

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL THEME ISSUE: *DALLAS WILLARD AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION*



When we first informed Dallas that we were doing a special issue on his work in spiritual formation, we made it clear that it was not meant to be primarily honorific. Dallas said he was pleased to hear that and he hoped we would give preference to submissions that “blow my stuff out of the water.” While we had trouble locating any submissions that had this torpedo-like effect, we did receive dozens of quality papers from which we gathered (with the help of a team of blind reviewers) what we took to be the best of the lot. Throughout the process we attempted to stay true to our commitment to keep the personal accolades to a dull roar. But why?

Without a doubt Dallas deserves the affirmations of his fellow colleagues and, like all of us, Dallas needs such encouragement. But there is equally no doubt that one of the best compliments that can be paid a scholar is to have his or her carefully presented ideas thoughtfully and critically engaged. The articles and reflections which follow attempt to take Dallas’ work as seriously as he took it, and in that we trust Dallas will be encouraged.

But even more importantly is the realization that to praise Dallas for the quality and impact of his writing in spiritual formation is to quite literally miss the point of Dallas’ work. Anyone familiar with Dallas’ writing and speaking on formation is familiar with his definition of grace: “Grace is God acting in our lives to bring about what we do not deserve and cannot accomplish on our own.” We know God is graciously at work in and through us when what is accomplished cannot be explained by human effort alone. Now, make no mistake, we are quite sure that Dallas *on his own* could make a significant splash. But the quality and outcome of Dallas’ character, thinking, writing, and teaching makes it abundantly clear that God’s grace is at work in and through him. What has been accomplished both in and through this man defies a purely naturalistic explanation. Dallas is not, at the end of the day, the one to be honored and praised. Once again, if we take the views Dallas has done so much to proliferate seriously, then what we can do is thank Dallas for continuing to do what he can to offer his body to God as an instrument of righteousness (cf. Rom 6:13). In doing this, Dallas exemplifies what he teaches, harnessing a power beyond himself to accomplish great and eternal good in millions of lives. So, Dallas,

we do thank you for doing enough of your part that God, in his grace, was able to do “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph 3:20 NKJV). May the Lord see fit to use the writings contained herein in a similar manner.

This special issue is organized into two main parts. First, we have seven featured articles. These articles span New Testament studies (Bock and Copan), systematic theology (Issler), the history of Christian spirituality (Looker), and philosophy (Preston and Ten Elshof). The final article (Porter) offers an analytical retrospective of Willard’s five main monographs in spiritual formation. These articles are followed by three reflection essays (Moon, Hull, and Meyer). Since Dallas’ influence comes not only through his writings but often through his embodied life and personal presence, it seemed important to select three essays which discussed Dallas’ personal impact.

By God’s grace, we hope you benefit from this special issue.

Gary W. Moon and Steve L. Porter
Special Issue Editors