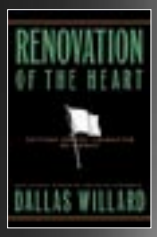
A BOOK REVIEW: RENOVATION OF THE HEART





BY GARY BEST

It's another Sunday in your average Canadian Vineyard. Already the pastor and/or speaker have spent some hours preparing for this crucial time as have many others – children's teachers, worship teams and setup crews not the least. The worship time has an especially sweet sense of God's presence, the message is delivered well with conviction and the call to respond is well heeded. Nevertheless a nagging thought harasses the pastor and no doubt many of the service participants – have any of us truly changed in a lasting way?

Of course, this isn't only a Vineyard problem. The reality of the church in North America today is a sad story: in spite of our continual talk about life change the evidence falls far short of the advertising. In fact, far too often the inability of the church to clearly live out the teachings of Jesus is the main stumbling block for genuine seekers.

Why is this so? Dallas Willard, in his book "Renovation of the Heart", suggests that it is largely because the Western church "…takes as its basic goal to get as many people as possible ready to die and go to heaven. It aims to get people into heaven rather than to get heaven into people." He goes on to explain how this strategy is self-defeating:

> … it creates groups of people who may be ready to die, but clearly are not ready to live. They rarely can get along with one another, much less those "outside." Often their most intimate relations are tangles of reciprocal harm, coldness, and resentment. They have found ways of being "Christian" without being Christlike. As a result they actually fall far short of getting as many people as possible ready to die, because the lives of the "converted" testify against the reality of "the life that is life indeed"….[1]

Willard's solution builds on the foundation of his previous book, "The Divine Conspiracy", challenging us toward a discipleship goal that mirrors Jesus' description in the Sermon on the Mount – that is, apprentices of Jesus who have been so won over by God's Spirit that they are literally 'good by accident', their first inclination being to please God even before they have a chance to catch themselves. The behaviour of a real Christian disciple, Willard says, is a natural outcome of an inner self totally convinced in the rightness of God and his ways. Therefore the real task of discipleship is the changing of the inner self; the rest then takes care of itself.

Few of us, of course, would argue with him on this. His main challenge to us in the Vineyard world comes as he describes the nature of this inside–out change process. It is not passive or unpredictable Willard says; though it is absolutely impossible without the active presence and grace of the Holy Spirit, we must intentionally partner with that grace, "making every effort" (cf. 2 Peter 1) to let it impact our inner self.

Upon that premise, Willard then devotes a large section of his book to explaining just how the different parts of our self (i.e. our will, our thoughts and feelings, our body, etc.) function and how we can practically co-work with the grace of God to see them transformed in surrender to God.

Though Renovation of the Heart, is not light reading and may require some re-reading of sections to really absorb the full depth of Willard's arguments, I believe that it is an extremely important book at this time for our Vineyard family in Canada. The flip side of our strength of intimacy with the Holy Spirit is the weakness of tending to be very passive about the process of sanctification - letting others (i.e. in prayer ministry) do the grunt work of our spiritual growth for us. It has not worked very well!

Willard offers another way, not devoid of prayer ministry, but combining with it an intentional, systematic plan for spiritual formation consistent with the New Testament and the practice of saints through the ages. I, for one, plan to use this book personally, reading and re-reading it over at least the next year, until I feel that I have made some significant progress in my own inner spiritual journey. I invite you all to join me! ■

(Endnotes)

[1] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 238