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Volume 2 . Issue 27

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# Renovation of the Heart

## A Quick Focus

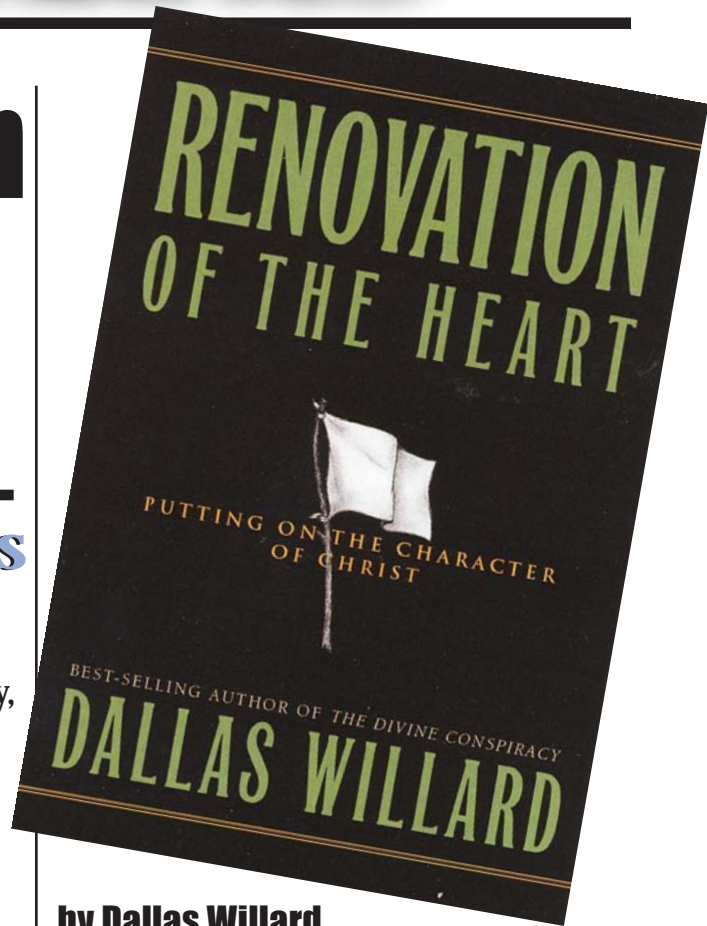
### The Book's Purpose

- Show that spiritual transformation is possible, orderly, and straightforward
- Explain how spiritual transformation must occur in thoughts, feelings, the will, the body, the social dimension, and the soul
- Articulate ways spiritual transformation impacts the Church and the world.

### The Book's Message


Why does the life promised by the Bible seem so radically different from our lives today? Is a life of spiritual success impossible, or can we enjoy the blessings, promises, hope, and freedom the first believers did?

We can experience this life, but only through true spiritual renewal. The good news is that complicated programs, expensive facilities, and secret techniques are not required—we just need to take the right approach. This approach is not burden-



by Dallas Willard

NavPress

some; it requires only small, ordered steps. We do not need to live in spiritual defeat—we can live in victory over sin and circumstance. We just need a renovation of the heart. 

## Six Main Points

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# Understanding the Heart of the System

## Before we can

take care of anything, we must understand it. Therefore, to renew the heart, we must first learn what it is, what it does, and what role it plays in human nature.

Man is not a purely physical animal with a better brain. The heart, the inner core of man, is essential to human nature. Many modern thinkers argue that there is no such thing as “human nature”~ admitting its existence would bring about moral constraints. So universities and governments hold that man is essentially “good” when left to do what is natural, that he should never be forced to do anything against his will, and that gender and race are mere “social constructs” with no reality behind the labels.

The best of the wisdom literatures of most cultures, however, deny this argument~especially the Bible and classical Greek literature. This body of literature teaches us that the “will,” “spirit,” and “heart” *all* refer to different aspects of one thing: the fundamental essence of a person. *Will* refers to our ability to create and initiate; *spirit* refers to our existence apart from the physical body; and *heart* refers to the imagined location of this essence: the very center of our being.

Like the chief of a large corporation, the heart is our “executive center” where we make decisions and coordinate all the dimensions of our life. A well-managed heart is flexible, poised, and ready to respond to any challenge in ways that are good and right.

Actions do not flow from the heart alone. Whatever turbulence and coherence exist in our *entire* lives depends on the congruity between heart and action. People with divided hearts live in chaos, unable to consistently do what is right and good. Only spiritual formation will transform the divided heart, uniting it with God's will and the whole life of the individual.

Six dimensions form the essence of “human nature”: thought, feeling, choice, body, social context, and soul. Everything essential to human life falls within these domains and our behavior reveals their complex interaction.

For example, action never comes from exercise of will alone. Instead, choices result from pressure on the will by more than one of these dimensions. This is how behavior reveals inner reality. Further, any conflict between our spirit, heart, will, emotions, body, and social dimension results in behaviors that also demonstrate our lack of harmony with God's will.

Understanding this is critical to spiritual transformation. Good intentions are *not enough*. Trying to *will* ourselves into doing good is bound to fail because our flesh is weak. But spiritual renewal organizes all six dimensions under submission to God, resulting in a “love of God with *all* of the heart, soul, mind and strength, and of the neighbor as oneself.” A person like this can flexibly respond to anything in life in ways that are right and good, and behavior will naturally align with God's will.

**“Whatever my action is comes out of my whole person.”**

Therefore, the ultimate goal of spiritual transformation is to align our lives according the proper order of dominance:

- God
- Spirit
- Mind (thought and feeling)
- Soul
- Body

When we walk in the spirit, the body serves the soul, the soul serves the mind, the mind serves the spirit, and the spirit serves God. Under this arrangement, our mind is ultimately set on God. But the person who is away from God lives a life ordered under the flesh. His god is the belly, as illustrated by this ordering:

- Body
- Soul
- Mind (thought and feeling)
- Spirit
- God

## Spiritual Change is Possible

We talk about spiritual change and holiness in our churches, but the reality seems impossible. With so little difference between Christians and unbelievers today, truly changed lives seem impossible to find. Moral failure is common; the news is littered with leaders who faithfully served God for years but have experienced moral failures. Spiritual transformation seems truly unattainable. Is this the best we can do?

We should note three things. *First*, long-time Christians do not give in to sin in a single moment of weakness. Sin reveals what always lurked within, the true state of the heart. Such lapses result when we go about spiritual renewal in the wrong way: by willing behavior to conform to a standard~instead of submitting to real inner change. Without true inner renewal, change in personality and character *is impossible*. Transformation does not happen by chance or by frequent church attendance. It is the result of intentional apprenticeship to Jesus and the reordering of our lives in submission to His will.

*Second*, spiritual transformation will seem impossible if we hold a “miserable sinner” view of Christianity, believing that we are but miserable sinners and that moral failure is expected. This view holds that the ungodly state of the heart is *essential* to human nature and is unchangeable. If we were not ungodly at the core, then we might presume to deal with God based on merit. Therefore, rather than appear self-righteous, we say, “I’m only human.”

It is true that there will always be a spark of evil within us ready to burst into flame if we are not watchful. However, this is why Paul articulates the need to keep himself in spiritual shape, like an athlete preparing for a race. Paul also encourages us to “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, NRSV) and to “flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

Renewal is a continually ongoing process. We can never cease to be vigilant, assuming we have attained spiritual perfection. We are all “recovering sinners,” yet we must continually experience change.

**“In the spiritual life one never rests on one’s laurels. It is a sure recipe for failing. Attainments are like the manna given to the Israelites in the desert, good only for the day. Past attainments do not place us in a position of merit that permits us to let up in the hot pursuit of God for today, for now.”**

*Third*, we should also reject the alternative to the “miserable sinner” view: that we are essentially good. We cannot earn our salvation. We cannot even respond to God’s grace on our own; the initiative is always God’s, and He has already acted. The ball is in our court. We can receive God’s grace in salvation, and progress toward Christlikeness in union with God.



## Transforming the Mind

While God grants many freedoms, one of our greatest liberties is the ability to think. Since spiritual renewal involves knowing God intimately, the first step begins with our thoughts.

Thoughts consist of conscious memories, perceptions, and beliefs. They influence our feelings and motivate our actions. While we cannot evoke thoughts by *feeling* a certain way, we can evoke and direct feelings by *thinking* a certain way.

*Thoughts* consist of whatever we are conscious of, including memories, perceptions, beliefs, and what is simply in our minds when we think about things. Thoughts determine the orientation of all that we do, influencing the feelings and motivating actions. While we cannot evoke thoughts by *feeling* a certain way, we can evoke and direct feelings by *thinking* a certain way.

The realm of thought involves four main factors: ideas, images, information, and our ability to think. The two most powerful are ideas and images.

*Ideas* are general models of how things exist. They control our interpretations of things; more than beliefs, they do not even depend on belief. Ideas are so fundamental to thought that we are usually unaware of their existence and influence.

Ideas influence how we see reality. In fact, we believe our ideas *are* reality, requiring no explanation or analysis to understand. In fact, they control our very lives. For example, the common idea of *success in life* can move us to interpret promotions or possessions in terms of such success.

Bad idea systems are Satan’s main tool for dominating humanity. For example, Eve was tempted away from God with an idea~that she must act in her own self-interest because God could not be trusted. The antidote is renewal of the mind

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## TRANSFORMING THE MIND continued from page 3

(Romans 12:2), which allows our minds to become like Christ's (Philippians 2:5). This is one of the most difficult things we will ever do. Nevertheless, we must expose and replace our faulty idea systems with what Christ embodied and taught.

While ideas are abstract, *images* and symbols are specific, concrete, and emotionally loaded. Every idea system is represented by a few powerful images. For example, the image of the American flag represents the idea of freedom~while a burning flag represents a completely different idea.

Powerful images can hide the bad ideas controlling our lives. For example, a distorted self-image controls our beliefs about reality and even God's love. This can lead to self-hatred, submission to group pressure, and an inability to accept the love of God.

**“Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”**

~Henri Nouwen

Together, ideas and images become a stronghold of evil, blinding us to truth. When Satan's ideas and images rule our minds, we are under his control. Therefore, we must break the grip of bad imagery and underlying faulty idea systems, embracing instead correct ideas about God represented by the right images.

This process is the renewal of the mind, and it works by employing information and our ability to think.

Good *information* is critical to our ability to think properly because

without the facts, we have no foundation for action. Lacking good information can result in simple inconvenience (like losing keys) or tragedy (like ignorance concerning the way germs spread fatal disease). However, lacking information about God, and what He requires, leads to eternal ruin.

Jesus brought the good news that destroys all the false information about God and undermines bad idea structures. To have the full effect of that good information, we must also use our ability to think.

*Thinking* is the activity of “searching out what *must* be true, or *cannot* be true, in the light of given facts or assumptions.” Thinking well enlarges what we know, gives us the “big picture,” and undermines bad ideas. To experience renewal, we must apply our thinking to the Bible. We must thoughtfully absorb it, dwell on it, and ponder it.

We must think about what it says, implies, and commands. We must pay attention so that we can understand the facts and information of the gospel. This is the only way the information, images, and ideas of God can enter our lives.

However, we must not only *think*, we must *think well* because bad thinking always favors evil. We must reject the ideas that only the trained elite can think deeply and that thinking hinders faith. These false notions romanticize passion, elevating impulse and feeling over reason~subjecting us to the control of bad ideas and images. Remember, through the ages, the greatest influences on the Church have always been its greatest thinkers: the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and~most importantly~Christ, the most powerful thinker ever.

As we use our intellect to study God's Word, He will teach us to love Him passionately and our thoughts will turn to Him consistently. This is how our lives become worshipful. To think accurately about God *as He really is* teaches us to love Him.

This love provokes worship, and worship sustains inner renewal. As this process unfolds, our thought life begins to conform to scriptural revelation. Then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can apply the truths of the Bible to life, further strengthening the overall process of spiritual transformation.

We cannot directly will to morph bad ideas, images, and information into Christlikeness. But there are several effective indirect means available~proven disciplines to help transform our minds. The primary discipline is memorizing Scripture, lodging key ideas in our minds so they will be ready when needed (Joshua 1:8).

To begin replacing our mental wordly images, we must surround ourselves with images that keep biblical teachings central.

We should also seek out older, more experienced Christians who have entered a transformed life, and emulate them as they follow Christ. In addition, we can study the lives of transformed believers through their biographies.



## Transforming the Will and Character

Our will enables us to originate an act or refrain from an act. Being created in the image of God, the will is essential to our nature. As the “executive center” of the heart, our will directs and organizes our entire life. However, each area of life is still part of an interlocking whole and sustained transformation requires renewal in each element.

True to the interconnected nature of the parts, the will relies on the contents of the mind: our ideas, thoughts, and feelings. In fact, we make all our decisions and choices in terms of thoughts or feelings. Conversely, our thoughts and feelings reflect our will~what we choose

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**TRANSFORMING THE WILL AND CHARACTER**  
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or allow ourselves to think and feel. Furthermore, through our current choices we have the power to change the thoughts and feelings that are available for *future* choices~thus, it is critical that we train our minds and feelings before we are “on the spot” during temptation.

Will is often confused with character, which only long-term patterns of choice and behavior can reveal. But even though character takes time to shape, it is not a permanent feature. As we submit our will to Christ, our character can change for the better~it must.

Yet many efforts to change character fail because strength of will is not enough to prevent sin. We must go deeper, training our thoughts and feelings by the disciplined use of our will so that we become the *kind of person who does not do* those sorts of things. Moreover, not just any disciplined use of our will is enough: we transform our will through interaction with the images, ideas, information, thoughts, and feelings found in the Bible.

A transformed will is like Christ's, who said, “I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29).

**“The only haven of safety is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever He leads. Let this, then, be the first step, to abandon ourselves, and devote the whole energy of our minds to the service of God.”**  
~Calvin

To transform our character, we must submit our misguided will to God, invite Christ into our lives, and follow him with all of our hearts~not just a fractured part.

Only then can we truly become what he created us to be, no longer enslaved to a fractured, insincere, and debased will.

**“God is constantly *looking for* people who will worship Him ‘in spirit and in truth.’...At the level of the human spirit, nothing can be hidden. Lying always depends upon the use of our body.”**

There are four movements in this area of transformation. The first move is *surrendering* to God's supremacy in all things. We may not be able to do His will yet, but we can be *willing* to do His will~or at the very least, *willing to will it*. Without this minimal identification with God's will, we are unable to even *understand* God's truth (John 7:17), much less follow His will.

The next move is one of *abandonment*, holding no part of ourselves back from submission to His will. Here we begin to see everything happening as parts of God's grand design~even the painful things He allows~and we accept them gracefully. We know that no permanent harm can come to us when we live in His hands; we can welcome afflictions, and pain and injury will not turn into bitterness.

Beyond abandonment lies *contentment* with God's will~rejoicing under all circumstances becomes natural and appropriate. Here, gratitude and joy are fully evident in our lives for we know that God will always do good by us.

Beyond contentment lies *participation* with God in seeing His will done. No longer spectators, we become energetic players in God's eternal drama. Beyond being content in our circumstances, we fully embrace them, no matter how tragic. At this stage, we no longer act on the strength of our tiny will-power but on God's; for it is *His* will that is the source of our strength. It is “not I, but Christ that liveth in me.”

“The strongest human will is always the one that is surrendered to God's will and acts *with it*.”

These moves describe a will not tangled or enslaved by desires and wants. As we progress our will becomes sharply focused, no longer ruled by a distracted mind or turbulent feelings, and we be-

come single-minded in our pursuit of God's will. In this condition, we “lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Free from entanglement, we eliminate duplicity in our hearts, for the tendency to mislead lies at the root of so many other sinful behaviors. Insidious duplicity is present in every dimension of our being. Because these dimensions powerfully influence our ability to choose, we must discover, confront, and forsake duplicity wherever we find it. Again, strength of will, alone, is not enough. We need the help available through spiritual disciplines.

Through exercising disciplines like *solitude, fasting, worship, and service*, we uncover the duplicity in our lives so we can deal with it. Further, by practicing these disciplines we deny the direct fulfillment of our desires. Only then can we realize how subtle and shameless their hold is on our will, and we see how entangled we have become.

The goal of such exercises is not to lose our sense of self. This is not a program to eradicate our own will. Instead, the goal is to have a will that is fully functional and not at war with God. We want our will to harmonize with God's will so that we do not hesitate to do what is right and good~so that when we do wrong, we work against ourselves. This is transformation of the heart.



# Transforming the Body

The body is critical to the process of spiritual renewal. To be constantly poised to do good and refrain from evil, we must eliminate the sinful inclinations that reside in all our body's parts. For many, the body is the main barrier to conforming to Christ's image, even though the body is not inherently evil. God made the body for good, and we should cherish and care for it—but not as slaves. Unfortunately, for most, the body governs life. Even many professing Christians devote more time to their body than to spiritual growth.

When we place ourselves at the center of our universe, we displace God, worshipping the body and a life of sensuality. Our veneration of youth and physical attractiveness, and our fear of old age and ugliness reveal this. The body becomes a main source of desires that must be gratified, the means to gratify them. This is a life lived in terms of the flesh, and in this condition we are preoccupied with what we can manage on our own power.

When set on the flesh our minds are hostile toward God because the flesh has become god, and we cannot serve both. We cannot serve God or follow His will with this mindset because we are working against Him (Romans 8:7).

Seen in one way, the body represents *power*—potential energy to be processed and accessed. But other things outside the body also represent potential energy to be used. For example, we can use the energy stored in gasoline to power our cars. However, accessing the energy stored in other objects requires first using our own bodies. Though we might have control over external objects, the body is the first and primary place of power, *dominion*, and responsibility.

Our bodies are the only physical objects in the world that are part of who we are—the body is essential to identity. Only through our bodies can we exist in place and time, in relation to family and culture, and possess gender and talent. The only way to extend our dominion, our personal *kingdom*, is by using the body. This process of enlargement begins at birth as we gain control over our eyes, hands, feet, and voice. In time, efforts to extend our power and dominion include other bodies: toys, playmates, Mama, Papa, and so on.

As we expand our little kingdoms, we eventually meet resistance and frustration, generating destructive emotions such as anger, fear, envy, jealousy, and resentment. These initial responses can eventually evolve into habitual patterns of hostility, contempt, or indifference, making us always ready to harm others and ourselves. Over time, these attitudes settle into the body as trained reflexes requiring no thought to perform, ruling our lives and poisoning all our relationships.

However, the use of our bodies in our expanding domain is not all bad. It is, in fact, largely positive. We assimilate ideas, sensations, and emotions that are good for others and ourselves. All this development and extension of our domain—both good and bad—settles into our bodies so we can unconsciously act when faced with the complexity of daily life without much thought or analysis. But these habits of action and reaction can actually start to run our lives, even if we are not aware of it.

This is what makes the incarnation of Christ so powerful. Christ came in a fully human body to bring redemption not just to our spirits, but also to our bodies. Since the body is essential to who we are, redemption is only complete when it also includes the body in the process. The life we now live *in the flesh* must become holy, too, or life as a whole cannot become holy. Our bodies must be inhabited by the real presence of Christ.

The body's centrality to life helps us understand Paul when he encourages the saints to "kill off" their "members which are upon the earth" (Colossians 3:5). Those members are "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desires, and covetousness"—the evidence of a life lived entirely under the power of the body. We need no divine or spiritual power to indulge in these sins, since living according to physical inclinations comes naturally.

However, not all the parts of our physical lives are obviously bad; some are "nice" and become a trap for believers who focus on them. This is why Paul had no confidence in the flesh—even the "nice" parts in which one might naturally boast (Philippians 3:5-6). However, Paul did not live in the flesh. In comparison to what he gained in Christ, he counted these bodily accomplishments as losses.

Life is not of this earth but is a gift from Christ. Before receiving this gift, mortal flesh enslaves us. Afterwards, God's grace and righteousness reign. This grace is a *presence* and *power* far superior to the meager power available through the body alone. We can now walk in the new life just like Christ, who triumphed over the flesh and was raised from the dead.

Therefore, it is up to us, with God's help, to resist the lure of the body's dominion. We are to refuse to surrender our bodies to sin. Instead we are to present our bodily parts to God "as weapons of righteousness" (Romans 6:13), and as "living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1).

The goal of spiritual formation in the body is that the various parts carry *in them* a life that is not *of them*, for Christ lives in us, giving life to our bodies through His Spirit (Romans 8:11). This is *essential* to Christlikeness. Of course, the *ultimate* goal of spiritual formation is the transformation of the inner self. But, as that happens, the inner reality should settle into our bodies so that our transformed behavior becomes reflexive, operating automatically.

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## TRANSFORMING THE BODY continued from page 6

The greatest danger here is failing to take this literally. These habits to sin actually *do* reside in our bodies' various parts, and can cause us to act or speak without even thinking. James gave us a specific example with the tongue~perhaps the last body part to submit to righteousness. Proverbs describe haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands to shed innocent blood, and feet that run to do evil (Proverbs 6:17-18).

Someone caught up in rage, lust, resentment, or even self-righteousness has been taken over by his body~even if for a moment. If we fail to take this literally, we will not address the sin ingrained in our bodies, and we will not be ready for the sinful inclinations that inevitably arise.

Another danger is to go too far with the idea that the power of evil resides in our bodies. Throughout history, many have despised the body, believing it is evil in itself. This is wrong, for we are to see the body as a shrine of the Holy Spirit, meant for the Lord.

In fact, our bodies are the bodily parts of Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 6:15). We are His hands; we are His feet. In fact, we should reject the notion that "my body is my own." Our bodies belong to God. We are stewards~not owners~of what God has given us.

In light of all this, the only reasonable use of the body is to surrender it to God as a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). This is the only way to break conformity with the world~living according to the flesh~making possible the complete the renewal of our minds. To avoid the *temptation* to sin, we must also banish the sinful *habits* that reside in our bodies. Only when both are complete will we have true renewal.

There are particular steps that will help us apply spiritual formation to the body. *First*, we must release our bodies to God. This is what Paul means by making our bodies "a living sacrifice" (Romans 12). This should be a definite action: we need to take a day in solitary retreat, get clear of all distractions and burdens, and pray through some Scriptures dealing with the body. Then we must formally surrender our bodies to God, submitting them to Him for His use.

*Second*, we need to stop idolizing the body. We cannot make it an object of "ultimate concern"~either by worshipping it or by living in fear of it. We must care for our bodies without living in fear of what our bodies might "do to us."

*Third*, we must stop misusing our bodies. We need to decide to stop using it for physical gratification out of necessity or dependency, stop it to manipulate others~such as by dressing or acting to elicit sexual thoughts, or by intimidating others with "power dressing," sarcasm, knowing looks, and so on. In addition, we must resist and avoid addictions, including substance abuse, smoking, and even addiction to activities such as excessive competition or work.

*Fourth*, we need to properly honor and care for our bodies, regarding them as holy and owned by God. We can do this by honoring the Sabbath as a day of rest, silence, and worship getting proper nourishment and enough sleep.

Without this transformation, we will be at war with our flesh, and inner renewal will not take root. However, as we progress in seeing our bodies spiritually transformed, we will discover that genuine beauty, health, strength, and incredible grace come from within.

# Impact on the World and Church

God wants to raise a community of people to serve as His priests who will govern the earth for a time and ultimately reign with Him in eternity as heirs. This community will be a dwelling place for God, harmonizing with His purposes. Spiritual formation here and now is a constant movement toward this ultimate reality. We cannot be *perfect* now, but we should be *different*~from the inside out.

Our *thought lives* will be different. What is on our minds will be, simply, God. We will dwell on who He is, His goodness, His loveliness, and His plans. We will adore Him and be intoxicated with Him. Our minds will not dwell on evil but will welcome all other good things (Philippians 4:8).

Our *feelings* will be different. Our emotional lives will be dominated by love~love for God, people, life, and who we are in Him. We will be thankful, joyful, peaceful, and will receive even the greatest difficulties as God's gift. We will be confident and hopeful, wasting no time on thoughts of rejection, failure, hopelessness, or anxiety~and we will share God's view of life and eternity.

Our *will (spirit, heart)* will be different. We will be devoted to what is good and right, habitually attentive to rightness, kindness, and helpfulness. We will think of others first and act in the interest of others. We will be in harmony with and abandoned to God's will, never hesitating to do what is right.

Our *bodies* will be different. Instead of being our masters, they will be subordinated to our will to do good. We will be constantly ready to do what is right and good as a matter of habit and reflex.

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**IMPACT ON THE WORLD AND CHURCH**  
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perfect, but whenever we are in error, we will not defend ourselves~ whether to ourselves, to others, or even to God. In fact, we will be thankful because the discovery of an error creates another opportunity to repent and grow in sanctification and transformation.

A community like this cannot be hidden.

In fact, it would further a worldwide moral revolution, which Christ initiated when He sent His disciples out to train new apprentices. Yet the condition of the world today, with all of its depravity and degradation,

is partly due to our failure throughout history to stand as children of light, transformed from within.

We must return to that community of moral revolution, standing with Christ as the light of the world.

We must shine as stars in a dark and

perverse generation. Mere talk is not enough~demonstration is required. The only way out is to fulfill Christ's call to be His apprentices, learning to do all He said to do.



**“If there is to be an accurate history written of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it will have to give prominence to the fact that the highest ethical teaching the world has ever been given was rejected by the intellectual leaders of humanity in favor of teachings that opened the way to forms of human behavior more degraded than any the world had seen to that point.”**



**Christian  
Book  
Summaries**

Volume 2, Number 27

**Publisher**

David A. Martin

**Editor**

Michael J. Chiapperino

Published on the WorldWide Web at  
ChristianBookSummaries.com.

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*Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard. Copyright © 2002 by Dallas Willard. Summarized by permission of the publisher, NavPress, P.O. Box 35001, Colorado Springs, CO 80935. 272 pages. \$24.99 U.S. ISBN 1-57683-296-1. Available at your favorite bookstore or online book marketer.

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