

The Spiritual Disciplines and Christian Ministry

Beverly Vos

KEYWORDS: *Spiritual transformation, solitude, silence, meditation, fasting, celebration, confession.*

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY is 'carrying on the work that Jesus himself did'.¹ Jesus proclaimed and manifested the kingdom of God (Mt. 4:23), and commanded his followers to 'go into all the world and make disciples' (Mt. 28:19-20). One of the primary activities of Christian ministry is to make and grow disciples of Jesus. But in order to be effective at making disciples, we need to become disciples ourselves. If, as Bobby Clinton says, 'we minister out of who we are',² then our effectiveness in leading others into spiritual growth is entirely dependent upon the extent of our own spiritual growth. This paper explores the role of the spiritual disciplines in Christian ministry today for

ministers and Christian believers.

Willard writes of an imaginary church with a sign out the front declaring: 'We teach all who seriously commit themselves to Jesus how to do everything he said to do'.³ How strange, how ridiculous this sounds. Is this not exactly what the church should be doing, so why must we declare it on a billboard? But our churches today fall far short of this. Often all we preach is a conversion gospel which says, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved!' Often we give the impression that discipleship is a terribly difficult thing and very 'costly'.⁴

Discipleship is not something we can accidentally drift towards or into. It is something we must give our full attention to, intentionally determining to make ourselves Jesus' apprentices, no matter what the cost.⁵ Being disci-

1 Dallas Willard, *Spirituality and Ministry*, notes of lectures delivered at the Australian College of Ministries (2007).

2 J. R. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1988), 32.

3 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1998), 344-5.

4 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 320.

5 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 327.

Beverly Vos currently lives in Launceston, Tasmania and is a Paediatric Nurse and Midwife, currently undertaking her MA in church leadership with the Australian College of Ministries (ACOM). She worships at Door of Hope Christian Church in Launceston. She has an interest in cross-cultural missions and holistic community development. This article has its origins in an MA assignment she wrote for an ACOM course intensive taught by Professor Dallas Willard in Sydney in July, 2008.

ples and making disciples is the core business of Christian ministry. We have Jesus' example to prove it.

I Being Disciples

Willard says that Jesus called us 'not to do what he did, but to be as he was, permeated with love. Then the doing of what he did and said becomes the natural expression of who we are in Him.'⁶ We should learn from Jesus how to live our life as he would if he were us. We should learn as Paul says, to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17). This means placing a priority on contributing to and understanding our own spiritual formation as a fundamental part of Christian ministry. Thomas à Kempis states that 'Christ counsels us to follow his life and way' and that his life should 'be our first consideration'.⁷

Willard suggests that 'a life of victory over sin and circumstances is available to all of us', through faithfulness to spiritual formation in Christ, as revealed in the Bible and many godly examples throughout history.⁸ However, many of us are too distracted with what Willard calls the 'vessel' mode of ministry (how we do church) rather than the 'treasure' mode of ministry (what the church should be about).⁹ In the Great Commission, Jesus showed us where our focus should be. This is basically the 'principles and absolutes' of the New Testament church.¹⁰

It is all about spiritual formation—becoming like Christ! 'The call of Christ today is the same as it was when he left us here. That call is to be his apprentices, alive in the power of God, learning to do all he said to do, leading others into apprenticeship to him, and teaching them how to do everything he said.'¹¹ He calls us to be his disciples. Ludowyk and Moore define a disciple as 'a person who follows the teaching of a leader'.¹² Willard says that 'if I am Jesus' disciple that means I am with him to learn from him how to be like him'.¹³ We must spend time with him. The Bible provides us with all the teaching we need to learn to live our lives as God desires for us.¹⁴ Peter says, 'His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him' and he goes on to encourage us to 'make every effort' to cultivate godly characteristics in our lives so that we do not become 'ineffective and unproductive' (2 Pet. 1:3-8). He says, 'if you do these things, you will never fall' (2 Pet. 1:10).

The best way to become like Jesus is to live as he lived, and be as he was. Willard calls this 'the secret of the easy yoke'.¹⁵ It involves following Jesus in

6 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 204.

7 Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Penguin, 1952), 27.

8 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, xi.

9 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 26-27.

10 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 28.

11 D. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 202.

12 F. Ludowyk and B. Moore, *The Australian Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, 2nd edition, (South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 1996), 224

13 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 303.

14 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 311.

15 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 6.

the entirety of his life and not just trying to behave as he would on the spur of the moment. That means practising the disciplines he engaged in and even more, because we are not God as he is, but human, and therefore prone to many weaknesses and character flaws.

II Transformed by the Spiritual Disciplines:

Willard describes spiritual disciplines as tried and true activities undertaken in order to give our spirits more control over our bodies, by moulding and shaping our embodied selves.¹⁶ Willard states that 'we grow in spiritual life and in ministry by well directed effort'¹⁷ and nothing else will substitute for this. However, no effort of sheer will power on its own can transform our sinful desires, attitudes and behaviours.¹⁸ Our normal response to deal with ingrained sin is to rely on will power and determination.¹⁹ Heini Arnold states that 'as long as we think that we can save ourselves by our own will power, we will only make the evil in us stronger than ever'.²⁰

We need God's grace acting in our lives to accomplish what we cannot do on our own. This is what grace is all about. As Willard says, 'if we had never sinned we would still need grace'.²¹ Foster explains that 'the disciplines al-

low us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us'.²² They put us in a position where we can receive his grace more readily. Henri Nouwen suggests that we must 'create a space in which God can act'.²³

Many Christians act and speak as if effort on our part is pointless and even offensive to God. They respond with statements such as, 'God's grace is a free gift which covers our sins' and 'there is nothing you can do to earn God's favour'. It is true that righteousness cannot be earned by human effort or will power—all of the New Testament attests to this, but the distinction must be made between 'earning' and 'effort'. As Willard states, 'grace is not opposed to *effort*, but to *earning*'²⁴ (emphasis added). Paul tells Timothy to 'train yourself to be godly' (1 Tim. 4:7).

In 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, he speaks about going into strict training, and even beating one's body to make it one's slave. As any great athlete knows, training certainly involves a substantial amount of effort! Paul calls us to follow his example as he follows Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). By themselves spiritual disciplines will achieve very little; they only put us in a place where God's grace can change us.²⁵ While we are self-reliant and other-reliant for our personal and spiritual formation, we are totally God-reliant for our spiritual transformation.

We need to be transformed spiritu-

16 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 86, 92.

17 Willard, *Spirituality and Ministry*, 20.

18 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121; Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 4.

19 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 4.

20 Cited in Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 4.

21 Willard, *Spirituality and Ministry*, 14.

22 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.

23 Cited in P. Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006), 278.

24 Willard, *Spirituality and Ministry*, 20.

25 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.

ally if we wish to minister to people effectively. Without it, in our sinfulness and brokenness we will only do more harm than good. Ortberg says that the primary goal of our life as Christians is to become transformed spiritually.²⁶ This means our ministry should have little to do with simply assuring people of where they will go when they die, or just getting to heaven. People's spiritual transformation in this life should be our goal. Most of us want to change, but very few of us actually see transformation into Christ-likeness happening at any observable pace.²⁷ Willard says we must be intentional about spiritual transformation otherwise it will not happen as a regular feature of our ministries.²⁸ It may happen accidentally, and once it does happen, we will not know how to make it happen again.

He says to become spiritually formed in Christ we must have: (1) a vision of what that means; (2) an intention to carry it out; and (3) intentionally apply means for achieving those ends.²⁹ When we are spiritually awakened into a state of transformation, God's commands are not burdensome (1 Jn. 5:3). It is then that we become good trees that cannot bear bad fruit (Lu. 6:43). Willard says that 'ordinary people in common surroundings can live from the abundance of God's kingdom, letting the spirit and actions of Jesus be the natural outflow from their lives'.³⁰

He insists elsewhere, that 'we can become like Christ in character and in power and thus realize our highest ideals of well-being and well-doing'.³¹ C. S. Lewis suggests that we do not desire the things promised to us enough because we are 'half-hearted creatures'.³² 'Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.'³³ We should take up the promises offered to us through a life guided by spiritual disciplines.

Disciplines of prayer, meditation and study of scripture have often been thought of as indispensable to the journey of faith. Referring to such disciplines, Bonhoeffer says, 'for the pastor it (prayer) is an indispensable duty and his [sic] whole ministry will depend on it'.³⁴ The spiritual disciplines help us to identify the duplicity and malice buried in our character and will, so that God's word and Spirit can work in us to rid us of these destructive feelings that arise.³⁵ Such feelings and sins are often hidden by our habits of self-deception and rationalisation.³⁶

Many of the spiritual disciplines help us to deal with these sins head on, as the purpose of spiritual disciplines is the transformation of one's entire

26 J. Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1997), 21.

27 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 29.

28 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 62.

29 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 59-61.

30 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 24.

31 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, ix.

32 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: With Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1942), 46

33 Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 26.

34 D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1949), 66.

35 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

36 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

person.³⁷ According to Ortberg, following Jesus means learning from Jesus how to organise our lives around practices which enable one to 'live in the fruit of the Spirit'.³⁸ Ortberg describes a spiritual discipline as 'any activity that can help me gain power to live as Jesus taught and modelled it'. For this reason there is no exhaustive list of spiritual disciplines.³⁹

III Listing the Disciplines:

The following is an exploration of common spiritual disciplines and their role in the spiritual growth and ministry of disciples of Jesus Christ. Numerous times in scripture we hear of Jesus practising solitude and prayer, going off early in the mornings to pray by himself (e.g. Mark 1:35). Willard describes the discipline of prayer simply as 'talking to God about what we are doing together'.⁴⁰ Ortberg suggests that prayer is the discipline that people feel most guilty about not practising enough, because they believe that prayer should be effortless if we are truly devoted to God.⁴¹ However, this was not the case even with Jesus' disciples, for they asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

1 Prayer

Prayer is something we learn by praying. Thomas Merton says of prayer,

'we do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life!'⁴² Foster believes that prayer is the primary way that God chooses to change us into his likeness.⁴³ In prayer, God reveals to us the hiding places we have from him, and he graciously frees us from them.⁴⁴ Prayer causes our love for others to increase.⁴⁵ Jesus himself teaches us that prayer is useful for avoiding temptation when he says; 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (Mt. 26:41).

Willard states that prayer has a 'spiritually strengthening effect'⁴⁶ on every aspect of our personality. It builds our faith and confidence in God.⁴⁷ To be done well, prayer will almost certainly be linked with other disciplines such as study, worship, meditation, as well as solitude and fasting.⁴⁸ John Wesley said, 'God does nothing but in answer to prayer'.⁴⁹ We should 'precede, unfold and follow' everything we do with prayer'.⁵⁰ Imagine the potential of our ministries if we did this. However, so often we forget to pray—or is it more than this? Willard makes a profound statement regarding prayer. He says;

The idea that everything would hap-

37 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 54.

38 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 44.

39 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 48.

40 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 267.

41 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 95.

42 Cited in Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 96.

43 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 30.

44 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 30.

45 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 106.

46 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 191.

47 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 192.

48 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 191.

49 Cited in Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 31.

50 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 40.

pen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a spectre that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God does not respond to this. You wouldn't either.⁵¹

We must deal with these psychological barriers to prayer, otherwise our prayers are sure to be ineffective. Brother Lawrence says of prayer that there is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of continual conversation with God'.⁵² What a wonderful way to live one's life and carry out one's ministry, in constant communion with God. Isn't that what every true Christian longs for?

2 Solitude

Solitude is spending long periods of time alone with God,⁵³ and purposefully avoiding interaction with others.⁵⁴ Foster describes solitude as a state of one's mind and heart.⁵⁵ The gospels show us that Jesus regularly sought solitude, particularly before and after important events.

He began his ministry in the desert, and ended his ministry in Gethsemane with times of solitude.⁵⁶ Nouwen says that it is in 'solitude that we discover

that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than the result of our efforts'.⁵⁷ Here we can escape from the forces in society that attempt to mould us.⁵⁸ Willard explains that 'in solitude we find the psychic distance, the perspective from which we can see, in light of eternity, the created things that trap, worry and oppress us'.⁵⁹

Solitude can help us to see that our extreme busyness is caused by our inability to trust God or unwillingness to let others contribute.⁶⁰ Willard explains that hurry is the enemy of kindness and love, and also involves worry, fear and anger.⁶¹ He says that solitude can help us to remember that the world keeps going without us, and that there is more damage done by our unkindness and lack of love, as a result of our hurry, than the benefits to haste (if there are any at all!).⁶² A life without lonely places of solitude can easily become destructive without a 'quiet centre'.⁶³

Bonhoeffer⁶⁴ and Foster⁶⁵ both make the point that for one to have meaningful fellowship with others, one must be comfortable being alone, and we must

51 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 268-9.

52 Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims* (Grand Rapids: Spire Books, 1958), 44.

53 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

54 Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 164.

55 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 84.

56 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 84.

57 H. J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*, (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, Indiana, 1976), 22.

58 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 84.

59 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 165.

60 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

61 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 29.

62 D. Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006), 29.

63 Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 21.

64 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 58.

65 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 85.

have the fellowship and accountability of others in order to be alone safely. 'In solitude, our heart can slowly take off its many protective devices, and can grow so wide and deep that nothing human is strange to it.'⁶⁶ Willard believes that solitude is one of the most fundamental disciplines to the beginning of spiritual life, and must continue to be practised.⁶⁷ In aloneness it is possible to be silent and still and know that the Lord is indeed God.⁶⁸

3 Silence

Intricately connected to solitude is silence. In fact Foster believes that silence and solitude are inseparable.⁶⁹ To just refrain from speaking without a heart ready to hear from God, is not silence.⁷⁰ We must 'close off our souls from "sounds"'.⁷¹ Noises can be a comfort to us, while complete silence often gives the impression that nothing is happening, and this can be quite shocking to us in our busy lifestyles.⁷² Willard claims that only silence can provide us with the opportunity for 'life-transforming concentration upon God'.⁷³ Silence can also give us the 'quiet, inner confidence' that many of us desire, and are lacking in our daily life and ministry.⁷⁴ Silence teaches us when to speak and when we need to

close our lips. This can be an important realisation in Christian ministry.

The discipline of silence can help us to see that our vocalness in offering opinions can stem from a contempt of other people's words and thoughts, or a wish to keep them quiet. According to à Kempis, 'It is easier to keep silence altogether than not to talk more than we should'.⁷⁵ This is so true for many of us as restraint is something we so often lack. Foster says that the discipline of silence will often bring the freedom to let God be the one to justify our actions, rather than being defensive of them, and increased compassion and sensitivity to others.⁷⁶

Practising silence helps us to have an 'inner distance' that allows us time to ponder our words and have the self control to respond graciously, and to also learn to really listen to others.⁷⁷ A person who has mastered the discipline of silence is someone who can say what needs to be said, and also hold their tongue appropriately. What a benefit this would be to any one of us! Willard says that the ability to be silent and truly listen to others may be the greatest witness and testimony to our faith.⁷⁸ How valuable the discipline of silence could be to life and ministry for Jesus Christ.

4 Meditation

Meditation is not a foreign concept in the Bible, though for many Christians these days it is primarily associ-

66 Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 45.

67 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166.

68 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166.

69 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 86.

70 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 86.

71 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 167.

72 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 167.

73 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 168.

74 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 170.

75 à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 50.

76 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 95.

77 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 169.

78 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 169.

ated with eastern religions.⁷⁹ However, meditation is mentioned over 50 times in the Old Testament.⁸⁰ Meditation is all about *sustained* attention.⁸¹ The aim of Christian meditation is not simply to empty one's mind, but also to fill it with thoughts of God and his word. Meditation on scripture should be used to internalise and personalise scripture.⁸² Jesus studied God's word as a boy and was well versed in scripture (Lu. 2:49; Jn. 7:15). If Jesus took the time to memorise and internalise scripture, that gives us even more reason to do so. Study, as opposed to meditation, is careful observation of objective structures which results in a change to one's thought processes.⁸³

5 Study

In the spiritual discipline of study we engage our minds with the word of God or material about God's word.⁸⁴ The aim of study is to replace old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits.⁸⁵ It is distinguished from meditation by the fact that study is analytical and meditation is devotional, though the two do overlap.⁸⁶ Study requires repetition, concentration, reflection and humility in order to be effective in changing the way

we think.⁸⁷ Romans 12:2 says that we should 'be transformed by the renewing of our minds'. Ortberg says that 'the goal is not for us to get through the scriptures. The goal is to get the scriptures through us.'⁸⁸

Memorisation of scripture is one of the best ways to transform our minds and ingrain scripture in our character.⁸⁹ Psalm 119 speaks of hiding God's word in our hearts so that we will not sin against him. One of the greatest benefits of studying God's word is that it increases our faith, as it penetrates our heart, mind and soul.⁹⁰

6 Simplicity

Our culture is 'plagued by the passion to possess'.⁹¹ Hamilton and Denniss write that although Australia is one of the world's richest countries, two thirds of Australians still believe they cannot afford to buy everything they really need.⁹² They state that 'as a rule, no matter how much money people have, they feel they need more'.⁹³ Tozer says, 'things have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended.'⁹⁴ God's gifts now take

79 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 13.

80 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 189.

81 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 189.

82 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 26.

83 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55.

84 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 182.

85 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 54.

86 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 56

87 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 56-7.

88 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 188.

89 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 190.

90 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 182-3.

91 R. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 3.

92 C. Hamilton, and R. Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2005), 4.

93 Hamilton, and Denniss, *Affluenza*, 5.

94 A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Carlisle, United Kingdom: OM Publishing, 1982), 26.

the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.'

In our desire for affluence we tend to buy so much more than we really need, and waste so much of what we do not use. Australians today buy far more food and luxury items than they can even use because of an 'insatiable appetite for more things' and this inevitably leads to a tremendous amount of waste.⁹⁵ It is a gross understatement to say that our contemporary culture lacks the reality of simplicity; we have so much, do so much, and want so much out of life. It is interesting then that authors such as Tabb claim that 'the only way to get more out of life is to choose less'.⁹⁶

The Bible is clear about God's displeasure towards the accumulation of wealth and exploitation of the poor. The Old and New Testaments abound with examples of God's wrath on those who ignore injustice and commands to care for the poor, the ostracised, the fatherless, and on those who put their trust in material things. Even our Christian culture is affected by the insanity of affluence. Foster states that we buy things we don't need or even want, to impress people we don't even like, and which we ultimately don't end up using.⁹⁷ What is the point? He says that western culture falsely says covetousness = ambition, hoarding = prudence, and greed = industriousness.⁹⁸

The discipline of simplicity offers a direct challenge to our sinful desires and affluent lifestyles, resulting in 'a life of joyful unconcern for possessions'.⁹⁹ Our society needs the corrective example of godly people who are not enslaved to the rat race of accumulating wealth and prestige. The discipline of simplicity would go a long way in developing such characteristics in our lives. Jesus Christ is the perfect example of what it meant to live simply.¹⁰⁰ He did not accumulate wealth or become deceived by the things of this world, and he avoided competitive popularity and prestige.

Simplicity as a discipline is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.¹⁰¹ However, simplicity is not easy to achieve, neither is it fundamentally simple. In fact, it is actually complex because it goes against accepted values and expectations.¹⁰² Both the greedy and the miserly do not know simplicity, as it has nothing to do with an abundance or lack of possessions.¹⁰³ Simplicity relies on receiving all we have as a gift, entrusting what we do have to God, and being willing to give it to others.¹⁰⁴ But it also requires an outward expression, as simplicity must affect the way that we live. However, there are no legalistic rules as to what simplicity should look like.¹⁰⁵

Foster suggests ten principles for developing simplicity in one's life, in-

95 Hamilton and Denniss, 100-5.

96 M. Tabb, *Living With Less: The Upside to Downsizing your life* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006) xv.

97 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 70.

98 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 71.

99 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 75, 77.

100 Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 3.

101 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 69.

102 Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 5.

103 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 77.

104 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 77.

105 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 8.

cluding buying things for their usefulness and not their status, rejecting anything that causes addictions, habitually giving things away, appreciating creation more, enjoying things without owning them and not buying things that may continue the cycle of oppression for others. One example would be choosing to buy fair trade coffee beans rather than brands which exploit unfairly paid African people. Through simplicity, followers of Christ can exert a remarkable influence on those around them, and through them, the entire culture.

7 Fasting

As depicted in the Bible, fasting is about abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.¹⁰⁶ Willard says its purpose as a spiritual discipline is about learning to be free from the desire for food, and experiencing how God directly nourishes us.¹⁰⁷ There are many examples throughout scripture of God's people fasting including David, Esther, Daniel, Elijah and Paul to name a few. Jesus fasted for forty days on one occasion recorded in scripture (Lu. 4:2). There are just as many examples of great Christians throughout history who also practised fasting, such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, John Knox and Charles Finney.¹⁰⁸

Jesus taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, while teaching about giving and prayer (Mt. 6). Referring to this passage Foster states that 'it is as if there is almost an uncon-

scious assumption that giving, praying and fasting are all part of Christian devotion'.¹⁰⁹ Although Jesus didn't make any specific commands about fasting it could be assumed that he expected his followers to fast.

Willard claims that fasting will surely prove humiliating for us, as so much of our peace is dependent on the joy of eating.¹¹⁰ It can reveal to us how we use food to distract us from our own unwise behaviour and sinful attitudes, feelings of self-worth or meaninglessness.¹¹¹ It affirms our dependence on God, and the fact that in him we can find 'a source of sustenance beyond food'.¹¹² Through fasting we can truly learn that it is not just food that gives us life but 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Mt. 4:4).

Fasting is an important way that we can practise self denial, which Jesus requires of us as his followers (Mt. 16:24). Willard says that someone who is well practised in fasting will easily be able to endure many forms of deprivation with joy.¹¹³ Fasting also teaches us self-control and temperance, with reference to all our desires, and so it can have a great effect in transforming our whole personality.¹¹⁴

8 Worship

To worship is to ascribe great worth to God and to see him as *worthy*.¹¹⁵ Worship is a response of our heart to the

106 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 42.

107 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

108 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 42.

109 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 46.

110 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 171.

111 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 171.

112 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 171.

113 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 172.

114 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 172.

115 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 184.

love of God¹¹⁶ which encompasses our whole lives.¹¹⁷ We can worship both in community and alone.¹¹⁸ Worship includes but is far more than just singing, praising, and praying.¹¹⁹ When we worship we contemplate and express the glorious radiance, goodness and greatness of God through various expressions including words, symbols and rituals.¹²⁰ We read in John 4:23 that God is actively seeking those who will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. In worship we praise God for who he is, and we express gratitude for all he has done for us.¹²¹

Foster says worship is a spiritual discipline because 'it is an ordered way of acting and living that sets us before God so that He can transform us'.¹²² Worship is not true worship unless it changes us. It propels us towards greater obedience, deeper compassion for others, and compels us to release our resentments.¹²³ Foster states that 'to worship is to change'.¹²⁴ When God meets us in worship and reveals himself to us 'our thoughts and words turn to perception and experience of God'.¹²⁵ Worship is faith-building and strengthening for the believer and is therefore an important spiritual discipline for effective ministry.

The discipline of celebration usually involves gathering together with others to eat, drink, sing, dance and share stories of God's goodness¹²⁶ and so reflect on how wonderful he is.¹²⁷ Willard claims that it is the completion of worship.¹²⁸ Foster suggests that it should involve lots of noise.¹²⁹ As there is a time for silence, so there is a time for making noise! The Bible is full of examples of celebration. In the Old Testament the Israelites were commanded to gather three times a year for periods of celebration.¹³⁰ Jesus practised fellowship and celebration as evidenced by his presence with people and reputation as a glutton and a drunkard.

9 Celebration

Celebration fills us with joy, and joy gives us strength as Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us: 'the joy of the Lord is your strength'. Without the joyful festivity that celebration brings, the spiritual disciplines can become dull and draining, but celebration provides us with energy.¹³¹ Paul commands us in Philippians 4:4 to 'rejoice in the Lord always'. One reason for this command may well be that no one will be attracted to a life of following Jesus if it proves to be as dull as our faces often suggest. Ortberg explains that joylessness is a sin that religious people are prone to enjoy.¹³²

116 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 138.

117 D. Zschech, *Worship: Hillsongs Australia Leadership Series* (Hillsong Australia: Castle Hill, NSW, 1996), 21.

118 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 184.

119 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 139.

120 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 183.

121 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 140.

122 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 144.

123 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 148.

124 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 148.

125 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 184.

126 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 185.

127 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 67.

128 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 185.

129 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 168.

130 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 164.

131 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 164.

132 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 63-4.

Celebration helps us not to take ourselves too seriously, it prevents us from becoming weary in our quest for godliness, and it gives us perspective, and helps us to laugh at ourselves.¹³³ Many Christians are cautious about celebration and to this Willard responds:

The suffering and terror of life will not be removed no matter how 'spiritual' we become. It is because of this that a healthy faith before God cannot be built and maintained, without heartfelt celebration of his greatness and goodness to us in the midst of our suffering and terror.¹³⁴

He says that God is dishonoured just as much if we fear and avoid pleasure, as when we depend upon it and live for it.¹³⁵ Uncle Screwtape informs his protégé Wormwood that fun is closely related to joy and,

It can sometimes be used, of course, to divert humans from something else which the Enemy would like them to be feeling or doing: but in itself it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils.¹³⁶

Celebration done well makes all our problems and sorrows seem small, and it accentuates the goodness of God towards us, so that we have greater strength to do his work. Ortberg claims that it is a learned skill to be joyful. It is a skill well worth practising in the life of every minister of the gospel.¹³⁷

The discipline of service is about doing good things for others, without thinking of ourselves.¹³⁸ In service we give of ourselves and our resources to promote the good of others.¹³⁹ Although service can be used as a discipline, it does not have to be a discipline. It can simply be a means of showing love to others, without any thought to how it will enable one to follow Jesus better.¹⁴⁰ However, service strengthens us in refusing to conform to the world's standards of authority and promotion, while resisting the temptation to conform to the 'pecking order'.¹⁴¹

10 Service

Service can train us to rid ourselves of arrogance, envy, coveting, being possessive or resentful, particularly if we are in 'low' positions in society.¹⁴² Willard believes, however, that service is of more benefit to those in higher social positions, because it is a greater challenge to serve from such a place.¹⁴³ In Matthew 20:26, 28 Jesus says, 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve'. Willard says that this is more of an instruction for those who are 'great', rather than training on how to become 'great'.¹⁴⁴ Jesus gave us an excellent example of service by washing his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:1-17). He loved them by performing this menial

138 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

139 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 188.

140 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 188.

141 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 111.

142 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 188.

143 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 189.

144 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 190.

133 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 168.

134 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 187.

135 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 187.

136 Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 54.

137 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 66.

and humiliating act which was normally assigned to the lowest of servants in the household.¹⁴⁵

Jesus' reason for calling us to serve others was not simply because they need help, but because of the benefits to the individual who serves others.¹⁴⁶ Pride always lurks in the background for people who aim for spiritual transformation¹⁴⁷ and although humility is a virtue that we can't gain by trying to be humble, service is the spiritual discipline most conducive to producing humility.¹⁴⁸ Humility is about having a 'submitted willingness' and 'involves a healthy self-forgetfulness'.¹⁴⁹ In serving, we think of others and give no thought to our own needs and desires.

Service that results from obligation or duty cannot compare to the life, joy and peace that flow's from service motivated by our 'inward person'.¹⁵⁰ True service builds community and a sense of intimacy,¹⁵¹ it requires no service in return, and it 'draws, binds, heals and builds'.¹⁵² What a benefit the discipline of service could be to our Christian communities and ministry.

11 Confession

The discipline of confession can be practised only within fellowship as it requires trusting others enough to know our deepest failures and weaknesses.¹⁵³ James 5:16 says, 'confess your sins to each other and pray for each other'. Bonhoeffer claims that 'he who is alone with his sin is utterly alone' and 'the more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it'.¹⁵⁴ Our sins need to be confessed so that we can begin to heal and to change.¹⁵⁵

Confession helps us to abandon self-justification, and when sin is expressed to another person, it loses its power over us.¹⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer states that 'in confession we affirm and accept our cross. In the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother—which means before God—we experience the cross of Jesus as our rescue and salvation'.¹⁵⁷ Confession builds our faith that God can provide for our needs through his people, it allows us to experience love, and to be humbled before others.¹⁵⁸ Foster says;

Without the cross the discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming

145 M. Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, Tn: W Publishing Group, 2006), 25.

146 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 117.

147 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 112.

148 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 113.

149 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 112

150 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 122.

151 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 119.

152 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 113.

153 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 195.

154 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 86-7.

155 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 129.

156 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 88.

157 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 89-90.

158 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 195.

the inner spirit.¹⁵⁹

Confession is not just about telling the truth, it also involves acknowledging the pain of the people we have hurt, as well as God's pain over our sin.¹⁶⁰ In addition, it also involves an intention to change.¹⁶¹ It is a grace and a discipline, as it is a 'consciously chosen course of action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty'.¹⁶² As Christians, we so often forget that we are all sinners under grace, and we hide our sinfulness behind hypocrisy.

Often, although we pray and even beg for forgiveness, we do not feel it ourselves until we have confessed it to another person. For this reason, God has provided other Christians to 'make God's presence and forgiveness real to us'.¹⁶³ We have been given the authority to receive confessions of sins and forgive them in Jesus' name. As John 20:23 says, 'if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven'. What a great ministry we have been given! Confession also assists us in avoiding sin. As Willard says, 'nothing is more supportive of right behaviours than open truth'.¹⁶⁴ It builds community, enables deep fellowship, and encourages restitution among believers.

IV Practising the Disciplines

Our relationship with God allows much room for creative individuality and

experimentation with spiritual disciplines.¹⁶⁵ We are limited only by the number of sins such disciplines can address! When we commit to engaging in the above mentioned disciplines faithfully, we are sure to be changed from glory to glory. Willard suggests that 'the duplicities, entanglements and evil intentions that infect our will can be eliminated as "we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith"' (Hebrews 12:2), through the practising of spiritual disciplines.¹⁶⁶

Jesus said in John 14:12 that 'anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these.' Willard says that such great acts of power, which Jesus promises we would do, require great character and great character is something we can grow only slowly towards.¹⁶⁷ Through spiritual disciplines one builds great character, and therefore, the disciplines go hand in hand with the power of God demonstrated in one's life.

If one has great power without great character, pride in one's ability is an inevitable consequence. It was said of Satan that he fell into pride when he observed how well he performed his religious acts. Willard goes on to say that in God's kingdom he intends us to have as much power as our character can bear.¹⁶⁸ Eventually we will even have enough power to do whatever we want; because we will have 'the mind of Christ' and will therefore do what God wants. What an awesome picture that is!

159 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 126.

160 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 135.

161 Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 138.

162 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 127.

163 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 129.

164 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 196.

165 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 198.

166 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 121.

167 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 403.

168 Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 404.

The spiritual disciplines deserve a place of prime importance in training for Christian ministry, and practice in daily life. To make the sort of impact that many claim they want to make in reaching our cities, states, and our world for Christ, we need people to become more like Christ. The tried and true way to do this is to practise spiritual disciplines. We will minister most

effectively when we learn to be like Christ. What power and what amazing transformative effects our ministry could have if we learned what it means to pray effectively, and see God answer us as we spend time each day communing with him. It is plain to see that the spiritual disciplines are essential in our growth and development as disciples of Christ, and in the ministry of disciple making.

1, 2, 3 John Word Biblical Commentary (Revised Edition) (WBC)

Stephen S. Smalley

The letters of John, although simple in style, affirm such profound truths that interpreters throughout history have laboured to explain them. In this extensively revised edition of his commentary on the Johannine epistles Smalley updates his work by interacting with recent scholarship on the letters over the last twenty years. This revision is seamlessly woven into the commentary.

Stephen S. Smalley has retired from his position as Dean of Chester Cathedral. He is author of *John: Evangelist and Interpreter and Hope For Ever*.

978-1-41851-424-2 / 216 x 140mm / £29.99

Judges Word Biblical Commentary

Trent C. Butler

This commentary will feature the most extensive text critical notes available in any modern commentary on Judges. It will present a theological reading of the present text of the book and seek to show that current literary and source theories attributing various parts and even minute pieces of the book to a long series of editors over almost a millennium of time are not needed to explain the origin and purposes of the book. This volume of the WBC will argue for a much earlier date of the book in the reigns of Rehoboam and Jeroboam and will show how Judges is designed as a reversal of the structure and achievements of the Book of Joshua, preparing the way for the Davidic line of kings. The commentary will underline Judges' ironic presentation of its major characters as heroes and failures. The commentary will wrestle with the nature and expectations of leadership in Judges.

Trent C. Butler is Vice President of Editorial Services, Christian Board of Publication. He is a former Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschtikon, Switzerland.

978-0-8499-0207-9 / 229 x 152mm / £24.99

**Paternoster, Authenticmedia Limited, 52 Presley Way,
Crownhill, Milton Keynes, MK8 0ES**

Copyright of Evangelical Review of Theology is the property of Paternoster Periodicals and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.