

Becoming Dallas Willard: The Formation of a Philosopher, Teacher, and Christ Follower
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Dallas Willard was a personal mentor and inspiration to hundreds of pastors, philosophers, and average churchgoers. His presence and ideas rippled through the lives of many prominent leaders and authors, such as John Ortberg, Richard Foster, James Bryan Smith, Paula Huston, and J. P. Moreland. As a result of these relationships and the books he wrote, he fundamentally altered the way tens of thousands of Christians have understood and experienced the spiritual life.

The Ongoing Legacy of Dallas Willard

“What a gift it’s been to read the biography of Dallas! It feels like getting to know him better and receiving more of God’s gifting through him. The depth of thought and reflection and the mastery of not only Dallas’s life but also the explanation of concepts from theology and psychology and philosophy, are amazing. It’s clear, powerful, compelling, and moving both for folks who knew Dallas and many who will meet him through this book.”

—**John Ortberg, pastor, Menlo Church,**
author of *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*

“Dallas was a wonderfully disruptive presence in the world,’ may be the best description of the man whose theology has helped all of us understand and experience God and his kingdom in clear, hopeful, and magnificent ways. But Dallas’s humanity was, to me, as strong a draw to him as his mind. Gary has managed to capture both the brilliance and the brokenness of Dallas, and I think the weaving of those two threads together is what God used to shape this most unique and winsome of men. This story is ministering to some of the most broken and wounded parts of my soul.”

—**Nancy Ortberg, CEO of Transforming the Bay with Christ**

“The web of Dallas Willard’s life is a highly complex, wondrous, and redemptive story woven from the strands of God’s providence: family, friends, colleagues, events, institutions, ministry, teaching, writing, choices, pain, grief, healing, deep faith, and love. How difficult and maybe all but impossible task it is for a biographer to untangle and explain the story of any image-bearer’s life, much less a giant in the land such as Dallas Willard. But Gary Moon does this in a kind, discerning, and wise manner. We can now know Dallas Willard much better – and be enriched and encouraged in the knowing – because his close friend Gary Moon has researched and written so clearly.”

—**Christopher Hall, president, Renovaré**

“Dallas Willard has had an immense influence on many Christians in our time. His writings would also benefit the lives of many who are not yet familiar with his thought. Gary Moon’s winsome telling of Willard’s life and thought will deepen the appreciation of those who already know his work and will provide an insightful introduction to those who do not. In this well-written book, Dallas Willard’s academic and spiritual legacy lives on.”

—**Tremper Longman III, distinguished scholar of biblical studies, Westmont College**

“You’ll enjoy the intriguing story behind a man who lived in the kingdom of God here and now. Drawn skillfully from a variety of resources, *Becoming Dallas Willard* shows us how Dallas thought carefully, lived authentically, and loved well.”

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Gary W. Moon (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is director of the Martin Family Institute and Dallas Willard Center for Spiritual Formation at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. He is also codirector of Fuller's doctor of ministry degree program in spiritual direction. He served as distinguished professor of psychology and Christian spirituality at Richmond Graduate University, editor in chief for the journal *Conversations*, and the director of the Renovaré International Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation. His books include *Apprenticeship with Jesus* and *Falling for God*.

— **Jan Johnson**, coauthor with Dallas Willard of *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice, Hearing God Through the Year, and Study Guide to the Divine Conspiracy*

"The Willard wit and charm appear on nearly every page of this edifying book. Those who knew Dallas well will learn more besides, much of it truly captivating. Gary Moon manages to weave what is anecdotally interesting with what is spiritually compelling, and the whole thing is layered with philosophical richness without which there would be no Dallas Willard."

— **R. Douglas Geivett**, professor of philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

"C. S. Lewis once wrote, 'no possible degree of holiness or heroism which has ever been recorded of the greatest saints is beyond what He [God] is determined to produce in every one of us in the end.' In *Becoming Dallas Willard*, Dr. Gary Moon presents in narrative a developing portrait of a modern saint, a man who both believed and lived the sober truth that real change is possible for all of us. Gratefully, Gary does not write a hagiographic account of one great man's life that awakens desire to become a truly good person but frustrates us with no idea of what to do. I intend to reread what Dallas wrote. His thoughts just might light the path to where I long to go."

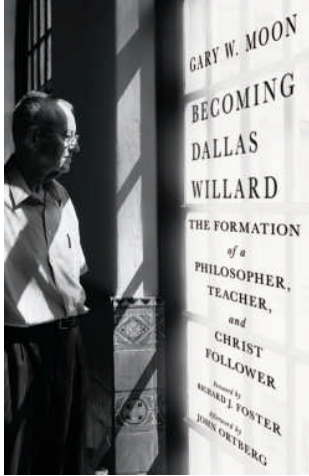
— **Larry Crabb**, psychologist, author, *When God's Ways Make No Sense*

"The main reason I took with absolute seriousness the disruptive ideas that Dallas taught about God and God's kingdom was that he obviously lived in these realities himself. The good news he shared was credible because of his own overwhelmingly radiant life. Dallas lived in the house of his own proclamation. Now, in this labor of love, Gary Moon has given us a believable glimpse into how Dallas became the person he was. By describing Dallas's slow and gradual journey of inner transformation within the crucible of his own challenging and sometimes painful life circumstances, this biography communicates the wonderful good news that real change is possible for each one of us. I believe that this book will light up a deep and intense longing in many hearts to live more faithfully as apprentices of Christ in the kingdom of God."

— **Trevor Hudson**, Methodist minister in South Africa, senior fellow, Dallas Willard Center and Martin Institute, lecturer, Renovaré Institute for Spiritual Formation

"Thank you for this beautiful look at one of my heroes. I remember many events where Dallas was speaking and I always left feeling that I had been in the presence of a true spiritual wise man. I will read this book again and again."

— **Ken Medema**, concert and performing artist



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In Gary W. Moon's candid and inspiring biography, we read how Willard became the person who mentored and partnered with his young pastor, Richard Foster, to inspire some of the most influential books on spirituality of the last generation. The life of Dallas Willard deserves attention because he became a person who experienced authentic transformation of life and character. Dallas Willard not only taught about spiritual disciplines, he became a different person because of them.

“Every Society, Every Culture, Every Age Needs Models of a Life Well Lived”

If we are fortunate, once in our lifetime a human supernova presence streaks across our mental and emotional horizon, and the intensity of this light changes us forever. Dallas Willard was such a supernova for me.

The gnawing question is, exactly how did a person with the rare combination of exceptional brilliance and unadulterated goodness come to be? Brilliance is often marred by arrogance. Goodness is often combined with an absence of rigorous intellectual effort. So, how did this unique blending of brilliance and goodness happen?

This is precisely the complicated, even tangled, issue Gary Moon seeks to unravel in *Becoming Dallas Willard*. And he does so with unusual success.

Weaving a story that stretches all the way back to the heart-rending losses Dallas experienced in the Missouri Ozarks, and all the way forward to him becoming an international authority on Edmund Husserl and his philosophical system known today as phenomenology. Both sides of the story are crucial to understanding how Dallas Willard became such an extraordinary person.

The pain-filled losses of childhood are almost too much to bear. His mother dying suddenly . . . his father making a tragic moral choice . . . well, perhaps I had best leave these stories for you to discover from the book itself.

There are also amazing graces. As a child of nine, Dallas becomes convinced that “Jesus Christ [is] the greatest person that ever lived, and I wanted to be on his side.” As a teenager he reads every book in the high school library. (“Oh, it was a small library,” he once told me.) This leads him to adventure stories like *The Count of Monte Christo* and the sweeping histories of Flavius Josephus, a book his father buys for him. And then his favorite, Plato’s *Republic*, a book he carries with him all through his time as a migrant agricultural worker. And more.

Now, to speak of Plato’s *Republic* leads us to consider the brilliant side of this man. Over the years I have been around a fair number of genuinely bright people, but Dallas, I think, is the only person I have known that I would place in the genius category. I once asked him if he had a photographic memory. He demurred. Well, if his mind was not photographic, it certainly was close.

Scott Soames, the department chair of USC’s School of Philosophy says that Dallas was “the

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teacher with the greatest range in the school of philosophy, regularly teaching courses in logic, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, history of philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, including both sides of the split between analytic philosophy and phenomenology.”

“Those who did not know Dallas in person can get a good sense of him from his lectures and writings. But what has been a gnawing omission is the details of his life made available to the public—until now. Gary Moon’s incredible book *Becoming Dallas Willard* fills this void and more. It is a first-rate, accurate, honest, and timely biography that is riveting. If you enjoy Dallas’s lectures and writings, you need to read this book. I am so thankful to Gary for doing such a careful and painstakingly accurate treatment of the life of the greatest man I ever met.

—J. P. Moreland,
distinguished professor of philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University;
author of *Love Your God with All Your Mind*

It is in discussing the brilliance of Dallas that Gary Moon’s skills shine brightly. Somehow, don’t ask me how, he is able to take concepts like “metaphysical realism” and “epistemic realism” and make them understandable for ordinary people like you and me. Even more, he skillfully shows us how these concepts are absolutely critical for Dallas’s teaching on, for example, the invisible realities of the Trinity and the kingdom of God.

Dallas, of course, is best known for his writing and teaching in Christian spirituality. I would consider *The Divine Conspiracy* a masterpiece and his most important work. *The Spirit of the Disciplines* lays a philosophical, theological, and psychological foundation for the practice of the Christian spiritual disciplines in ordinary life. *Renovation of the Heart* is a careful unpacking of how the human person can be formed, conformed, and transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. And *Hearing God* is the best book on divine guidance I have ever read. Other books and essays by Dallas are out there in abundance.

Of course Dallas’s brilliance, as important as it is, is far from the whole story. He possessed in his person a spiritual formation into Christlikeness that was simply astonishing. Please understand, Dallas and I had a working friendship for more than forty years, so, believe me, I knew the warts and the wrinkles. Still, I saw rich character-forming realities deepen and thicken in him over many years.

I am struggling for the words to share with you what I mean. To put it negatively, Dallas was amazingly free from manipulation and control. To say it positively, he showed graciousness and kindness to everyone who came in contact with him.

Every society, every culture, every age needs models of a life well lived. The deepest, most fundamental reason for studying the life of another person is so we can learn to live our lives more fully, more truly, more authentically. This is why *Becoming Dallas Willard* is a genuinely important book.

— Taken from the foreword by Richard J. Foster