

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives. Dallas Willard. Harper & Row, Publishers. 1988.

Reviewed By: Dr. Rick Spencer, University of Texas, Austin.

It is rare praise when an author with Richard Foster's reputation describes another writer's work as "the book of the decade," especially when the book being lauded covers some of the same content as Foster's own work. Yet, in my opinion, Dallas Willard's Spirit of the Disciplines deserves high billing.

Willard, as a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California and a Southern Baptist minister, blends the roles of prophet and educator to provide critique and challenge for the Christian community. His thesis is that Christians become Christlike by doing what Christ did--"by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself" (pg. ix). "This book is a plea for the Christian community to place the disciplines for the spiritual life at the heart of the gospel" (pg. xi).

To understand the thesis of The Spirit of the Disciplines, one can listen to an imaginary conversation between Uncle Screwtape and the apprentice demon Wormwood in C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters. Though Screwtape reproaches Wormwood for allowing his subject to become a Christian, he says, "There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the enemy's camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour" (pg. 11).

If the believer's mental and bodily habits still favor God's adversary, the process of transformation is a serious challenge, one which will necessitate the complete cooperation of God and man. As Oswald Chambers puts it, "When the crisis comes, we ask God to help us, but He cannot if we have not made our nature our ally" (The Psychology of Redemption, pgs. 26-27).

Among the corrective emphases advocated by Willard, none is more needed in Christian circles which extol activism and performance as hallmarks of spirituality than the call to solitude. If, as Willard suggests, "it is solitude and solitude alone that opens the possibility of a radical relationship to God" (pg. 101), one should not be surprised that much of contemporary Christianity is clearly superficial.

In touching activities such as solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, service and celebration, Willard covers themes common to Foster's Celebration of Discipline. Willard's uniqueness is emphasis on the crucial responsibility of the practice of these disciplines, referring people to Foster's work for advice as to how to carry through with specific activities.

Appendix II is a reprint of Willard's article in "Christianity Today," (Oct. 10, 1980). He poses an important question? "Am I a disciple, or only a Christian by current standards?" (pg. 265). Willard contends the Western churches of recent decades have not made discipleship a requirement for the Christian.

For me, The Spirit of the Disciplines is one of the books of the decade; however, even if it is not so highly rated by every reader, it deserves careful attention as a challenge to recover essential elements of Christianity.

A Time of Growth: Baptist Student Work in Louisiana, 1949-1988. Udell Smith. Fowlco Printing. 1990, 134 pp.

Reviewed By: Dr. Charles J. Scalise, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kentucky.

Udell Smith has left us his testimony. the patriarch of Baptist student work in Louisiana has presented this book to our student ministries family as a witness to his years of faithful service to the kingdom among the students of Louisiana. It is a positive testimony, which testifies to years of expansion in the vision and provision of the Baptist churches of Louisiana for a caring ministry to students. Fond recollection and spiritual reminiscence mingle with a diverse assortment of data gleaned from across the years of Dr. Smith's ministry.

Perhaps the most revealing aspects of the entire book are the images of Louisiana student work captured by the black-and-white photographs scattered across the pages. There is a long road--not just chronologically but culturally--between the picture of the Smiths with Kernie Keegan in 1958 (p. 69) ( and the picture of the presentation of the basketball awards in 1987 (p. 54)!

A book such as this could have taken many other forms. For example, one could wish that Dr. Smith had attempted to offer some critical perspective upon the ministry, along with his chronicle of God's blessings in good times and bad. I personally would have benefitted from some analysis of the institutional dynamics of student work within the Louisiana Baptist Convention. For example, Dr. Smith's creative leadership in achieving recognition of Louisiana student work as a "division," reporting directly to the State Executive Director, rather than as merely a state convention department, is a tale that will have to be told another day.

Of course, these wishes for more cultural analysis and critical historical perspective would change the character and tone of the book. Its contribution to our self-understanding rests upon its testimony, not its research. Southern Baptist campus ministers should not only thank the author for sharing his testimony, but also consider whether they have a similar contribution to make to the local history of Baptist campus ministry.