

Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ

by Dallas Willard

NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2021

“We live from our hearts...Our lives and how we find the world now and in the future are, almost totally, a simple result of what we have become in the depths of our being—in our spirits, will, or hearts” (p. 5).

Thus, Dallas Willard begins his look at why hearts need to be formed properly, and why, in all reality, we all need our hearts to be reformed or renovated. Willard points out spiritual formation is not by definition a positive godly thing. Our hearts have all been formed and are currently being formed. Sadly, for each of us, sin has been the dominant formational agent in our hearts. As Paul said, we’ve all sinned (Romans 3:23). We’ve all become slaves of sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:16). In other words, our hearts have all been malformed spiritually. We need reformation or renovation.

Renovation of the Heart provides guidance in the means and methods of that renovation. The book is predicated on two principles. 1) Such renovation is not only necessary, but possible and expected by God. 2) That while God is the empowering force making such renovation possible, we disciples must choose, pursue, and work out this renovation through faithful submission to God’s will.

The book is divided into two main sections.

The first section (chapters 1-5) presents an overarching look at spiritual formation and reformation. In this section, Willard makes his case that renovation is possible and expected. In order to demonstrate the need for renovation, he lays out the state of the hearts and souls malformed by sin and slavery to it. He then lays out God’s promise and plan to save and transform spiritually malformed lives into radically good God-formed lives. Willard presents a model of human existence, delineating the five “parts” of our existence: heart, mind, body, social, soul. He demonstrates how those parts are aligned in the idolatrous, evil, malformed life and how they will be realigned in the transformed, God-oriented life.

I would quibble with some of Willard’s definitions regarding the aspects of our existence and being. He equates “heart” with “spirit,” and speaks of the “soul” as the all-encompassing life of the believer. I disagree with some of the labeling, but I think his model is in essence correct and a helpful way of looking at the transformation process.

The second section (chapter 6-13) breaks down the process of spiritual reformation by individually discussing the transformation of each aspect of our human existence and how each aspect fits in the plan of being transformed as a whole person. Willard spends two chapters on the Mind, subdividing the Transformation of the Mind into Transformation of Thinking (chapter 6) and Transformation of Feeling (chapter 7). He then progresses chapter by chapter to discuss the Transformation of the Heart (chapter 8), the Body (chapter 9), the Social Dimension (chapter 10), and the Soul (chapter 11). The penultimate chapter addresses the need for these transformed souls to be the light of the world rather than allowing the world’s darkness to overcome us (chapter 12). Finally, he presents a chapter on how the local congregation needs to be focused and concerned with producing this transformation in individual disciples (chapter 13).

While I highly recommend this book to you, my group of well-studied and grounded preaching friends, I must provide one major caveat to my recommendation of this book which keeps me from recommending the book to everyone. Willard was a Baptist and very ecumenical in his approach to Christianity. Borrowing terminology from 2 Corinthians 4:7, he views denominations, religious movements, and historical expressions of Christianity as “earthen vessels” through which God has moved and worked. If you have read Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis, you will recognize a similar falsehood as his hallway and rooms off the hallway analogy. This mistake is expressed in a couple of frustrating paragraphs in the first chapter, but is one of the dominant themes in the final chapter about “Spiritual Formation in the Local Congregation.”

As with all books, I have to say “usual caveats apply.” Willard is sorely wrong on some very important points. Yet, he has incredible insight on others. I believe you will be blessed by reading this book. I believe you will be provoked to grow spiritually. I believe you will be given insight to help others grow through your preaching and teaching. As many have said about all books, find the meat and spit out the bones. I believe this book contains some significant meat you will find helpful and strengthening.

Edwin L. Crozier
9737 Fox Chapel Road
Tampa, FL 33617
edwin@godswayworks.com
317.902-9955