A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former one" (125). Drawing on the inherent definition of the word discipline, Willard leans hard on personal responsibility in one's own spiritual formation process, which deliberately cooperates with the Spirit and does not wait for a bolt of lightning from above: "I must learn and accept the responsibility of moving with God in the transformation of my own personality" (150). Indeed, he points out that nothing worthwhile or significant is accomplished without discipline, much less one's walk with Christ.Not only are disciplines needed for growth and maturity, but they are the only answer for addressing human brokenness. My doctoral project is on emotional scars, and a major part of my premise will address overcoming such invisible but permanent disfigurations and limitations rather than trying to "heal" (a scar by definition is healed) and effectively erase them, which is a vain attempt to return to one's state prior to the injury. Willard addresses this matter at length:people who are not totally shattered, and who have experienced the birth from above, can usually, with simple instruction and encouragement, begin to make real progress toward wholeness by gentle and persistent practices such as solitude and silence, fasting, scripture memorization, regular times of corporate and individual praise and worship, and so on. The various disciplines minister to different and complementary aspects of our wrungness and brokenness (153).I would add only that the same Spirit-led transformational process that guides, directs, and accomplishes spiritual maturity through intentional engagement with the disciplines--thus creating a true disciple--is the same exact process for those who start with greater amounts of brokenness than others. This process "enables the individual to restructure or reprogram the wrung soul, along with the body, through spiritual disciplines" (157).Because the church has "lost the concept of discipleship" (166), tragically both the very broken and sin-ravaged Christians as well as the basically healthy Christians end up together on the same treadmill that equates discipline with works, and thus never raises the elevation or increases the speed--with the end result of producing endless streams of undisciplined, unimpressive, and uninspiring Christians. Willard states, "everything that we develop from our lives that is of any value is the result of discipline" (171), thus it follows logically that those Christians without spiritual discipline necessarily develop little of significant value in and for the Kingdom. The ultimate problem with such a believer, other than all

they miss out on personally, is the quality of their witness to the world.

As usual, Dallas Willard hits the nail on the head with this book! The church has strayed from its primary mission of disciple-making and Great Commission living. We have substituted popular programs for serious discipleship and the result is that people drift in and out based on whatever it is they think they want at the moment. Our churches have become full of people who are more interested in having someone meet their needs than with people committed to following Christ. Fortunately, Willard points the way forward. This is one of my favorite books from one of my favorite authors. Get this book, read it, and put it into action in your life and church.

Willard was a fine Biblical philosopher and I admire his numerous writings on the Christian life. His heavy emphasis on the various disciplines of the Christian inner life is important. The work of believers becoming true disciples requires real love of God and genuine obedience to all the scripture. Serious Christians seeking a deeper walk and a greater impact will gain much insight about what discipleship means. However, one cannot overlook the fact that though he is Baptist in a general sense, he is much influenced by his close association with Quaker theology. His long connection during his life with Quaker Richard Foster (once his pastor) is part of his influence. Although very popular with many Christians as a writer, one needs to examine all things through scripture. The problem is few Christians will find the passion of Willard and Foster for the life approach he proposes. I am a pastor of 35 years and struggle with being consistent in such a life.

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