



# THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY

REDISCOVERING OUR HIDDEN LIFE IN GOD

"A masterpiece and a wonder . . .  
the book I have been searching for all my life."

—From the Foreword by RICHARD FOSTER

DALLAS WILLARD

## **Chapter 9**

# **A CURRICULUM FOR CHRISTLIKENESS**

So those who hear me and do what I say are like those intelligent people who build their homes on solid rock, where rain and floods and winds cannot shake them.

MATT. 7:24–25

Train them to do everything I have told you.

MATT. 28:20

### **The Course of Studies in the Master Class**

**T**hese words from Jesus show that it must be possible to hear and do what he said. It also must be possible to train his apprentices in such a way that they routinely do everything he said was best.



That may seem a dream to us today, or it may even be perceived as a threat to our current vision of the Christian hope—indeed, of our personal hope. But that is only because we now live in a time when consumer Christianity has become the accepted norm, and all-out engagement with and in Jesus' kingdom among us is regarded as just one option people may take if it suits them—but probably as somewhat “overdoing it.” By contrast, the biblical pattern is, from beginning to end, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

Because that is so, and we have insisted upon it, we now must deal with the question of ways and means. What could we teach apprentices to Jesus, and how could we train them in such a way that they would routinely do the things he said were right? Indeed, what can we do to put *ourselves* in position actually to do what he has said?

In the previous chapters we have already learned most of what we need to know to answer this question, but now we must respond to it systematically and with some fullness of detail. And this we shall do after a few preliminary clarifications.

### **Obedience and Abundance: Inseparable Aspects of the Same Life**

Certainly life on “the rock” must be a good way to live. Wouldn't you like to be one of those intelligent people who know how to live a rich and unshakable life? One free from loneliness, fear, and anxiety and filled with constant peace and joy? Would you like to love your neighbors as you do yourself and be free of

That may seem a dream to us today, or it may even be perceived as a threat to our current vision of the Christian hope—indeed, of our personal hope. But that is only because we now live in a time when consumer Christianity has become the accepted norm, and all-out engagement with and in Jesus' kingdom among us is regarded as just one option people may take if it suits them—but probably as somewhat “overdoing it.” By contrast, the biblical pattern is, from beginning to end, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

Because that is so, and we have insisted upon it, we now must deal with the question of ways and means. What could we teach apprentices to Jesus, and how could we train them in such a way that they would routinely do the things he said were right? Indeed, what can we do to put *ourselves* in position actually to do what he has said?

In the previous chapters we have already learned most of what we need to know to answer this question, but now we must respond to it systematically and with some fullness of detail. And this we shall do after a few preliminary clarifications.

### **Obedience and Abundance: Inseparable Aspects of the Same Life**

Certainly life on “the rock” must be a good way to live. Wouldn't you like to be one of those intelligent people who know how to live a rich and unshakable life? One free from loneliness, fear, and anxiety and filled with constant peace and joy? Would you like to love your neighbors as you do yourself and be free of

That may seem a dream to us today, or it may even be perceived as a threat to our current vision of the Christian hope—indeed, of our personal hope. But that is only because we now live in a time when consumer Christianity has become the accepted norm, and all-out engagement with and in Jesus' kingdom among us is regarded as just one option people may take if it suits them—but probably as somewhat “overdoing it.” By contrast, the biblical pattern is, from beginning to end, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

Because that is so, and we have insisted upon it, we now must deal with the question of ways and means. What could we teach apprentices to Jesus, and how could we train them in such a way that they would routinely do the things he said were right? Indeed, what can we do to put *ourselves* in position actually to do what he has said?

In the previous chapters we have already learned most of what we need to know to answer this question, but now we must respond to it systematically and with some fullness of detail. And this we shall do after a few preliminary clarifications.

### **Obedience and Abundance: Inseparable Aspects of the Same Life**

Certainly life on “the rock” must be a good way to live. Wouldn't you like to be one of those intelligent people who know how to live a rich and unshakable life? One free from loneliness, fear, and anxiety and filled with constant peace and joy? Would you like to love your neighbors as you do yourself and be free of



anger, envy, lust, and covetousness? Would you like to have no need for others to praise you, and would you like to not be paralyzed and humiliated by their dislike and condemnation? Would you like to have the inspiration and strength to lead a constant life of creative goodness? It sounds pretty good thus far, doesn't it?

Wouldn't you also like to have a strength and understanding that enables you genuinely and naturally to bless those who are cursing you—or cheating you, beating you out on the job, spitting on you in a confrontation, laughing at your religion or culture, even *killing* you? Or the strength and understanding merely to give further needed assistance to someone who has forced you to drop what you are doing and help out? To offer the other cheek to someone who has slapped you? Clearly, our entire inner reality of thought and feeling would have to be transformed to bring us to such a place.

And if you are the usual person reading this list, you are by now beginning to experience some hesitation and some doubt. Yes, a part of this sounds very like *abundance* of life: a very desirable condition to be in that immediately recommends itself to everyone. But other parts seem like *obedience*: something that well might spoil our plans or ruin our life. And so I may be asking myself along about now whether I really want to give up all the “behavioral options” that would disappear from my repertoire if I became the person described—that intelligent person who builds his or her house upon the rock.

But the truth about obedience in the kingdom of Jesus, as should be clear by now, is that it really *is* abundance. Kingdom

obedience is kingdom abundance. They are not two separate things. The inner condition of the soul from which strength and love and peace flow is the very same condition that generously blesses the oppressor and lovingly offers the other cheek. These Christlike behaviors are expressions of a pervasive personal strength and its joy, not of weakness, morbidity, sorrow—or raw exertion of will—as is so often assumed. And all those old “options” that we might think should be kept in reserve, just in case they turn out to be “necessary,” will not even be missed.

However, this truth about obedience seems a secret very well kept today. And the correlation between *faith in Christ* and the obedience/abundance of *life in Christ* has now become, apparently, something of a mystery. Yes, it is a relationship that has functioned well in many periods of Christian history. The cultural and literary record is there for all to see. And there still are those today for whom faith in Christ progressively modulates into both obedience and abundance. I meet such people. But, not very many. The usual Christian experience does not progress in that way. And it is mainly because individuals are rarely offered any effective guidance into the inner substance of the path laid down by Jesus in his teachings and example.

### **Where Are the Training Programs?**

We have to come to terms with the *fact* that we cannot become those who “hear and do” without specific training for it. The training may be to some extent self-administered, but more than that will always be needed. It is something that must be made available to us by those already farther along the path.

That clearly was the understanding of Jesus for his people. Training in Christlikeness is a responsibility they have for those who enter their number. But at the present time intentional, effective training in Christlikeness—within the framework of a clear-eyed apprenticeship commitment and a spiritual “engulfment” in the Trinitarian reality—*is just not there for us*. In the last chapter we said that nondiscipleship is “the elephant in the church.” What feeds that elephant and keeps it strong is the absence of effectual programs of training that enable his people to do what Jesus said in a regular and efficient manner.

Imagine, if you can, discovering in your church letter or bulletin an announcement of a six-week seminar on how genuinely to bless someone who is spitting on you. This primitive form of desecration is still practiced, much more commonly than is thought. We all recall the ceaselessly repeated television images of a professional baseball player recently spitting in the face of an umpire. You can just feel what incredible grace and maturity would be required for that umpire to respond with heartfelt blessing. And of course no one even thought he should give such a response, though it would have been the way of Jesus.

Or suppose the announced seminar was on how to live without purposely indulged lust or covetousness. Or on how to quit condemning the people around you. Or on how to be free of anger and all its complications. We recall the whole range of real-life enactments Jesus talked about in explaining kingdom goodness from the heart. (See chapter 5.)

Imagine, also, a guarantee that at the end of the seminar those who have done the prescribed studies and exercises will



actually be able to bless those who are spitting on them, and so on. In practical matters, to teach people *to do* something is to bring them to the point where they actually do it on the appropriate occasions.

When you teach children or adults to ride a bicycle or swim, they actually do ride bikes or swim on appropriate occasions. You don't just teach them that they *ought* to ride bicycles, or that it is *good* to ride bicycles, or that they should be ashamed if they don't. Similarly, when you teach people to bless those who curse them, they actually do bless those who curse them—even family members! They recognize the occasion as it arises for what it is and respond from the heart of Jesus, which has become their own. They do it and they do it well.

Imagine further, if your imagination is not already exhausted, driving by a church with a large sign in front that says, We Teach All Who Seriously Commit Themselves to Jesus How to Do Everything He Said to Do. If you had just been reading the Gospels—especially Matt. 28:20, quoted on the title page of this chapter—you might think, “Of course, that is exactly what the founder of the church, Jesus, told us to do.”

But your second thought might be that this is a highly unusual church. And then, “Can this be *right*?” And: “Can it be *real*?” When do you suppose was the last time any group of believers or church of any kind or level had a meeting of its officials in which the topic for discussion and action was how they were going to teach their people actually to do the specific things Jesus said?

## **The Necessity of a Curriculum for Christlikeness**

My hope in this chapter is to enable us to begin a gentle exploration of these issues within our own minds and possibly in our own group context. Of course, the very last thing we intend is to blame anyone for the situation we now find ourselves in or to condemn institutions and persons now in place. No one really is to blame, in any case. We now live in the outcome of a largely unconscious historical drift over many years. Moreover, it is human nature to resist deep inward change, for such change threatens our sense of personal identity. The need now is to understand our situation. Where exactly are we now, as the people of Jesus, and why are we at this spot? And then we can begin to ask what might be done about it.

The *fact* is that there now is lacking a serious and expectant intention to bring Jesus' people into obedience and abundance through training. That would be discipleship as he gave it to us. What we have just said about seminars and signs demonstrates beyond a doubt the lack of intention. This is true even though leading writers, such as Alister McGrath, now acknowledge that "God wishes his people to possess...the fullness of life" that Christian spirituality recognizes in Jesus.<sup>1</sup> What a stunning thought, once you allow it to sink in. Somehow the seriously thought out intention—not just a vague idea or wish—to actually bring about the fullness of life in Christ must be reestablished.

One must recognize that numerous programs in local congregations and wider levels of organization are frequently spoken of as discipleship programs. We do not wish to detract from the

good they do, and they do much good. Here we have in mind everything from Sunday school and special courses and seminars to Twelve Step programs and various types of national movements.

However, the emphasis all too often is on some point of behavior modification. This is helpful, but it is not adequate to human life. It does not reach the root of the human problem. That root is the character of the inner life, where Jesus and his call to apprenticeship in the kingdom place the emphasis.

Behind our many praiseworthy activities there still lie many-sided theological and institutional disconnections between faith and obedience. We have discussed a number of them in previous chapters, but a much more thorough examination of these is needed than we can supply here. These disconnections reflect the profound brokenness of the human condition, and they stand squarely at the center of contemporary Christian life, yet they too are not a matter of intention. There is no human conspiracy involved. No one has intended them, and in the midst of oceans of good intentions, few are even aware of them. But there they are, radiating their deadly effects on daily faith and life.

These deeper theological and institutional disconnections are just a matter of how, through gradual historical development we have come *automatically* to think about Jesus Christ and the eternal kind of life that he brings to us. Jesus as the actual teacher of his people has disappeared from the mental horizon of our faith. In that capacity he is not a part of how we “do” our Christianity today.



It is a main purpose of this book on Jesus and his kingdom to help us face this fact of the absence of Jesus the teacher and to change it. And now we have come to the point where we must propose a “curriculum for Christlikeness”: A Course of Study and Practice for Apprentices to Jesus in The Kingdom Among Us. We must begin to think about what, exactly, we would do to help people already committed to learning to do the things Jesus taught, so that they would actually come to do them routinely. Or possibly it is we ourselves who have been “ravished by the kingdom of God.” What would we then study, how would we train *ourselves* to “learn from Jesus how to live our life as he would live it if he were we”? This, you will recall, is what discipleship to Jesus is.

### **Not Just More Information**

As we approach this task, it is very important to understand that the “teaching” to be done at this point—whether directed toward ourselves or toward others—is not a matter of collecting or conveying information. The task is not to inform the disciple, or student, about things that Jesus believed, taught, and practiced. Usually that will already have been done, and more of that alone will be of very little use. The student will already possess almost all of the correct *information*. If tested for accuracy on it, he or she would probably pass.

And that information is essential. It is even a large part of the reason why the students have confidence in Jesus at all. Very likely they deeply want it all to be true. They want heartily to believe it. But they do not really understand it, and their confi-

dence in its reality is shaky. They are like Peter in his truly earth-shaking confession that Jesus was the One anointed to save humanity. He had it right, of course, but had no real idea of what it meant (Matt. 16:16–19, 23).

Often those who are disciples initially only believe that *Jesus* believed the message of the kingdom. They are perhaps somewhat strengthened by that. But what the information they have actually represents does not form a part of their real life. In their bodily and social being they continue to be ready to act as though it were *not* true, even though in their conscious affirmations they accept it. Here is the point where the training “to hear and do” must begin.

### **Getting the Answers Right—And *Believing* Them**

And here also is one of those points where the educational practices that have developed in our society deeply injure our souls and impede the coming of the kingdom into our lives. In our culture one is considered educated if one “knows the right answers.” That is, if one knows which answers are the correct ones. I sometimes joke with my students at the university where I teach by asking them if they believe what they wrote on their tests. They always laugh. They know belief is not required. Belief only controls your life.

It is, I suppose, actually funny. You could never lower a student’s grade for simply giving the right answer but not believing it. Someone who doesn’t believe it still “knows” it. Indeed, on some types of exams if the student marks the “right” answer by

accident—a slip of the pen—he or she still gets “credit.” A student who by pure chance got all of them “right” would get an A.

So, as Jesus’ current assistants in his ongoing program, one important way of characterizing our work of “training disciples to do everything I told you” is “bringing them to actually believe all the things they have already heard.” Our task in ourselves and in others is to transform right answers into automatic responses to real-life situations.

The ordinary members of a church have an immense amount of information about God, Jesus, what they ought to do, and their own destiny. It has come to them through the Christian tradition. Some parts of it are false or misguided, to be sure. No one completely avoids that—even *me*. But generally we have the “right answers,” and those answers are very precious indeed. But as things stand we are, by and large, unable to believe them in the way we genuinely do believe multitudes of things in our “real” life.

For example, nearly every professing Christian has some information about the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, and other standard doctrines. But to have the “right” answers about the Trinity, for example, and to actually *believe* in the reality of the Trinity, is all the difference in the world.

The advantage of believing in the reality of the Trinity is not that we get an A from God for giving “the right answer.” Remember, to believe something is to act as if it is so. To believe that two plus two equals four is to behave accordingly when trying to find out how many dollars or apples are in the house. The advantage



of believing it is not that we can pass tests in arithmetic; it is that we can deal much more successfully with reality. Just try dealing with it as if two plus two equaled six.

Hence, the advantage of *believing* in the Trinity is that we then live as if the Trinity is real: as if the cosmos environing us actually is, beyond all else, a self-sufficing community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge, and power. And, thus believing, our lives naturally integrate themselves, through our actions, into the reality of such a universe, just as with two plus two equals four. In faith we rest ourselves upon the reality of the Trinity in action—and it graciously meets us. For it is there. And our lives are then enmeshed in the true world of God.

So, to drive home the crucial point, a great deal of what goes into “training them [us] to do everything I said” consists simply in *bringing people to believe with their whole being the information they already have* as a result of their initial confidence in Jesus—even if that initial confidence was only the confidence of desperation.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Disciple Is Not Perfect—Yet**

Understanding this also helps dispel the common misconception that those who are studying with Jesus have already realized in themselves the vision and practice of the kingdom. You often hear being a disciple spoken of as if it were an advanced spiritual condition. Not necessarily. The disciple has made a major step

forward, to be sure, but may in fact still have a solid hold on very little of kingdom reality.

Jesus' disciples are those who have chosen to be with him to learn to be like him. All they have necessarily realized at the outset of their apprenticeship to him is, *Jesus is right*. He is the greatest and best. Of this, they are sure. That initial faith is God's gift of grace to them. So they have him. They do not yet have it. Living as his apprentices, they are increasingly getting "it." And as they move along they do indeed attain, by increasing grace, to an "advanced spiritual condition." They increase in the amount and quality of grace (interaction with God) they have in their real life. That is the same as increasing in their experiential knowledge of the real person, Jesus Christ, which in our current condition just is the eternal kind of life (2 Pet. 3:18; compare John 17:3).

Toward the beginning of their course they do not, for example, really believe that the meek and the persecuted are blessed, and certainly not the poor. That is, they do not automatically act as if it were so. But they know that Jesus does believe this, and they believe that he is right about what they themselves do not yet, really, believe.

Further, they want to believe it because, seeing his strength and beauty, they admire him so much and have such confidence in him. That is why they have become his students and have trusted him—or *intend* to trust him—for everything. Their cry is that of the desperate but honest man in the Gospels: "Lord, I believe! Help thou my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). This man believed in Jesus and cast himself upon him for help with his afflicted son.

But as for the rest, well, he was very much less sure about the kingdom and the larger scene. Hence, “Help my unbelief!”

The apostle Peter puts the belief structure involved here in a correct and helpful manner by saying, “For Jesus was in the plan before the world started, but for your sake he has come at the end of the times, for you who *through him believe in God* who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in *God*” (1 Pet. 1:21). We are captivated by Jesus and trust ourselves to him as his apprentices. He then leads us to genuine understanding and reliance upon God in every aspect of our life. But that progression takes some time, and it is supposed to come in part through the efforts of others among his people, who are prepared to train us so that we are able to do, and routinely do, all of the things he said we should.

In order to become a disciple of Jesus, then, one must believe in him. In order to develop as his disciple one must progressively come to believe what he knew to be so. To enter his kingdom, we believe in him. To be at home in his kingdom, learning to reign with him there, we must share his beliefs.

As his apprentices, we pass through a course of training, from having faith in Christ to having the faith of Christ (Gal. 2:16–20). As a proclaimer and teacher of the gospel of his kingdom, I do not cease to announce a gospel *about* Jesus. That remains forever foundational. But I also recognize the need and opportunity to announce the gospel *of* Jesus (Mark 1:1)—the gospel of the present availability to every human being of a life in The Kingdom Among Us. Without that, the gospel about Jesus remains destructively incomplete.

## Getting Clear on Objectives

### Four Things We Must *Not* Take As Primary Objectives

To correctly form a curriculum for Christlikeness, we must have a very clear and simple perception of the primary goals it must achieve, as well as what is to be avoided.

Two objectives in particular that are often taken as *primary* goals must not be left in that position. They can be reintroduced later in proper subordination to the true ones. These are *external conformity* to the wording of Jesus' teachings about actions in specific contexts and *profession of perfectly correct doctrine*. Historically these are the very things that have obsessed the church visible—currently, the latter far more than the former.

We need wait no longer. The results are in. They do not provide a course of personal growth and development that routinely produces people who “hear and do.” They either crush the human mind and soul and separate people from Jesus, or they produce hide-bound legalists and theological experts with “lips close to God and hearts far away from him” (Isa. 29:13). The world hardly needs more of these.

Much the same can be said of the strategies—rarely taken as primary objectives, to be sure, but much used—of encouraging faithfulness to the activities of a church or other outwardly religious routines and various “spiritualities,” or the seeking out of special states of mind or ecstatic experiences. These are good things. But let it be said once and for all that, like outward conformity and doctrinally perfect profession, they are not to be

taken as major objectives in an adequate curriculum for Christlikeness.

Special experiences, faithfulness to the church, correct doctrine, and external conformity to the teachings of Jesus all come along as appropriate, more or less automatically, when the inner self is transformed. But they do not produce such a transformation.

The human heart must be plowed much more deeply. Thus these four emphases are good in their place, and even necessary when rightly understood. But when taken as *primary* objectives, they only burden souls and make significant Christlikeness extremely difficult, if not impossible. With respect to these four emphases, we need to say loudly and repeatedly, to everyone concerned, “You cannot build your house on the rock in this way.”

### **The Two Primary Objectives of the Course of Training**

By contrast, the *primary* objectives of any successful course of training for “life on the rock,” the life that hears and does, are twofold.

The first objective is to bring apprentices to the point where they dearly love and constantly delight in that “heavenly Father” made real to earth in Jesus and are quite certain that there is no “catch,” no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or to his power to carry them out.

When the elderly apostle John, who had been the “kid” among the apostles, came near to the end of his long life he said, “This is the message we heard from Jesus...” (1 John 1:5). It will be very useful in helping us see where we actually stand today if we ask ourselves, before looking at the rest of his statement, how we would automatically finish his sentence for him. What is *the* message Jesus brought, according to us? And then we might also ask our friends and acquaintances. If you do this, and write down the answers you elicit, I think you will be both astonished and enlightened by what you get.

But the aged apostle, on the basis of a lifetime of firsthand experience of Jesus, said that *this* was his message: “God is light, and darkness in him there is not, none” (v. 5). That is *the* message he brought, according to John. It is also, according to him, the message “we proclaim to you” (v. 5). It is the message we today are to proclaim. It is, as we shall further develop later, the message that impels the willing hearer to dearly love and constantly delight in that “heavenly Father” made real to earth in Jesus. And it is the message that, finally, gives us assurance that *his* universe is “a perfectly safe place for us to be.” Love perfected eliminates all fear.

When the mind is filled with this great and beautiful God, the “natural” response, once all “inward” hindrances are removed, will be to do “everything I have told you to do.”

The second primary objective of a curriculum for Christlikeness is to remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God, to free the apprentices of domination, of “enslavement” (John 8:34; Rom. 6:6), to their old habitual patterns of



thought, feeling, and action. These are the “automatic” patterns of response that were ground into the embodied social self during its long life outside The Kingdom Among Us. They make up “the sin that is in my members” which, as Paul so brilliantly understood, brings it about that “wishing to do the good is mine, but the doing of it is not” (Rom. 7:18).

It is not enough, if we would enable Jesus’ students to do what he said, just to announce and teach the truth about God, about Jesus, and about God’s purposes with humankind. To think so is the fallacy underlying most of the training that goes on in our churches and theological schools. Even relentlessly pursued, it is not enough.

Very little of our being lies under the direction of our conscious minds, and very little of our actions runs from our thoughts and consciously chosen intentions. Our mind on its own is an extremely feeble instrument, whose power over life we constantly tend to exaggerate. We are incarnate beings in our very nature, and we live from our bodies. If we are to be transformed, the body must be transformed, and that is not accomplished by talking at it.

The training that leads to *doing* what we hear from Jesus must therefore involve, first, the purposeful disruption of our “automatic” thoughts, feelings, and actions by doing different things with our body. And then, through various intentional practices, we place the body before God and his instrumentalities in such a way that our whole self is retrained away from the old kingdoms around and within us and into “the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13 NAS).

This part of the curriculum for Christlikeness consists of “disciplines for the spiritual life.” We shall discuss them later in this chapter.

But for now let us only add the comment that these two “primary objectives” of the curriculum are not to be pursued separately but interactively. We do not first bring apprentices to love God appropriately and then free them from pattern enslavement. Nor do we do it the other way around.

Pursuit of the two primary objectives goes hand in hand. They are to be simultaneously sought. This would be expected in the case of persons such as we are, who live at the mercy of their thoughts, to be sure, but also are bodily beings with a social context that all too easily takes over our life.

Now let us consider in some detail what we would have to do in order to achieve the two primary objectives. And here we enter the substance of the curriculum for Christlikeness.

## **Enthralling the Mind with God**

### **Turning the Mind Toward God**

With regard to our first primary objective, the most important question we face is, How do we help people love what is lovely? Very simply, we cause them, *ask* them, help them to place their minds on the lovely thing concerned. We assist them to do this in every way possible. Saint Thomas Aquinas remarks that “love is born of an earnest consideration of the object loved.” And: “Love

follows knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Love is an emotional response aroused in the will by visions of the good. Contrary to what is often said, love is never blind, though it may not see rightly. It cannot exist without some vision of the beloved.

As teachers we therefore bring the lovely thing—in this case, God—before the disciple as fully and as forcibly as possible, putting our best efforts into it. But we never forget that in the last analysis, as we have already learned from Emily Dickinson, “the soul selects her own society, then shuts the door.”<sup>4</sup> Though we act, and as intelligently and responsibly as possible, we are always in the position of *asking*: asking them, asking God, and responding to their responses.

God has placed the only key to the innermost parts of the human soul in its own hands and will never take it back to himself or give it to another. You may even be able to destroy the soul of another, but you will never unlock it against his or her will. The soul, to continue the words of the poet just quoted, can “close the valves of her attention, like stone.” She can even lose the key, and have to have help finding it. She can even refuse the help she desperately needs. But she will never cease to need to love, which is deeper than the need to be loved.

A popular saying is “Take time to smell the roses.” What does this mean? To enjoy the rose it is necessary to focus on it and bring the rose as fully before our senses and mind as possible. To smell a rose you must get close, and you must linger. When we do so, we delight in it. We love it.

Taking time to smell the roses leaves enduring impressions of a dear glory that, if sufficiently reengaged, can change the quality of our entire life. The rose in a very special way—and more generally the flower, even in its most humble forms—is a fragile but irrepressible witness on earth to a “larger” world where good is somehow safe.

This simple illustration contains profound truths. If anyone is to love God and have his or her life filled with that love, God in his glorious reality must be brought before the mind and kept there in such a way that the mind takes root and stays fixed there. Of course the individual must be willing for this to happen, but any genuine apprentice to Jesus will be willing. This is the very lesson apprentices have enrolled in his school to learn.

So the question for the first part of our curriculum is simply *how* to bring God adequately before the mind and spirit of the disciple. This is to be done in such a way that love for and delight in God will be elicited and established as the pervasive orientation of the whole self. It will fill the mind of the willing soul and progress toward an easy and delightful governance of the entire personality. Our first primary objective will then have been achieved.

## **Our Mind and Our Choices**

Now we need to understand that what simply *occupies* our mind very largely governs what we do. It sets the emotional tone out of which our actions flow, and it projects the possible courses of action available to us. Also the mind, though of little power on

its own, is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. This is true in both a direct and an indirect sense. Of all the things we do, we have more freedom with respect to *what we will think of*, where we will place our mind, than anything else. And the freedom of thinking is a direct freedom wherever it is present. We need not do something else in order to exercise it. We simply turn our mind to whatever it is we choose to think of. The deepest revelation of our character is what we choose to dwell on in thought, what constantly occupies our mind—as well as what we can or cannot even think of.

But the mind is also at the root of our indirect freedoms—of things we can do *if* we do something else. For example, the highly successful Alcoholics Anonymous program is designed to free people from drinking alcohol. They have learned they cannot be free by just trying. Steps 1 through 4 in the well-known Twelve Step program are exercises of the direct freedom of the individual, the freedom to place their minds where they need to: on themselves as they really are and on God, who can help them.<sup>5</sup>

But these first steps make it possible to do other things (the remaining eight steps) that they could not do if their minds were not directed as the first four steps require. Eventually, they want to be free of drink day by day. That is the goal. But this “freedom” will never be realized unless the individual involved takes constant care over the *direct* placement of his or her mind.

What we see in this wondrously life-saving program is a general arrangement of the human personality that, really, is totally obvious to any thoughtful person. But we are rarely thoughtful. As the line from A. E. Houseman says, “We think by fits and



starts.” Thus a part of the call of God to us has always been to *think*. Indeed the call of Jesus to “repent” is nothing but a call to think about how we have been thinking. And when we come to the task of developing disciples into the fullness of Christ, we must be very clear that one main part, and by far the most fundamental, is *to form the insights and habits of the student’s mind so that it stays directed toward God*. When this is adequately done, a full heart of love will go out toward God, and joy and obedience will flood the life.

What we have just explained is the constant testimony of biblical writers. As only one illustration, in Psalm 16 we read,

The Lord is what I have in life and what sustains me....  
My mind teaches me through the night times about this. I hold the Lord continually before me; because he is involved in all I do, I will not be troubled. Therefore my heart is glad, and all that is best in me rejoices; my flesh also will be secure. You will not desert me in the grave, nor allow your godly friend to experience decomposition. You will show me the path through life. Around you one has joy to the full. Your right hand offers everlasting pleasures. (Ps. 16:5–11)

The distortion, or “wringness,” of the will, on the other hand—theologians of another day called it “corruption”—is primarily a matter of our *refusal* to dwell in our minds on right things in the right way.<sup>6</sup> We “refuse to retain God in our knowledge,” as Paul says (Rom. 1:28).



To illustrate from lesser things, if I do not want to keep a promise or contract, I will choose to dwell on how to avoid keeping it, not on how to keep it. This is an observable fact. And if I dwell on how to keep it, I pretty certainly will keep it, as far as matters truly are in my control.<sup>7</sup> That is how human personality is organized, and how it is organized must always be kept in mind as we train disciples.

### **The Three Areas of Necessary Intellectual Clarity**

There are three main ways in which God comes before the mind, where we can lose ourselves in love of him. These are, of course, also ways in which we may present God to others, as well as ways by which we individually may seek to fill our minds with him. Through them, the lovely God wins the love of the disciple. He comes to us (1) through his creation, (2) through his public acts on the scene of human history, and (3) through individual experiences of him by ourselves and others.<sup>8</sup>

#### **1. “God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth”**

In training ourselves or others for fullness of life in The Kingdom Among Us, the first task is to present our Father, the one in the heavens, as maker and sustainer of everything else, of “heaven and earth.” From the very beginning of the Judeo-Christian experience, he is understood to be “God most high” (*El Elyon*), creator and therefore possessor of “heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:18–19).

The basis for this assurance about God lies in the common understanding or impression that all of “natural” reality, including you and me, owes its existence and therefore its astonishing order and magnificence to something other than itself. We have no experience of any natural object or event that is self-productive or self-sustaining. Yet we are very familiar with the role of human thought and planning in the production of food, furniture, computers, airplanes, and so forth. So it is an easy inference for human beings, which they have always drawn, to find a great “God most high” through all that exists around us.

The famous Greek philosopher Epictetus, a contemporary to Peter and Paul, commented that “any one thing in the creation is sufficient to demonstrate a providence to a modest and grateful mind.”<sup>9</sup> Paul himself explains that all human beings remain responsible, no matter how far they fall, because of the clear way in which God stands forth in natural reality. “Since the creation of the world,” he says, “God’s invisible nature is clearly presented to their understanding through what has been made” (Rom. 1:19–20).

In a later passage in Romans (10:18), he comes close to identifying the very “word of Christ,” the gospel, with the word of God that goes out from nature to “the ends of the earth,” according to Psalm 19. Through the ages and up to today, outstanding thinkers have continued to be convinced of the soundness of such thinking.

But though the rational processes involved in seeing the Creator through nature are important—and, I believe, conclusive—they are not all that is involved. It may be that for most people

God is more *sensed* through nature than inferred—somewhat as I “sense” or “read” your thoughts, feelings, and presence when I am around you, but do not *infer* them.

The words of the poet Wordsworth express the situation best for many people:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

However that may be, the point is that in the training that brings apprentices of Jesus to live on that rock of “hearing and doing,” “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth” must be made present to their minds in such a way that they

can see his magnificent beauty and their love can be strongly and constantly drawn to him. This will make a huge and indispensable contribution to their ability to love him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

### **Our Seeking and Teaching Must Be Thorough and Completely Honest**

In the seeking and teaching to be done, we will of course open up every term—*God, Father, Maker*—and so on, as carefully and as fully as we can to the disciples. We will use the goldmine of conceptualization in the scriptures for this purpose and the best of human thinking and writing available to us. Of utmost importance, we will take care to do this work in constant interplay with the rest of the education that we have received or are receiving at the time.

We then listen prayerfully to those we teach. We encourage every question, and we make it clear that dealing honestly with the questions that come up is the only path to a robust and healthy faith. We will *never* “pooh-pooh” difficulties, or take any problem with anything less than utter seriousness, or direct the slightest reproach or shame on anyone for having questions and doubts. When we don’t honestly know what to say at the time, we will just say so. We will go away and find an answer through study, conversation, and prayer.

After times of study and teaching, we will pay most attention precisely to the puzzles and ambiguities in our own minds and in the minds of our hearers. What makes no sense? What is not

understood? These unclarities are more important than questions about evidence or proof, though the latter are not to be slighted. Most but not all uncertainties in the minds of *disciples*—and this is only somewhat less so for people in general—are the result of unclarities and failures to understand. These shut down confidence and love, and we must never rest until they are cleanly dispersed from the mind.

In doing this, we of course are not just counting on our own cleverness and ability but stand in expectation of help from the Spirit of truth who is constantly at work in the disciples of Jesus. We do all we do in the knowledge that we are working alongside him. Moreover, we do this kind of work hand in hand with the cultivation of the mind and spirit through art and imagination, poetry and song, praise, prayer, and worship. These all help our minds to lay hold of this God, this most lovable being in all of reality.

### **Theology Tested by the Love of God**

The bane of the more liberal branches of Christian theology today is that they are unable to present a God who could be actually loved. They say a great deal about love—especially in connection with things such as community and respect and liberation—but what comes out in the end is something very like the words of the song, “Falling in Love with Love.”

What is to be loved is love itself, very often identified with nothing more than a certain sense of community. And then perhaps some words about God being love are tacked on. But what

is actually conveyed is that love is *ultimate*. That says something quite different, however, from the New Testament revelation of God in Jesus, which made it clear that the love of God is like no love known among humanity.

Basically, modern attempts to think about God independently of historical revelation have been thoroughly victimized by currents of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy that simply make knowledge of God—and maybe everything else—an impossibility. Indeed, something laughable. This forces one to handle the texts and traditions of Jesus in such a way that he can never bring us to a personal God whom we can love with all our being.

But things often turn out little better for theology on the right. It tends to be satisfied with having the right doctrines or traditions and to stop there without ever moving on to consuming admiration of, delight in, and devotion to the God of the universe. On the one hand, these are treated as not necessary, because we have the right answers; and on the other hand, we are given little, if any, example and teaching concerning how to move on to honest and full-hearted love of God.

The acid test for *any* theology is this: Is the God presented one that can be loved, heart, soul, mind, and strength? If the thoughtful, honest answer is; “Not really,” then we need to look elsewhere or deeper. It does not really matter how sophisticated intellectually or doctrinally our approach is. If it fails to set a *lovable* God—a radiant, happy, friendly, accessible, and totally competent being—before ordinary people, we have gone wrong.



We should not keep going in the same direction, but turn around and take another road.

Theologians on both the left and the right, and those on no known scale of comparison, are all loved by God, who has great things in mind for every one of them. They are our neighbors, and we are to share God's vision and love for them. *They* need to love God. The theologian who does not love God is in great danger, and in danger of doing great harm, for he or she needs to know him and believe with assurance concerning him.

Whether or not they stand within the professing community, they are human beings, and, like human beings generally, they think about God more than about any other thing. But if they do not understand him rightly, they can have no confidence in him. More often than not, it is not evidence or proof they need. They need someone to make sense of God in relation to what they are sure, rightly or wrongly, they know about themselves and their world. Surely there is reason by now to conclude that this cannot be done except through God's self-disclosures and, I think, through Jesus above all.

## **Two Harmful Myths**

Unfortunately, a number of myths associated with this part of disciple training on behalf of Jesus are now dominant. One is the idea that questions about God as creator have recently been conclusively settled in the negative by the progress of "scientific knowledge," and that nothing of significance can be known of

God from examining the order of nature—or anything else there may be.

One hundred years ago, by contrast, the general assumption was that those questions had been settled in the positive: God was regarded as manifestly present in nature. These positive answers were routinely taught *as knowledge* in schools at all levels, and the few dissenters were heard. No doubt the dissenters often were not treated with dignity.

Now the pattern is almost exactly reversed. But just as the positive answers in earlier times were sometimes based more on readiness to believe than on accurate thinking—though there was really no need for that—so the negative “answers” that now dominate our culture are mainly based on a socially enforced readiness to disbelieve. And *those* negative answers, which find no God in nature, really do need help from social conditioning.

As I said earlier in a similar connection (chapter 3), absolutely nothing of substance has changed in the last century or more with regard to the basic issues about God, the world, and the human self.<sup>11</sup> In this type of book we can only state that the reasons for believing God is the Creator, which were good reasons in other years still are good reasons, and in training the apprentices of Jesus we should present them thoroughly and carefully, updating them in any way appropriate.

To understand why the negative prejudice is so strong now, just reflect on how the entire system of human expertise, as represented by our many-tiered structure of certification and accreditation, has a tremendous vested interest in ruling God *out*

of consideration. For, if it cannot do that, it is simply wrong about what it presents as knowledge and reality—of which God is no part. As we noted earlier, God currently forms no part of recognized human competence in any field of knowledge or practice.

But if this actually is God's universe, the current lords of knowledge have made what is surely the greatest mistake in human history. Believing the world is flat or the moon is cheese would be nothing in comparison to their mistake. To believe that the current lords of "knowledge" are right, on the other hand, is to omit the spiritual God and the spiritual life from the literally real. It is to take them to be illusions; and two or more centuries of "advanced thinking" have now been devoted to showing that they *are* illusions. So the battle to identify our universe as God's and our existence as part of his creation simply has to go on. We cannot stand aside. And in training people to "hear and do," we must take an open, loving, and intelligent stand on these fundamental matters.

The other harmful myth that I should mention here is the idea that one has to be some kind of profoundly technical scholar to deal effectively with questions about God as creator. Certainly we do need technical scholars, and we should treasure them and pray for them. Today they are in short supply among Jesus' people. Perhaps you should become one. But the work of presenting the lovely God through his creation is basic *pastoral* work, and it is the work of a friend or neighbor. The technical scholars can assist, but the work required can be done by any teacher who will simply decide to do it, follow the material where it leads

(that is, devote the necessary time to study), and rely upon the cooperation of the Trinitarian God who is being presented.

But what we must never forget, in moving toward the faith “on the rock,” is that our “doing” comes—or fails to come—from what our beliefs actually are. Hence, if we would train people to do “all things,” we must change their beliefs. Only so can we change their loves. You cannot change character or behavior and leave beliefs intact. It is one of the major illusions of Western culture, deriving from a form of Christianity that is merely cultural, that you can do this. We cannot work around that illusion, but must dispel it.

Just as we must change the beliefs of individuals in order for them to become disciples in the first place, so we must further change their beliefs if they are to develop as disciples into that fullness and abundance of kingdom life that has obedience as a by-product. And to help disciples toward intelligent assurance that this universe really is God’s world is to advance them greatly toward “loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength” (Mark 12:30).

Jesus, in stating that as the primary, or “first,” commandment, understood that if such love were in place all else of importance would follow, including “hearing and doing.” And that is why hearty and clear-headed love of God must be the first objective in any curriculum for Christlikeness. That objective is substantially gained when God is clearly and constantly present to the mind as our “faithful Creator” (1 Pet. 4:19).

## 2. The God of Jesus and His People

Although knowledge of God through his creation is fundamental to our love for him, it is not enough and was never meant to be. It does not begin to make clear the extent to which God loves, and loves human beings in particular. It cannot make clear, to humans as they are, the “Father heart” of God toward us. But the “faithful Creator” does not leave himself to be a topic of speculation. His love reaches out. From the very beginning of the biblical revelation, human beings are blessed by God personally and engaged by God in a face-to-face relationship renewed by periodic visits (Gen. 1:27–31; 2:7–3:8).

This is such a striking arrangement that it poses a puzzle to the biblical writers about their own nature. “Compared to the cosmos, what are human beings,” the psalmist cries, “that you pay attention to them? Or human offspring that you care about them? You created them a little less than supernatural beings. But you let glory and majesty rest on them! You cause them to rule over the works of your hands and put everything on earth under their feet!” (Ps. 8:4–8).

Even when they turn their back on the Father and put themselves on the cosmic throne, he continues to visit human beings and makes every possible provision for their salvation. Apparently even the angels don’t understand this (1 Pet. 1:12). It seems that through the ages they will be constantly admonished and instructed concerning the nature of God by the eternal presence of the redeemed community of human beings among them (Eph. 2:7; 3:10). And God not only interacts with every individual human being (John 1:9; Acts 10:30–31; 14:17; Rom. 1:14–15),

but also establishes a *public* presence in human history through a covenant people in which he is tangibly manifest to everyone on earth who wants to find him.

The magnificent prayer in Neh. 9:5–38 expresses how creation and covenant come together in the historical tradition of a redeemed and redemptive people. The occasion is one of corporate confession of a disastrous failure to keep the covenant, and of renewal before the gracious God who does not give up on us. The first part of the prayer is the “address,” which we studied in chapter 7. The two crucial elements stated in the address are, precisely, creation and covenant:

CREATION. “You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens and the highest heaven, with all their angelic hosts. You made the earth and all on it, the seas and all in them. You give life to all, and the hosts of the heavens adore you” (vv. 5–6).

COVENANT. “You are the covenanting God, who selected Abram and led him out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the covenant name ‘Abraham,’ meaning ‘father of multitudes’” (v. 7).

This name change was made because in Abram now “all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Abraham and the tradition of faith that comes down from him through the ages was to be *the publicly appointed place in history* where the nature of God’s Father heart was to be accessible to all.

Of course the people that later came to follow Jesus, a child of Abraham—claimed by Paul to be *the* seed of Abraham—understood themselves to be the continuation and fulfillment of



the covenant with Abraham. Thus they understood themselves to be parties to a “New Covenant,” a “New Testament.” The first chapters of the New Testament book of Acts portray how they understood the transition and continuation of the covenant through Jesus, and their prayers reflect the same creation-covenant combination as we saw in Nehemiah 9.

Thus in Acts 4 the apostles and others with them, under severe threat from the authorities, respond by “lifting up their voices to God and saying: ‘O Lord, it is you who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all in them’” (v. 24). Then they quote the great Old Covenant king David, and an association is established between him and “your holy servant Jesus” (vv. 25–30). God then responds to the new covenant people by shaking the place where they are gathered and filling them with the holy spirit to “speak the word of God with boldness” (v. 31).

### **“Knowledge of the Glory of God in the Face of Christ”**

Accordingly, we bring the heart-wrenching goodness of God, his incomprehensible graciousness and generosity, before the mind of disciples by helping them to see and understand the person of Jesus. On a wearying, dreadful night, Jesus was saying a lot of things that were confusing and upsetting those in his little circle of friends. Philip blurted out, “You talk about the Father all the time. Just show us the Father and that will satisfy us” (John 14:8). Jesus patiently replied, “Haven’t you yet understood who I am, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9). No doubt Philip and the others experienced this as just too good to

be true. Could the character of God really be that of Jesus? The stunning answer is, “Yes indeed”

The key, then, to loving God is to *see Jesus*, to hold him before the mind with as much fullness and clarity as possible. It is to adore him. For purposes of training disciples, we should divide this into four main aspects.

First, we teach his beauty, truth, and power while he lived among us as one human being among others. The content of the Gospels should be explained and brought to life in such a way that the Gospels become a permanent presence and possession of the mind of the disciple.

Second, we teach the way he went to execution as a common criminal among other criminals on our behalf. We don’t have to understand exactly how it works. Anyone who thinks he or she does fully understand what theology calls the atonement undoubtedly has some surprises coming. Nowhere, I think, is theological arrogance more commonly displayed than on this subject. But the *fact* is something we must always have before our minds. That is the good reason to wear or display a cross. For all the false and misleading associations that may surround it, it still says—even without the knowledge of the one displaying it —“I am bought by the sufferings and death of Jesus and I belong to God. The divine conspiracy of which I am a part stands over human history in the form of a cross.”

The individual disciples must have indelibly imprinted upon their souls the reality of this wonderful person who walked among us and suffered a cruel death to enable each of us to have

life in God. It should become something that is *never* beyond the margins of their consciousness. “God,” Paul said, “makes clear the greatness of his love for us through the fact that Christ died for us while we were still rebelling against him” (Rom. 5:8).

The exclusiveness of the Christian revelation of God lies here. No one can have an adequate view of the heart and purposes of the God of the universe who does not understand that he permitted his son to die on the cross to reach out to all people, even people who hated him. That is who God is. But that is not just a “right answer” to a theological question. It is God looking at *me* from the cross with compassion and providing for me, with never-failing readiness to take my hand to walk on through life from wherever I may find myself at the time.

Paul’s sense of the meaning of the death of the Son for the individual is spelled out in ecstatic detail in Rom. 8:31–39:

God is for us! Who is against us? Since he did not spare his own Son in reaching us, he obviously is ready to give us every good thing. Who will charge us with anything? God has cleared us of all his charges. Who condemns us? Jesus died for us. Yes, and he passed through death intact, and now stands in the place from which God acts, looking after our interests. Of all the terrible and frightening things the human mind discovers, not one can take us out of his loving hands. We don’t just “manage” or cope. We *thrive* on it all! Nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus the Anointed, our Lord.

With this radiant passage before us, the last two aspects of Jesus' person to be imprinted on the disciple's soul in training are already in view.

Third, we teach the reality of Jesus risen, his actual existence now as a person who is present among his people. We present him in his *ecclesia*, his motley but glorious crew of called-out ones. We trace him from those uncomprehending encounters on the first Easter morning and on through the amazingly different historical periods of the church. But we also show him now active among his disciples. Who he is, is revealed in an essential way in his people.

So the *continuing* incarnation of the divine Son in his gathered people must fill our minds if we are to love him and his Father adequately and thus live on the rock of hearing and doing. And to see how he has been and is lived with and loved and served and presented and celebrated by all kinds of people across time and space adds to the force of our love for him.

But fourth, we teach the Jesus who is the master of the created universe and of human history. He is the one in control of all the atoms, particles, quarks, "strings," and so forth upon which the physical cosmos depends.

Human beings have long aspired to control the ultimate foundations of ordinary reality. We have made a little progress, and there remains an unwavering sense that this is the direction of our destiny. That is the theological meaning of the scientific and technological enterprise. It has always presented itself as the in-

strument for solving human problems, though without its theological context it becomes idolatrous and goes mad.

But this Jesus is master of it all through his word. Satan in tempting him claimed to be in possession of all the kingdoms of the earth. But he was lying, as is his nature. Lies are his only hope. It is Jesus himself who is king of the kings of the earth, and who for good purposes allows Satan and evil to have some influence on humanity for a little while. And it is he, as the *Logos*, who maintains and manipulates the ultimate laws of the physical universe.

Thoroughly presented in all these ways, the love of Jesus for us, and the magnificence of his person, brings the disciple to adore Jesus. His love and loveliness fills our lives. An older Franciscan brother said to Brennan Manning on the day he joined the order, "Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus himself knew that this was the key. The keeping of his commandments was the true sign of love for him, because that love is what made it possible and actual. In this love of Jesus everything comes together: "If anyone loves me, my word he will keep, and my Father will love him, and we will move in with him and live there" (John 14:23).

### **3. God's Hand Seen Through the Events of the Disciple's Life**

The third area of teaching required to bring disciples to the place where they love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength concerns the goodness of their own existence and of

the life made theirs through their natural birth and the following course of life.

God, as our “faithful Creator” and as presented “in the face of Jesus Christ,” is lovely and magnificent. But he will remain something to be admired and even worshiped at a distance if that is all we know of him. In order for disciples to be brought into a full and joyous love of God, they must see their very own life within the framework of unqualified goodness. Perhaps “see” is too strong a word, though it is certainly what we should hope for. But they must at least be sure in their heart of hearts that their life *must* be a good thing. And those who teach disciples to “do all things” must aim to help them to this assurance.

Saint Clare, won in her youth to a life of complete devotion to Jesus by Saint Francis of Assisi, had these for her last words: “Lord God, blessed be thou for having created me!” This should be the daily breath of a disciple of Jesus.

Just previously, as she lay near death, Brother Rainaldo had exhorted her to bear her infirmities with patience. She replied, “Dearest brother, ever since I have known the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through his servant Francis, no suffering has troubled me, no penance has been hard, no sickness too arduous.”

Then, before her last words, she was heard to murmur to her soul, “Depart in peace, for thou wilt have a good escort on the journey. Go forth confidently to Him who has protected thee and loved thee as a mother loves her child.”<sup>13</sup>



We will never have the easy, unhesitating love of God that makes obedience to Jesus our natural response unless we are absolutely sure that *it is good for us to be, and to be who we are*. This means we must have no doubt that the path appointed for us by when and where and to whom we were born is good, and that nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us on our way to our destiny in God's full world.

Any doubt on this point gives force to the soul-numbing idea that God's commandments are, after all, only for his benefit and enjoyment, and that in the final analysis we must look out for ourselves. When the "moral failures" of well-known Christians (and unknown Christians, for that matter) are examined, they always turn out to be based on the idea that God has required them to serve in such a way that they themselves must "take care of their own needs" rather than being richly provided for by God. Resentment toward God, not love, is the outcome, and from such a condition it is impossible to consistently do the deeds of love.

A beautiful illustration of the faith and love to be developed in the disciple is provided by the Old Testament figure Joseph. His story is found in Genesis 37–50. Out of a sense of blessedness that was with him from childhood, he remained completely faithful to God.

Attacked and sold into slavery by his envious brothers (37:18–36), then buried and forgotten for years in prison on false charges deriving precisely from his moral rectitude (39:7–23), he remained sure of the goodness of his own life before God. Later on, after becoming the governor of all of Egypt, he could say to

his brothers concerning their betrayal of him, “You intended to do evil to me, but God meant for it to achieve good” (Gen. 50:20).

It is confidence in the invariably overriding intention of God for our good, with respect to all the evil and suffering that may befall us on life’s journey, that secures us in peace and joy. We must be sure of that intention if we are to be free and able, like Joseph, to simply do what we know to be right.

### **Honoring Father and Mother: A Vital Need**

Most of our doubts about the goodness of our life concern very specific matters: our parents and family, our body, our marriage and children (or lack thereof), our opportunities in life, our work and calling (which are not the same thing), and our job.

At the heart of our own identity lies our family, and our parents in particular. We cannot be thankful for who we are unless we can be thankful for them. Not, certainly, for all the things they have done, for they may have been quite horrible. And in many cases we must come to have pity on them before we can be thankful for them.

Nevertheless, the fifth of the Ten Commandments says, “Honor your father and your mother,” and then adds, “that you may enjoy a long life in the land the Lord your God gives to you” (Exod. 20:12). And Paul notes that this is “the first commandment with a promise attached to it” (Eph. 6:2).

The promise is rooted in the realities of the human soul. A long and healthy existence requires that we be grateful to God

for who we are, and we cannot be thankful for who we are without being thankful for our parents, through whom our life came. They are a part of our identity, and to reject and be angry with them is to reject and be angry with ourselves. To reject ourselves leads to sickness, dissolution, and death, spiritual and physical. We cannot reject ourselves and love God.

When the breach in the human soul that is self-rejection remains unhealed, the individual, and thereby society, is open to all kinds of terrible evils. This is where the Hitlers come from. And for every Hitler who rises to power, there are millions who consume themselves and die in quiet corners of the earth. The final words of the Old Testament address this profound problem. Speaking of an “Elijah” to come, they state that “he will turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:6). This “turning of hearts” is the deep human need that the Promise Keepers movement and other individuals and groups are trying to address in our time.

Thus, in training disciples to “hear and do” the words of their master, a major point will often be to help them honor their parents. This is not something that can be bypassed. In some cases it may be easy, and in a few cases it will be unnecessary because it will already have been done. But these cases will be very few indeed, especially in contemporary society.

The training in question has clearly discernible stages. First, the individual disciples must be honest about who and what their parents really are and how they truly feel about them. Then they must confess the wrongs of attitude and act they have done

their parents and ask for forgiveness. Then they must accept their parents for who and what they are, have mercy on them, and forgive them.

All of this will require careful advice and much prayer and perhaps intense personal presence by the teacher on occasion. The assistance of specially trained counselors may be required. It will take a lengthy period of time in some cases, and the child must take care not to get caught in old damaging patterns of interaction with the parent: for example, trying to make the parent understand, or trying to have the “last word,” or proving he or she was right. Such matters must be simply surrendered to God for him to work out as he will.

Similar teaching, training, and guidance must be given with reference to the other aspects of the disciples’ lives: body, love and sexuality, marriage and children, success with work and jobs. The object in each case is to enable the disciple to be thankful for who they are and what they have. And much the same progression will be required: from honesty to acceptance to compassion and forgiveness and then on to thankfulness to God and the honoring of our lives in all of the aspects indicated. And when this training has been completed, Paul’s words will make perfect sense: “Always giving thanks for all things on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father” (Eph. 5:20). And again: “I have learned how to be content whatever the circumstances.... I can do all things in him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:11, 13).

It is being included in the eternal life of God that heals all wounds and allows us to stop demanding satisfaction. What

really matters, of a personal nature, once it is clear that *you are included?* You have been *chosen*. *God* chooses you. This is the message of the kingdom.

Paul says to the Corinthians, fighting among themselves over who is right or best in this and that regard, "All things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor. 3:21–23 NAS).

Jesus, of course, taught the same thing about the personal plenitude of every one of his people (Mark 10:30). And a very touching passage occurs in the writings of Isaiah the prophet on this point. In his day, non-Israelites were always "on the outside looking in," as we say. And likewise eunuchs, who could never have a family of their own. But God says to them, "I will give them a place forever in my house, and a name better than sons and daughters; a name that will stand forever (Isa. 56:2–5).

It is noteworthy that when Job finally stood before God he was completely satisfied and at rest, though not a single one of his questions about his sufferings had been answered. His questions were good questions. He did not sin in asking them. But in the light of God himself they were simply pointless. They just drop away and lose their interest.

Let us now be perfectly clear. Your life is not something from which you can stand aside and consider what it would have been like had *you* had a different one. There is no "you" apart from your actual life. You are not separate from your life, and in that

life you must find the goodness of God. Otherwise, you will not believe that he has done well by you, and you will not truly be at peace with him.

You must find the goodness of God and the fellowship of Jesus in who you are, or your love for the Father and his unique Son cannot become the foundation for a life of abundance/obedience. They desire to dwell with you in your life and make glorious every aspect of it in the light of the whole that God has planned (John 14).

Today many will say that this simply does not do justice to the bitter facts of life. What of victims of sexual abuse or of dreadful diseases, birth defects, war, and other terrible things? But if we have suffered terribly, we must choose not to let that be our life focus. We must, if we can, focus on God, God's world, and ourselves as included in it with a glorious destiny of our own. And when we cannot, we should seek out those who bring or can help us find the power of the kingdom to do so. Gratitude then focuses forward on redemption, and on the future that is given to us in God's future, come what may. In the light of that, we return to receive, to even welcome, our life as it actually has been and is.

## **Acquiring the Habits of Goodness**

### **Breaking Bondage to the "Sin in Our Body"**

We have spoken of bringing the disciple to behold the loveliness of God in himself, in the face of his incarnate Son, and in his personal appointment and care of our individual existence. This



is a process that must go hand in hand with the *second main objective* in a curriculum for Christlikeness. That, as we have said, is the breaking of the power of patterns of wrongdoing and evil that govern our lives because of our long habituation to a world alienated from God. We must learn to recognize these habitual patterns for what they are and escape from their grasp.<sup>14</sup>

Frankly, there are many people who believe that this simply cannot be done. In Rom. 7:14–25, Paul gives a description of persons who are torn between their conscience and their inability to do what they know to be right. He identifies “indwelling sin” (v. 17) as a power in my body and its members to act for what is wrong without regard to my conscious intentions and desires (vv. 20–24). Evil takes on a life of its own when it inhabits my body in its social setting. It is not unlike how the AIDS virus lives and grows through the cells of the body. What Paul is describing is a reality. But this passage is mistakenly regarded by many as Paul’s personal statement of what his own life was like all the time.

However, Paul’s life after meeting and growing in Christ was totally different from this, as his writings and the remainder of the New Testament record make clear. The entire assumption of the very passage (Rom. 6–8) on which this misinterpretation is based also shows that.

It is assumed by Paul that “sin will not govern in our physical bodies to make us do what it wants, and that we will not go on giving our bodily parts to sin as tools of unrighteousness, but give ourselves to God as those whose physical bodies have

already died, and our bodily parts to God as tools of righteousness” (6:12–13).

The problem currently is that we have little idea—and less still of contemporary models—of what this looks like. Consumer Christianity is now normative. The consumer Christian is one who utilizes the grace of God for forgiveness and the services of the church for special occasions, but does not give his or her life and innermost thoughts, feelings, and intentions over to the kingdom of the heavens. Such Christians are not inwardly transformed and not committed to it.

Because this is so, they remain not just “imperfect,” for all of us remain imperfect, but routinely and seriously unable and unwilling to do the good they know to do, as Paul so accurately describes.

They remain *governed* by, or “slaves” of (John 8:34; Rom. 6:16), sin. For example, their lives are dominated by fear, greed, impatience, egotism, bodily desires, and the like, and they continue to make provision for them. It is this condition that the curriculum for Christlikeness must aim to abolish, in a very intelligent and businesslike manner.

### **What the “Sin in Our Members” Is**

To make a good beginning we must have it very clearly fixed in our minds that what dominates the individual in the course of “normal human existence” is not some invincible, overpowering cosmic force. It is not, as older theologians used to say, a metaphysical necessity we are under, but a personal or “moral” form

of constraint.<sup>15</sup> And if we think we are facing an irresistible cosmic force of evil, it will invariably lead to giving in and giving up—usually with very little resistance. If you can convince yourself that you are helpless, you can then stop struggling and just “let it happen.” That will seem a great relief—for a while. You can once more be a normal human being. But then you will have to deal with the consequences. And for normal human beings those are very severe.

Now, in fact, the patterns of wrongdoing that govern human life outside the kingdom are usually quite weak, even ridiculous. They are simply *our habits*, our largely automatic responses of thought, feeling, and action. Typically, we have acted wrongly before reflecting. And it is this that gives bad habits their power. For the most part they are, as Paul knew, actual characteristics of our bodies and our social context, essential parts of any human self. They do not, by and large, bother to run through our conscious mind or deliberative will, and often run exactly contrary to them. It is rare that what we do wrong is the result of careful deliberation.

Instead, our routine behavior manages to keep the deliberative will and the conscious mind off balance and on the defensive. That leaves us constantly in the position of having to deal with what we have *already* done. And the general “pattern of wrongdoing” that takes over in that case is to defend what we have already done by doing further wrong: by denying, misleading, and rationalizing—or even killing someone, as King David did.

Therefore it is primarily in the body and its social context that the work must be done to replace wrong habits with automatic responses that flow with the kingdom of Jesus and sustain themselves from its power. Certainly there must first come the profound inward turnings of repentance and faith. But the replacement of habits remains absolutely essential to anyone who is to “hear and do” and thus build his or her house on the rock. Without it, direct efforts in the moment of action to do what is right will seldom succeed.

### **A Matter of What Is “in” Us**

This point that bodily habits are the primary form in which human evil exists in practical life is absolutely essential for an understanding of the curriculum required, so we must emphasize it.<sup>16</sup> We will never be able to deal with that evil as long as we take it, in the popular manner, to be external to the self (Satan, the “world”) or something other than precisely the humdrum routines we accept as our habits.

James writes of those who, rather than standing firm under testing, blame their temptations on God. Of course, they were paving the way to “letting it happen.” But James points out that being tempted to do what is wrong is not a matter of God, it is a matter of one’s inner condition, of one’s obsessive desires (*epithumias*). Without these, even God cannot tempt anyone. But when one receives and harbors them, one is “pregnant with evil, gives birth to sin and the consequence is death or separation from God” (1:12–15).

Our training and experience must bring us to peace with the fact that if we do not follow our habitual desires, do not do what “normal” people would do, it is no major thing. We won’t die, even though at the beginning our outraged habits will “tell us” we are sure to. The sun will come up and life will go on: better than we ever dreamed.

Rightly understood, the “death to self” of which scripture and tradition speak is simply the acceptance of this fact. It is the “cross” applied to daily existence. And it is a major part of what disciples must learn in order to break the grip of the “motions of sin in their members” that drive them.

Patterns of anger, scorn, and “looking to lust” vividly illustrate the basic triviality of the drive to wrongdoing. “The look” is only a habit. There is nothing deep or vital about it. One looks to lust or to covet upon certain cues. Anyone who bothers to reflect on his or her experience will be able to identify what those cues are.

This is also true of anger, scorn, and—you name it. It’s not like the law of gravity. Falling when you step off a platform is not a habit. Cultivated lusting, anger, and so on are. And, generally speaking, those who say they “cannot help it” are either not well informed about life or have not decided to do without “it.” Most likely the latter.

But the really good news here is that the power of habit can be broken. Habits can be changed. And God will help us to change them—though he will not do it for us—because he has a vital interest in who we become. If, for example, you have decided not



to let anger or lust govern you, you can train yourself (and certainly you can do so given the help of experienced disciple trainers) to use the very “cues” that until now have served to activate habits of anger and lust to activate thoughts, feelings, and actions that will rule them out. Multitudes have found this to be so.

This is exactly the general arrangement that is used in the Twelve Step program already discussed, and, of course, Alcoholics Anonymous did not discover or invent it. It is a “law,” if you wish, of human personality. But even the A.A. program will be powerless to help anyone who has not decided to avoid drinking and stay alive. As always, the intention points the way, and then habituated thought and desire must be redirected to support the intention in the moments of action.

### **The Training Will Not Be Done for Us**

There has emerged here a truth that is fundamental for our curriculum for Christlikeness. The training required to transform our most basic habits of thought, feeling, and action will not be done for us. And yet it is something that we cannot do by ourselves. Life in all its forms must reach out to what is beyond it to achieve fulfillment, and so also the spiritual life.

The familiar words of Jesus are “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But these must be balanced by the insight that, in general, if we do nothing it will certainly be without him.

Obviously, the effects of training in any area cannot be transferred into us from another person, and rarely, if ever, will it be



*injected* by divine grace. Another person cannot learn Spanish for me, nor can someone else lift weights to improve my muscles. And our deepest moral character also is not something that can be developed by anything that is done for us or to us. Others can help us in certain ways, but we must act. We must act wisely and consistently over a long period of time.

Still, we cannot “put off the old person and put on the new” on our own. The transition and transformation are the result of several factors at work along with our inward or outward efforts. This is made clear in the magnificent passage in Philippians 2, where Paul is explaining the “mind” or inmost character of Jesus and calling us to have the same “mind.”

The mind or attitude in question is that of the loving servant to the good of others. This is the kingdom life. Jesus abandoned himself to the status of a voluntary slave, to the point of even dying for others. In so doing he achieved the highest possible unification of the life of God and the life of man. He is the Maestro, the Lord, and that will be acknowledged throughout the cosmos, by everyone, at the appropriate time (Phil. 2:11).

Now, Paul continues, we have received the life of the kingdom through the word of the gospel and the person of Jesus. That life we have as a gift. But once we have it, there is something for us to do, for, as noted earlier, the person we become cannot be the effect of what someone else does.

Therefore we are to “work out” the salvation we have (2:12). The word here, *katergazesthe*, has the sense of developing or elaborating something, bringing it to the fullness of what in its

nature it is meant to be. But we do not do this as if the new life were simply *our* project. It isn't. God also is at work in us, "choosing and acting on behalf of his intentions" (v. 13). Hence we do what we do—and what will not be done *for* us—"with fear and trembling" because we know who else is involved.

## **The Threefold Dynamic**

### **The "Golden Triangle" of Spiritual Growth**

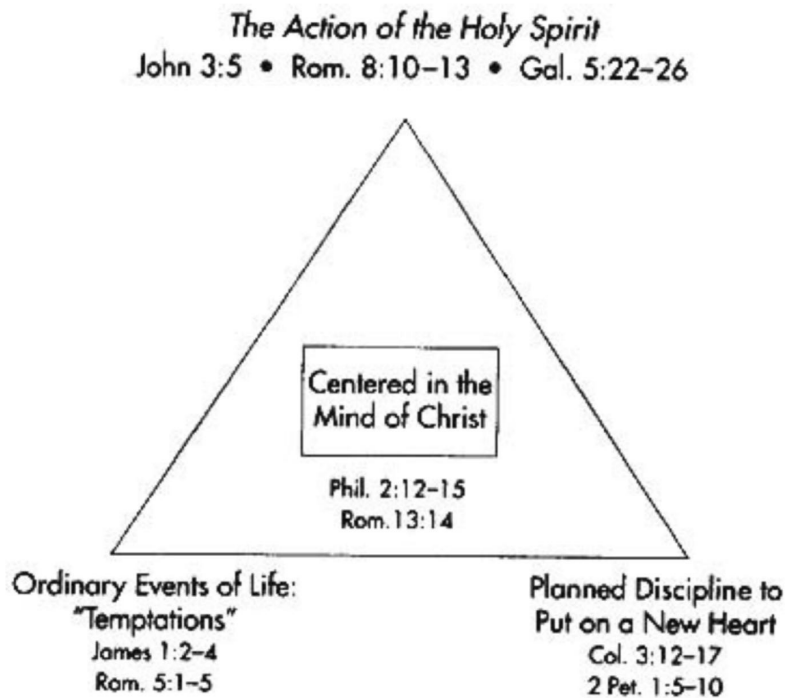
A picture of the factors involved in the transformation of our concretely embodied selves from inside (the "mind") out (behavior) can be conveyed by what I call "the golden triangle of spiritual growth." This image is designed to suggest the correlation in practical life of the factors that can certainly lead to the transformation of the inner self into Christlikeness. The intervention of the Holy Spirit is placed at the apex of the triangle to indicate its primacy in the entire process. The trials of daily life and our activities specially planned for transformation are placed at the bottom to indicate that where the transformation is actually carried out is in our real life, where we dwell with God and our neighbors. And at the level of real life, the role of what is imposed upon us ("trials") goes hand in hand with our choices as to what we will do with ourselves.

The responses we make to our context without thinking are simply an expression of what our body “knows” to do. Of course, in most situations this is good. It is what our body is for. There is almost nothing we do as adult human beings that does not depend on our body’s “knowledge” taking over. Speaking, kitchen work, and driving about in our community are things we have to think very little about as we do them. Unfortunately this remains true when what our body “knows to do” is wrong.

One of the most instructive sayings of Jesus occurs when he is leaving his last meeting with his closest students before his crucifixion. He explains to them that he is now going to be engaged in a spiritual battle that will leave him no time to talk with them. Now the “ruler of the world” is going to be permitted to try him as strongly as possible, tempting him in every way to show faithlessness toward his Father.

The struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane was a matter of Jesus’ mind and feelings being hammered in every possible way to make him mistrust the Father. He almost died of it on the spot. But, Jesus added to his friends, “*in me* this ‘ruler’ has not the least thing on his side” (John 14:30). It was, finally, what was *not* in Jesus that made him invincible, that kept him safe.

This is the true situation: nothing has power to tempt me or move me to wrong action that I have not *given* power by what I permit to be in me. And the most spiritually dangerous things in me are the little habits of thought, feeling, and action that I regard as “normal” because “everyone is like that” and it is “only human.”



The function of the Holy Spirit is, first, to move within our souls, and especially our minds, to present the person of Jesus and the reality of his kingdom. This is through the word of the gospel, in contrast to the realities of life without God. Our confidence in Jesus as the One is always a response elicited and supported by the spiritual movements of God. Thus, as Paul says, "No one can find Jesus to be Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:2).

After we receive the new life, the Spirit continues to move upon and within us to enable us to do the kinds of works Jesus did (through "gifts" of the Spirit) and to grow the kind of inward character that manifests itself in the "fruit" or outcome of the Spirit in our outward life: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, and similar traits of Christ (Gal. 5:22–23).

The importance of the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be overemphasized. But today our practice in Christian circles is, in general, to place almost total emphasis on the apex of this triangle, the work of the Spirit of God for or on the individual. This takes various forms, depending on the history and outlook of the individual or group.

Very commonly church participation is recommended on the basis of how it will change our lives, because God will be there and we will be just *overwhelmed*. And certainly there is an important truth to this. Public manifestations of God, “revivals” if you wish, have made a great difference in many lives, mine included. Emphasis may also be laid upon the gifts of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, the baptism or filling of the Spirit, or the anointing by the Spirit—all very important.

But reliance upon what the Spirit does *to* us or in us, as indispensable as it truly is, will not by itself transform character in its depths. The action of the Spirit must be accompanied by our response, which, as we have seen, cannot be carried out by anyone other than ourselves. This active participation on our part has two aspects, represented by the bottom angles in the triangle.

### **The Indispensable Role of Ordinary Events: “Tests”**

First we must accept the circumstances we constantly find ourselves in as the place of God’s kingdom and blessing. God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being “right,” we will simply have no place to receive his

kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments *are* our life.

Our life presents itself to us as a series of tasks. Our more serious challenges are *trials*, even *tribulations*. In biblical language they are all “temptations.” Just listen to how people carry on! For some of us the first tribulation of the day is just getting up. And then there is caring for ourselves. Then the commute. Then work and other people. But knowledge of the kingdom puts us in position to welcome all of these, because, as we have already seen, we are in a position to thrive on everything life can throw at us—including getting up of a morning! Whatever comes will only confirm the goodness and greatness of the God who has welcomed us into his world.

Thus James, the brother of Jesus, opens his letter to believers with words that truly announce the gospel of the kingdom:

Regard it as a most joyous occasion when the various kinds of trials hit you. For you know that when your confidence in God is put to practical tests it results in the ability to stay with things—patience. And when your capacity to stay with things is fully developed you will be complete and whole, lacking in nothing. (1:2–4)

What an astonishing statement! We immediately recognize that in order to carry through with the challenges of daily life in this way we must be deeply engaged in the other two points of the triangle: we must have the constant movement of the Spirit of God accompanying us, and we must incorporate substantial



“spiritual disciplines” in our overall life plan. In fact, all three points of the triangle are absolutely essential—to one another as well as to the overall goal of spiritual growth. None will work on its own.

Paul says something similar to James in the opening of chapter 5 of Romans. He begins with the hopefulness that is ours because of the grace, faith, and peace that come to us in God’s gift. Then he makes exactly James’s point: “We rejoice [*kauxometha*: ‘exult,’ even ‘boast’] in afflictions. For we know that afflictions bring the capacity to stay with things, or patience, to its fullest form. And patience proves that the hope was right. And the hope does not let us down, for the very best happens to us, love floods our hearts through the presence of the Spirit given to us” (Rom. 5:1–5).

So it is absolutely essential to our growth into the “mind” of Jesus that we accept the “trials” of ordinary existence as the place where we are to experience and find the reign of God-with-us as actual reality. We are not to try to get in a position to avoid trials. And we are not to “catastrophize” and declare the “end of the world” when things happen. We are to see every event as an occasion in which the competence and faithfulness of God will be confirmed to us. Thus do we know the concrete reality of the kingdom of the heavens.

But few disciples will be able directly to respond to their ordinary “trials” in this way, any more than they will be able directly to do “all things whatsoever.” They will have to adopt certain practices that put them in position to respond appropri-

ately. The practices in question are the disciplines that fall at the lower-right angle of the golden triangle of spiritual growth.

### **We Are Not Told Precisely How to Develop Kingdom Habits**

Not only is the outcome of our progression in the kingdom not under our control, but we are not told in any systematic way how to do our part in the process. Well, at least we are not told in precise terms—certainly not in formulas. This is because the process is to be a walk with a person. But it is also because what is needed is very much an individual matter, a response to the particular needs of individual disciples. Perfectly general instructions simply cannot be given. That is why we do not find them in the Bible. Its “wisdom” books, especially Psalms and Proverbs, come as close as possible.

The assumption of the way of Jesus is that we will, once we have decided to “hear and do,” do *whatever* is required to carry out the decision. The precise details of this process will be modeled and picked up by the devoted individual from the group, from redemptive history, and from the good sense of humankind. And that is exactly what we see when we look at the history of Jesus’ people.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is perhaps the best overall statement on the spiritual formation of the disciple in the New Testament. I suspect this is because it was written to people whom Paul had never met and had never had the opportunity to teach. So he gives them a well-rounded presentation of exactly what we have been talking about in this chapter.

Chapters 1 and 2 correspond quite closely to the first primary objective of a curriculum for Christlikeness as presented earlier. Chapters 3 and 4 correspond precisely to the second primary objective.

After summarizing the practical implications of the first two chapters in Col. 3:1–4, Paul moves immediately to the second primary objective in verse 5: “Kill off the aspects of your life that run on what is earthly.” Given how his readers, and we as well, have been formed in the “earthly,” these aspects are precisely “fornication, dirt, rage, evil desire—and covetousness, which amounts to idolatry.” You don’t have to look deeply to see that this list covers the same ground as Matthew 5.

“Get rid of rage, anger, hateful intentions, God-dishonoring and bullying language. Don’t mislead people in any way,” Paul continues (Col. 3:8–9). Then he shifts from acts and attitudes to the deeper level of *character*. “You have,” he says, “put off the old person with her habits, and put on the new person being progressively renovated to the point of fully sharing the mind of her creator” (vv. 9–10).

As those involved in this process, we are to “put on the inner substance heart of fellow-feeling, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, putting up with one another and forgiving each other. If you have a gripe against anyone, just forgive them, like the Lord forgave you” (vv. 12–13). Note that all this is emphatically expressed as *what we are to do*.

### **And Yet Everyone Knows**

Being a man of the scriptures, Jesus understood that it is the care of the soul or, better, the care of the whole person, that must be our objective if we are to function as God designed us to function. This is the wisdom of the entire scriptural tradition. “Put everything you have into the care of your heart,” the book of Proverbs says, “for it determines what your life amounts to” (4:23). “You will keep those in the peace of peace,” Isaiah says, “whose minds are fixed on you, because they trust in you” (26:3). The blessed person is one who “meditates in the law day and night” (Ps. 1:2; Josh. 1:8).

Paul tells his young protégé in the ministry, Timothy, to “become a pattern for the believers, in speech, behavior, love, faith, and purity,” and to cultivate the gift deposited in him at his ordination. He calls him to “pay attention to yourself and to the teachings, continuing in them.” For in that way Timothy will “save both himself and the ones hearing him” (1 Tim. 4:12–16).

If we are to succeed in “putting off the old person and putting on the new,” then, or in having the mind or inner character of our Lord, we must follow an order of life as a whole that is appropriately modeled after his. This should be, and has been, something that is practiced by his people and taught by them to those who enter their ranks. It would be a plan that incorporates *whatever* is necessary to enable us to have the character and then do the deeds indicated in the teachings of Jesus and his immediate followers. For simplicity’s sake we could just say “the character and deeds indicated in Colossians 3.” Our plan for a life of growth in the life of the kingdom of God must be structured around disciplines for the spiritual life.

## **Planned Disciplines To Put on New Heart**

### **What Spiritual Disciplines Are**

But exactly what are these “spiritual disciplines”? What is it about a practice that makes it a spiritual discipline? Well, they are, first of all, *disciplines*. A discipline is any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort.<sup>17</sup>

“Practicing” can be a discipline, as in singing or shooting baskets or hitting golfballs or enunciating French words and phrases in the French way. Practice is discipline, but not all discipline is practice, for in many disciplines we do not engage in the very activity that we hope to be good at.

In our culture, for example, which proceeds at such a frenetic pace, simple sleep and rest may be disciplines in the sense just described. They will, as we have said, enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort, including staying in good emotional and physical health, and possibly being loving and sensitive to our family and coworkers. But usually when we rest we would not be practicing resting—though, in the current world, that too may sometimes be needed, for some people actually cannot even rest by simply doing it.

But spiritual disciplines are also *spiritual* disciplines. That is, they are disciplines designed to help us be active and effective in the spiritual realm of our own heart, now spiritually alive by grace, in relation to God and his kingdom. They are designed to help us withdraw from total dependence on the merely human

or natural (and in that precise sense to mortify the “flesh,” kill it off, let it die) and to depend also on the ultimate reality, which is God and his kingdom.

Thus, for example, I fast from food to know that there is another food that sustains me. I memorize and meditate on scripture that the order of God’s kingdom would become the order and power of my mind and my life.

### **Centrality of Our Bodies**

Somewhat ironically, perhaps, *all* of the “spiritual” disciplines are, or essentially involve, bodily behaviors. But really, that makes perfect sense. For the body is the first field of energy beyond our thoughts that we have direction over, and all else we influence is due to our power over it. Moreover, it is the chief repository of the wrong habits that we must set aside, as well as the place where new habits are to be instituted. We are, within limits, able to command it to do things that will transform our habits—especially the inner habits of thought and feeling—and so enable us to do things not now in our power.

The deeds of the kingdom arise naturally out of a certain quality of life. We cultivate that life in its wholeness by directing our bodies into activities that empower the inner and outer person for God and through God.

In this second part of the curriculum for Christlikeness, then, the main task is, by engaging in ways of using the body differently, to disrupt and conquer habits of thought, feeling, and action that govern our lives as if we or someone other than God

were God and as if his kingdom were irrelevant or inaccessible to us. Once this is done—or, more accurately, hand in hand with doing it—we shift to the positive. Appropriate disciplines for developing *new* habits, kingdom habits, are practiced. The ultimate effect of this part of the curriculum is to make our body a reliable ally and resource for the spiritual life.

From the stage of early discipleship, where “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” we increasingly pass to the stages where the flesh—think of that as what we more or less automatically feel, think, and do—is with the spirit and supportive of its deepest intentions. This is absolutely essential in training that will bring us to do from the heart the things that Jesus knew to be best.

### **Modeled upon Jesus Himself**

A further help in understanding what spiritual disciplines are for the disciples of Jesus is to recognize them as simply a matter of following him into his own practices, appropriately modified to suit our own condition. We find our way into a life where the power of inward hindrances to obedience/abundance are broken by observing what Jesus and others who have followed him do and learning to structure our lives around those same activities. Thus, although we are indeed not told in formulaic terms what to do in order to build our life upon the rock, everyone who knows anything about Jesus’ life really does know what to do to that end, or can easily find out. It is not a secret.



So, basically, to put off the old person and put on the new we only follow Jesus into the activities that he engaged in to nurture his own life in relation to the Father. Of course, his calling and mission was out of all proportion to ours, and he never had our weaknesses, which result from our long training in sin. But his use of solitude, silence, study of scripture, prayer, and service to others all had a disciplinary aspect in his life. And we can be very sure that what he found useful for conduct of his life in the Father will also be useful for us. It was an important day in my life when at last I understood that if *he* needed forty days in the wilderness at one point, I very likely could use three or four.

This crucial point carries on down through the ages during which his people have been on earth. The ones who have made great spiritual progress all seriously engaged with a fairly standard list of disciplines for the spiritual life. There has been abuse and misunderstanding, no doubt, but the power of solitude, silence, meditative study, prayer, sacrificial giving, service, and so forth *as disciplines* are simply beyond question. This is a field of knowledge, and we remain ignorant of it to our great disadvantage.

However, the disciplines do not confirm their value to those who only talk about them or study them “academically” or hear others talk about them. One has to enter them with Jesus as teacher to find the incredible power they have to change one’s world and character. They are self-confirming when entered in faith and humility. And you don’t really need much of faith and humility if you will just stay with them. They will do the rest because they open us to the kingdom.

This is an extension of Jesus' emphasis on doing as a way of knowing the kingdom. We will be able to do what he says to do as we are inwardly transformed by following him into his life practices of solitude, service, study, and so forth. This is an essential part of what Paul calls "offering our bodies as living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:2). It will result in the mark of the disciplined person, who is able to do what needs to be done when and as it needs to be done.

### **Doing the Same Thing Differently**

Sometimes entering spiritual disciplines is not so much a matter of doing something we have not done before as of doing it in a different way.

I began to work my way into the practice of disciplines for the spiritual life without knowing that that was what I was doing. I still remember vividly the first time I spent the better part of a day just reading and rereading the Gospel of John. It was in my second year of college. I do not recall why I did it, exactly, but I do know it was not a course assignment. I believe that it was a holiday weekend, and the campus was largely deserted. That, it turns out, is a key point

I began by reading the Gospel while machines washed my clothes. But that was done in a hour or two, and by that time I found myself engrossed and drawn into the radiant world of John's account. I had never experienced anything like it before.

I did nothing for the rest of the day but live there in that world: reading, meditating, cross-referencing, and rereading.

Truthfully, my world never looked quite the same after that day. I discovered a reality in Jesus and the people and events surrounding him that I had never known before. I was not exactly “transformed,” I think. Perhaps we use that word far too easily and often. Certain “besetting sins” were still not eliminated. But there was a new thing at work in me. And I had learned something about how we do change—and how we do not.

In particular, I had learned that *intensity* is crucial for any progress in spiritual perception and understanding. To dribble a few verses or chapters of scripture on oneself through the week, in church or out, will not reorder one’s mind and spirit—just as one drop of water every five minutes will not get you a shower, no matter how long you keep it up. You need a lot of water at once and for a sufficiently long time. Similarly for the written Word.

A year or so later I learned a related lesson with regard to prayer. In the tradition in which I was brought up, scripture reading and prayer were the two main religious things one might do, in addition to attending services of the church. But I was not given to understand that these had to be practiced in a certain way if they were to make a real difference in one’s life.

In particular I did not understand the intensity with which they must be done, nor that the appropriate intensity required that they be engaged in for lengthy periods of undistracted time on a single occasion. Moreover, one’s life as a whole had to be arranged in such a way that this would be possible. One must not be agitated, hurried, or exhausted when the time of prayer and study came. Hence one cannot tack an effective, life-transform-

ing practice of prayer and study onto “life as usual.” Life as usual must go. It will be replaced by something far better.

Without my planning it or intending it, my life as a student made it possible for me to have lengthy periods to myself in an appropriate condition of soul and body. There were rooms on the third floor of a nearby building where small children met for classes in Sunday school. These rooms were filled with little chairs and tables for children, which for obvious reasons no one else could use. But I could go into those rooms Monday through Saturday and be totally alone for hour after hour. I needed no chairs. The floor alone was quite adequate for my business. And there I learned what extensive and intensive praying does for one’s soul, as well as for the subjects of such prayer.

### **Some Specific Disciplines in the Curriculum**

With these clarifications of the general nature of spiritual disciplines in mind, what are some of the specific practices that are of most use in the development of disciples? Here we need not be concerned about a complete list of such practices, and indeed there really is no such thing anyway.<sup>18</sup> That makes it all the more important that we understand the general concept just explained. What is clear and, for our purposes, essential is that a small number of them are absolutely central to spiritual growth. They must form a part of the foundation of our whole-life plan for growth as apprentices of Jesus.

These are, on the side of abstinence, solitude and silence and, on the side of positive engagement, study and worship.

TWO DISCIPLINES OF ABSTINENCE: SOLITUDE AND SILENCE. By solitude we mean being out of human contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy periods of time. To get out of human contact is not something that can be done in a short while, for that contact lingers long after it is, in one sense, over.

Silence is a natural part of solitude and is its essential completion. Most noise is human contact. Silence means to escape from sounds, noises, other than the gentle ones of nature. But it also means not talking, and the effects of not talking on our soul are different from those of simple quietness. Both dimensions of silence are crucial for the breaking of old habits and the formation of Christ's character in us.

Now why, precisely, are these disciplines of abstinence so central to the curriculum for Christlikeness? Remember that the second primary objective of the curriculum is to break the power of our ready responses to do the opposite of what Jesus teaches: for example, scorn, anger, verbal manipulation, payback, silent collusion in the wrongdoing of others around us, and so forth.

These responses mainly exist at what we might call the "epidermal" level of the self, the first point of contact with the world around us. They are almost totally "automatic," given the usual stimuli. The very language we use is laden with them, and of course they are the "buttons" by which the human surroundings more or less control us. They are not "deep"; they are just *there*, and just constant. They are the area where most of our life is lived. And in action they have the power to draw our whole being into the deepest of injuries and wrongs.

Now it is solitude and silence that allow us to escape the patterns of epidermal responses, with their consequences. They provide space to come to terms with these responses and to replace them, with God's help, by different immediate responses that are suitable to the kingdom environment—and, indeed, to the kind of life everyone in saner moments recognizes to be good. They break the pell-mell rush through life and create a kind of inner space that permits people to become aware of what they are doing and what they are *about* to do.

We hear the cries from our strife-torn streets: "Give peace a chance!" and "Can't we all just get along?" But you cannot give peace a chance if that is *all* you give a chance. You have to do the things that make peace possible and actual. When you listen to people talk about peace, you soon realize in most cases that they are unwilling to deal with the conditions of society and soul that make strife inevitable. They want to keep them and still have peace, but it is peace on their terms, which is impossible.

And we can't all *just* get along. Rather, we have to become the kinds of persons who can get along. As a major part of this, our epidermal responses have to be changed in such a way that the fire and the fight doesn't start almost immediately when we are "rubbed the wrong way." Solitude and silence give us a place to begin the necessary changes, though they are not a place to stop.

They also give us some space to reform our inmost attitudes toward people and events. They take the world off our shoulders for a time and interrupt our habit of constantly managing things, of being in control, or thinking we are. One of the greatest of spiritual attainments is the capacity to do nothing. Thus the



Christian philosopher Pascal insightfully remarks, “I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room.”<sup>19</sup>

This idea of doing nothing proves to be absolutely terrifying to most people I speak with. But at least the person who is capable of doing nothing might be capable of refraining from doing the wrong thing. And then perhaps he or she would be better able to do the right thing.

And doing nothing has many other advantages. It may be a great blessing to others around us, who often hardly have a chance while we are in action. And possibly the gentle Father in the heavens would draw nigh if we would just be quiet and rest a bit. Generally speaking, he will not compete for our attention, and as long as we are “in charge” he is liable to keep a certain distance.

Every person should have regular periods in life when he or she has nothing to do. Periods of solitude and silence are excellent practices for helping us learn how to do that. The law that God has given for our benefit as well as his tells us that one seventh of our time should be devoted to doing nothing—no work, not by ourselves or any of our family, employees, or animals. That includes, of course, religious work. It is to be Sabbath.

What do you do in solitude or silence? Well, as far as things to “get done,” nothing at all. As long as you are doing “things to get done,” you have not broken human contact. So don’t go into solitude and silence with a list. Can we enjoy things in solitude and silence? Yes, but don’t try to. Just be there.

Even lay down your ideas as to what solitude and silence are supposed to accomplish in your spiritual growth. You will discover incredibly good things. One is that you have a soul. Another, that God is near and the universe is brimming with goodness. Another, that others aren't as bad as you often think. But don't try to discover these, or you won't. You'll just be busy and find more of your own business.

The cure for too-much-to-do is solitude and silence, for there you find you are safely more than what you do. And the cure of loneliness is solitude and silence, for there you discover in how many ways you are never alone.

When you go into solitude and silence, you need to be relatively comfortable. Don't be a hero in this or in any spiritual discipline. You will need rest. Sleep until you wake up truly refreshed. And you will need to stay there long enough for the inner being to become different. Muddy water becomes clear if you only let it be still for a while.

You will know this finding of soul and God is happening by an increased sense of who you are and a lessening of the feeling that you *have* to do this, that, and the other thing that befalls your lot in life. That harassing, hovering feeling of "have to" largely comes from the vacuum in your soul, where you ought to be at home with your Father in his kingdom. As the vacuum is rightly filled, you will increasingly know that you do not have to do those things—not even those you want to do.

Liberation from your own desires is one of the greatest gifts of solitude and silence. When this all begins to happen, you will

know you are arriving where you ought to be. Old bondages to wrongdoing will begin to drop off as you see them for what they are. And the possibility of really loving people will dawn upon you.

Soon you may even come to know what it is like to live by grace rather than just talk about it.

These are some of the fruits of solitude and silence. The apprentice will have to learn *how* to do this, of course. For most of us, wise and loving practical arrangements must be made with those around us. And we should encourage and help family members and co-workers to enter spiritual disciplines themselves.

Obviously the effects of these disciplines will greatly benefit our first primary objective, to love God with a full heart. For the usual distractions of life greatly hinder our attention to God, and the habit of thinking about everything else is almost impossible to break in the bustle of life. Time away can help. People often complain that they cannot pray because their thoughts wander. Those thoughts are simply doing what they usually do. The grip of the usual is what must be broken. Appropriate solitude and silence are sure to do it.

TWO DISCIPLINES OF POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT: STUDY AND WORSHIP. We have already spoken of how our first area of freedom concerns where we will place our mind. Until solitude and silence have had their effects, our minds will very likely continue to be focused on the wrong things or on good things in an anxious attitude of trying to dominate them. But as we, through relocating

our bodies into solitude, escape and change the inputs that have constantly controlled our thoughts and feelings, we will have additional freedom to place our minds fully upon the kingdom and its peace and strength.

This, in turn, will transform our emotional state, and thereby the very condition of our body. Most of those around us will sense that and begin to act differently themselves. The social context will change for the better, and what we have to respond to will be much more in the spirit of the kingdom. I have observed this on many occasions.

Once solitude has done its work, the key to this progression is study. It is in study that we place our minds fully upon God and his kingdom. And study is brought to its natural completion in the worship of God.

When I study anything I take its order and nature into my thoughts, and even into my feelings and actions. At one time I did not know the alphabet, for example. But then I studied it. I brought it before my mind, with the help of my teacher, and related my body to it in ways well known to all. Before very long the order that is in the alphabet was in my mind and body. From there, that order enabled me to reproduce, recognize, and use the alphabet and its parts. The order that I took into myself by study gave me power to do many good things that I could not do until, by study, it had become mine.

What we learn about study from this simple example is true in all areas, from the most theoretical to the most practical. It is also true when we study what is evil. Then we take on an order

and powers of evil—or they take us. But, thankfully, most of what we naturally come to study is good. A student of plumbing or singing, for example, takes into his or her mind certain orders by purposely dwelling upon the relevant subject matter and activities in appropriate ways. That is how study works. And, of course, it always enables individuals “to do what they cannot do by direct effort.”

Now disciples of Jesus are people who want to take into their being the order of The Kingdom Among Us. They wish to live their life in it as Jesus himself would, and that requires internalization of that order. Study is the chief way in which they do it. They devote their attention, their thoughtful inquiry, and their practical experimentation to the order of the kingdom as seen in Jesus, in the written word of scripture, in others who walk in the way, and, indeed, in every good thing in nature, history, and culture.

Thus Paul’s practical advice to his friends at Philippi: “Whatever things are true, serious, right, pure, lovable, well regarded, any virtue and anything admirable, *let your mind dwell on them*. What you have learned, received, heard and seen in me, do that. And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8–9). For all such is of God and his reign.

Of course, in all our study as and with disciples, the person of Jesus is the center of attention. But he is not really separable, for us, from the written revelatory word, including the law, the prophets, the history, and the wisdom of the Old Testament. One who would train disciples “to hear and do” will direct them to all these, still centered on the person of Jesus.

The Twenty-third Psalm, for example, is an exquisite summary of life in the kingdom. The mind of the disciple should have it prominently displayed within, to always foster the joy and peace of the kingdom as well as to orient all of his or her actions within it. The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, Romans 8, Colossians 3, Philippians 2–4, and a few other passages of scripture should be frequently meditated on in depth, and much of them memorized. This is an essential part of any curriculum for Christlikeness. Positive engagement with these scriptures will bring kingdom order into our entire personality.

I know many people who profess serious allegiance to Jesus and claim him as their Savior but who, unfortunately, simply will not take these scriptures into their soul and body and utilize them as indicated. The result, I have to say with sadness, is that they continue to recycle their failures and make little or no real progress toward the abundance/obedience we have been discussing in this chapter. Some of them even try to use other spiritual disciplines, but with little result. An essential ingredient is missing, and the order of their mind and life remains other than that of the kingdom.

Study is by no means simply a matter of gathering information to have on hand. Intensive internalization of the kingdom order through study of the written word and learning from the Living Word establishes good epidermal responses of thought, feeling, and action. And these in turn integrate us into the flow of God's eternal reign. We really come to think and believe differently, and that changes everything else.



Now we must not worship without study, for ignorant worship is of limited value and can be very dangerous. We may develop “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Rom. 10:2) and do great harm to ourselves and others. But worship must be added to study to complete the renewal of our mind through a willing absorption in the radiant person who is worthy of all praise. Study without worship is also dangerous, and the people of Jesus constantly suffer from its effects, especially in academic settings. To handle the things of God without worship is always to falsify them.

In worship we are ascribing greatness, goodness, and glory to God. It is typical of worship that we put every possible aspect of our being into it, all of our sensuous, conceptual, active, and creative capacities.

We embellish, elaborate, and magnify. Poetry and song, color and texture, food and incense, dance and procession are all used to exalt God. And sometimes it is in the quiet absorption of thought, the electric passion of encounter, or total surrender of the will. In worship we strive for adequate expression of God’s greatness. But only for a moment, if ever, do we achieve what seems like adequacy. We cannot do justice to God or his Son or his kingdom or his goodness to us.

Worship nevertheless imprints on our whole being the reality that we study. The effect is a radical disruption of the powers of evil in us and around us. Often an enduring and substantial change is brought about. And the renewal of worship keeps the glow and power of our true homeland an active agent in all parts

of our being. To “hear and do” in the atmosphere of worship is the clearest, most obvious and natural thing imaginable.

Now we have briefly touched upon four specific spiritual disciplines—solitude and silence, worship and study—around which a curriculum for Christlikeness should be framed. It must be clear how strongly they will nourish and be nourished by the first principle objective of such a curriculum, that of bringing the disciple of Jesus to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Other disciplines, such as fasting, service to others, fellowship, and so on, might be discussed as well, and, indeed, in a full treatment of a curriculum for Christlikeness they must be discussed. But if these four are pursued with intelligence and prayer, whatever else is needed will certainly come along.

The important insight to guide us at this point is that to build our house upon the rock, putting off the old person and putting on the new, we must have a definite plan for doing so. That plan must incorporate all of the factors designated in the “golden triangle” and be pursued on the assumption that our life as a whole will be very different, in content and organization, from lives of those not living in the kingdom. It will include major components—not just a dash and a dribble here and there—of the four disciplines discussed and of others as suitable. They are not to be undertaken as deeds of righteousness, for they are not. But they are wise counsels on how to live with Jesus in his kingdom. Each of us must face the question What is *my* plan for doing that?”

### **Practical Steps for Attaining the Two Curricular Objectives**

## **An Illustration of Training-to-Do**

In addition to implementing whatever is necessary to achieve the two primary objectives of the curriculum—enthraling the mind with God and breaking the power of the evil in our bodies—individual disciples will, at least in some cases, require individualized direction and help to deal with particular teachings of Jesus. For example, suppose you are someone who is struggling with the command to lay aside anger or to stop being contemptuous of others.

The key in such cases is to aim at the heart and its transformation. We want to “make the tree good.” We do not aim *just* to control behavior, but to change the inner castle of the soul, that God may be worshiped “in spirit and in truth” and right behavior cease to be a *performance*.

We want to become the kind of person who is not dominated by anger and who truly loves and respects others. And we want to assist others in that transition. This means, of course, that the teaching cannot be captured by rules: for example, “Never say someone is a fool,” “Always give in,” “Never go to court,” and so forth. You could follow such rules and still be filled with anger, or not follow them on appropriate occasions and be completely filled with love.

It is crucial to understand that this point applies to all of Jesus’ teachings.

If we miss this point, we cannot help but fall into the worst kind of dead legalism. We can be sure that trying to follow Jesus’

teachings will then ruin our lives. We have all experienced so much well-intentioned meanness in our lives, by those who felt “responsible” and wanted us to be responsible, that Jesus, as the best-intended, will be experienced as the meanest in his “laws.” The root of true Christlikeness will then be destroyed.

Anger and contempt toward others is only removed by the vision and experience of God being over all, ensuring that all is well with me and that others are his treasures. I no longer need to engage in the violence of name-calling, for I do not need to “put others down” in order for me to be “up.” I no longer need to secure myself in life, for I am secure.

Moreover, the *shock* of being dealt with in love and fairness and mercy will certainly change the behavior of others. “When your ways please the Lord, he causes your enemies to be at peace with you” (Prov. 16:7).

To teach the “commandment” here, we explain (repeatedly) all of this in the context of the gospel of the kingdom, deal with any problems of understanding, and walk individual disciples through cases, helping them to experience and believe in the goodness of the rightness in Jesus’ command. We give assignments relative to their tendencies to be angry or scornful. We ask them to keep a journal and report back on how things went—for a day or a week, for example—and we give further teaching and practical suggestions as needed. No doubt some of this direction will concern appropriate use of selected spiritual disciplines.

Another “commandment” is to not “bully” others into acceptance of our wishes and views by “swearing”: verbally invoking

various things of value (from heaven to our head) in support of our beliefs and projects. This command is about the “song and dance” or “emphasis” we see daily in use.

The underlying teaching here is that we should respect others before God and allow them to make their judgments on the basis of our simple statements that things are this way or are not this way. We are not to attempt to drive, to control them, to manipulate them. (Matt. 7:1–7 is a companion teaching, involving not *emphasis* but our brilliant judgments as to who and what is right or wrong and why.)

To teach the “commandment” here, we help people understand what is really going on when we are “swearing,” show them its lovelessness and how it hurts others, and teach them how to leave others in the hands of God through prayer and our own example.

Also, we will take them through the individualized practical measures previously indicated. We will walk them through their own real-life cases where verbal manipulation tempts, helping them to experience and believe in the goodness of the rightness of Jesus’ command and to discover the practical measures they can take to become the kind of person who naturally obeys it.

### **The Pattern or General Form, of the Teaching**

Doing all this establishes a pattern of teaching, which can then be filled in in individualized ways by every “scribe disciplined unto the kingdom of the heavens” (Matt. 13:52). It is in this precise way that we will successfully teach others “to observe to do

all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” The *pattern* can be applied to all cases for example, the spirit of nonretaliation (“other cheek”), blessing for cursing (Jesus’ “method” in 1 Pet. 3:23), going the second mile, or living without intentional lust-ing, and so on.

The pattern has two main elements:

1. Clearly positioning the context before the heavenly Father’s present rule through Jesus
2. Walking the individual through actual cases in their own lives to give them experience-based understanding and assurance

This pattern can also be applied to middle-level commandments, such as “Let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:1), “If you love me, keep my commandments” (14:15), and “abide in me” (15:4). But in these cases, because they are less specific and cannot be obeyed by direct effort, the “how-to” instructions will have to do with more general arrangements of our lives. And these more general arrangements are almost totally a matter of engagement in appropriate disciplines for the spiritual life.

The disciplines are practices that change the inner self and its relationship to the “helper” (paraclete), so that we can actually do what we would and avoid what we would not. They of course have no point apart from the serious intent to obey Christ’s teaching and follow his example.

### **Overview of Progress from Here to Forever**



## **Five Dimensions or Stages of the Eternal Kind of Life**

The situation of the disciple, or student, of Jesus is, we should expect, one of change and growth, in which we progress from one stage or dimension of our life in God to another. Within a few years, apparently, it is possible to move from the level of mere blindly obedient servant or “slave” of Jesus to that of friend.

In his “commencement address” (John 14–16) to his first apprentices, he once again gives them the all-inclusive commandment “that you love one another just as I have loved you” (John 15:12). After clarifying that this includes “laying down our life for our friends,” and not least for Jesus himself, he makes the following observation: “You are my friends if you keep this commandment.”

This is a very distinct and important change of status, a promotion, if you wish, based upon the progress of the apprentices. “I no longer call you slaves [*doulous*],” he continues, “for the slave does not know what their Lord is about. But you have become my friends because under my teaching you now have learned all that I heard from the Father” (15:15).

Of course, that does not mean we no longer serve Jesus. He remains our Master, and a favorite term of New Testament writers for themselves is “slave of Jesus Christ.” But it is now on a different basis, a basis of loving cooperation, of *shared* endeavor, in which his aims are our aims and our understanding and harmony with his kingdom are essential to what he does with and through us.

We should be aware of, roughly, five dimensions of our eternal kind of life in The Kingdom Among Us, and these dimensions more or less arrange themselves in the following progression:

1. *Confidence in and reliance upon Jesus as “the Son of man,”* the one appointed to save us. Relevant scriptural passages here are John 3:15; Rom. 10:9–10; and 1 Cor. 12:3. This confidence is a reality, and it is itself a true manifestation of the “life from above,” not of normal human capacities. It is, as Heb. 11:1 says, “the proof of things not seen.” Anyone who truly has this confidence can be completely assured that they are “included.”
2. But this confidence in the person of Jesus naturally leads to a *desire to be his apprentice* in living in and from the kingdom of God. Only a sustained historical process involving many confusions and false motivations could lead to our current situation, in which faith in Jesus is thought to have no natural connection with discipleship to him. Our apprenticeship to him means that we live within his word, that is, put his teachings into practice (John 8:31). And this progressively integrates our entire existence into the glorious world of eternal living. We become “free indeed” (John 8:36).
3. The abundance of life realized through apprenticeship to Jesus, “continuing in his word,” naturally leads to *obedience*. The teaching we have received and our experience of living with it brings us to love Jesus and the Father with our whole being:

heart, soul, mind, and (bodily) strength. And so we love to obey him, even where we do not yet understand or, really, “like” what that requires. “If you love me,” Jesus said, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). And: “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me shall be loved by my father, and I will love him, and will disclose myself to him” (v. 21). Love of Jesus sustains us through the course of discipline and training that makes obedience possible. Without that love, we will not stay to learn.

4. Obedience, with the life of discipline it requires, both leads to and, then, issues from the *pervasive inner transformation of the heart and soul*. The abiding condition of the disciple becomes one of “love, joy, peace, long-suffering [patience], kindness, goodness, faith to the brim, meekness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22; compare 2 Pet. 1:2–11). And the love is genuine to our deepest core. These are called the “fruit of the spirit” because they are not direct effects of our efforts but are brought about in us as we admire and emulate Jesus and do whatever is necessary to learn how to obey him.
5. Finally, there is *power to work the works of the kingdom*. One of the most shocking statements Jesus ever made, and once again it was in his “commencement address,” was that “those who rely on me shall do the works I do, and even greater ones” (John 14:12). Perhaps we feel baffled and in-

competent before this statement. But let us keep in mind that the world we live in desperately needs such works to be done. They would not be just for show or to impress ourselves or others. But, frankly, even a moderate-size “work” is more than most people’s life could sustain. One good public answer to our prayer might be enough to lock some of us into weeks of spiritual superiority. Great power requires great character if it is to be a blessing and not a curse, and that character is something we only grow toward.

Yet it is God’s intent that in his kingdom we should have as much power as we can bear for good. Indeed, his ultimate objective in the development of human character is to empower us to do what we want. And when we are fully developed in the likeness of Jesus, fully have “the mind of Christ,” that is what will happen—to his great joy and relief, no doubt.

Looking back over this progression, one of the most important things for us to see and accept is that, once confidence in Jesus lives in us, we must be intelligently active in stages or dimensions 2 through 5. We do this by unrelenting study under Jesus, and in particular by following him into his practices and adapting them to form an effective framework of spiritual disciplines around which our whole life can be structured. This is precisely how we “through the spirit do mortify the life of the flesh” (Rom. 8:13) and “put off the old person and put on the new” (Col. 3:9–10, etc.). Though we cannot do it by ourselves, it

is nevertheless something that we do. Each of us must ask ourselves *how* are we doing it. What, precisely, is our plan? And as teachers of disciples, we must lead everyone we teach into developing his or her own plan.

## **The Curriculum and the Life of the Church**

### **Such a Curriculum for Christlikeness Is Nothing New**

From the perspective of contemporary Christian practice, many people will see this proposal for a curriculum for Christlikeness as radical and new. Radical it is, especially viewed against a background of all-pervasive consumer Christianity. But it is anything but new.

We have already commented on Paul's letter to the Colossians as a model of the very curriculum we are here explaining. Much the same is to be said of his other writings, especially the letter to the Ephesians and, to a lesser degree, the ones to the Philippians and the Galatians—though these are less systematic, due to his personal relationship to their situation and to specific concerns he had in mind with them.

But in order to appreciate this, you cannot read them with the “consumer Christian” mentality, for then the ultimate objective will be seen as presenting the “right answers” and combating the “wrong answers” so that people will be sure to be ready to pass the test and be doctrinally correct. Of course the “answers” are tremendously important, right and wrong. Let this be clearly understood. But they are only important in relation to life in the

kingdom with Jesus now. And *that* is what Paul writes about, as do the other biblical writers.

If you keep this clearly in mind, you will then find the two primary objectives for a curriculum for Christlikeness everywhere you look in the biblical sources. And, indeed, the writings of scripture will take on an entirely new character and significance for you. None of them have in mind to sponsor or assist the position of the consumer, or “bar-code,” Christian that so pervasively occupies the contemporary Western world.

But to be fair, consumer Christianity actually emerges quite early in the history of the church. One sees the seeds of it in the New Testament writings, and it becomes prominent through the development of the monastic tradition, which distinguished those who gave their whole lives to God—“the religious,” they are sometimes called—from the supposedly lower-grade Christians who ran farms and business, raised families, and participated in government and general cultural affairs.

Thus some of the most profound treatments of discipleship to Jesus, such as *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, *The Imitation of Christ*, and *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, presuppose a special class of Christians for whom they are *not* written. But if you simply lay that assumption aside and make necessary adjustments to the content of such works, you will see that they offer, in substance, precisely what we have been discussing in this chapter: a curriculum, a course of training, for life on the rock. And that is why, century after century, they have exercised incredible power over all who open themselves to them as disciples of Jesus.

And if you look at the founding persons, events, and literature of the great segments of Protestantism, you will discover much the same thing. We refer, of course, to traditions such as the Lutheran, Reformed (Calvin), Puritan, Mennonite, Friends (Quaker), Methodist, and so forth. If you examine landmark works such as Calvin's *Institutes* or John Wesley's standard two-volume set of *Sermons*, you will discover nothing new in what I have said here about a curriculum for Christlikeness, except possibly some points of organization. And certainly what I have said remains much more shallow, both theologically and practically, than these masterworks of the spiritual life. (One of the greatest hopes I have for the readers of this book is that they turn back to these true treasures of the people of Jesus.)

But if you look at what is generally accepted and done in contemporary versions of these great Protestant traditions, what I have said here will, once again, seem both radical and new—possibly outright crazy. (Who would think of putting it into actual practice in the normal congregational setting?) If so, I at least have the consolation of some wonderful company.

Book III of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example, is a treatment of the Christian Life. In chapter VII of book III, he sums up the Christian Life in one phrase, "self-denial." Not self-esteem, certainly, nor personal fulfillment. The presentation of obedience and discipline made here by me is quite tepid compared with what Calvin has to say in that and his following chapters. But his interpretation of faith in Christ is the same as what I have said here about faith. Read it and see. A similar point is to be made with reference to the other traditions



mentioned, without exception, though in other respects they retain their defining peculiarities.

It is one of the defects of an age with no true sense of its past to suppose that what is now is what has always been, and that anything else is either novel or wrong or both. But the only way forward for the people of Jesus today is to reclaim for today the time-tested practices by which disciples through the ages have learned to “hear and do,” to build their life upon the rock. Those practices are not mysteries. They are just unknown.

### **Some Practical Points About Implementation— Especially for Pastors**

In order to implement something like a curriculum for Christ-likeness in the context of a local assembly of believers, it will usually be vital to just *do* certain things and not talk a lot about them—at least until some time later.

If we are leading such a group, we must, first, be sure that the curriculum outlined is in fact the substance of our own life. Do we, or are we obviously learning to, love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Second, we should prayerfully observe those we serve and live with to see who among them has already been “ravished with the kingdom of God” and is ready to become Jesus’ apprentice. These we help to consciously do so, and we then can devote serious time to leading them into and through the curriculum, adapting it as needed.

It may at first not be possible to carry this on as a congregational project, though one should not be furtive about it. We can pour ourselves into a few people without fanfare, and soon they can begin sharing the work of forming other disciples. You can count on it to spread, for, in truth, there is nothing on earth to compare it to.

Finally, we should speak, teach, and—if that is our place—preach the gospel of the kingdom of the heavens in its fullness. Practically, that means that in our various communications we focus on the Gospels and on teaching what Jesus himself taught in the manner he taught it. This, with intelligent prayer and loving deed, is our method for “ravishing people with the kingdom of God,” and thus preparing them for the step into out-and-out apprenticeship.

Once again, we do not need to talk a lot about what we are doing. In time it will be obvious. And we certainly are never to be judgmental of Christians who are, honestly, not yet disciples. In most cases they never will have had a serious opportunity to become apprentices of Jesus. But for the most part they will quite certainly respond well to the word of the kingdom and the call to discipleship when it is clearly presented to them.

We must, of course, settle it in our minds that there will always be difficulties in the local setting when one becomes serious about discipleship to Jesus and an associated curriculum. But God is always there for those who serve him, no matter what; and we can “count it all joy”—really—and expect the manifest grace of God to be active in our midst.

Although I have not been a pastor for many years, I have always continued to teach quite regularly in churches and church-like settings. The appeal and power of Jesus' call to the kingdom and discipleship is great, and people generally, of every type and background, will respond favorably if that call is only presented with directness, generosity of spirit, intelligence, and love, trusting God alone for the outcome.

We may not soon have bigger crowds around us—and in fact they may for a while even get smaller—but we will soon have bigger Christians for sure. This is what I call “church growth for those who hate it.” And bigger crowds are sure to follow, for the simple reason that human beings desperately need what we bring to them, the word and reality of The Kingdom Among Us.