Be perfect:
A dialogue with Dallas Willard
towards a theology of spiritual formation
for young Singaporean Chinese Christians

Goh Chin Lian (Sam)

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a qualification at any tertiary education institution.

Qinglian

Goh Chin Lian (Sam)

ABSTRACT

Discipleship and spiritual formation of young Singaporean Chinese Christians (YSCCs) aged 13 to 35 have been compromised by a reductionist view of personhood defined by their achievements with debilitating consequences. Using a qualitative, conceptual approach that engages YSCCs' experiences and context with the writings of American philosopher-theologian Dallas Willard (1935–2013), this thesis proposes a theology and practice of spiritual formation for YSCCs comprising four aspects: an identity anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God, achievement as cooperating with God's power, a holistic model of self and its formation, and spiritual disciplines of abstinence and engagement. This theology follows from the finding that Singapore's philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy, and cultural Confucianism, mediated by the education system, shaped YSCCs' achievement-based identity. A critical textual study of Willard's ideas on spiritual formation yielded the four aspects of formation with priority given to reforming YSCCs' thoughts of God alongside their feelings, will, body, social context and soul. Willard's prioritising of the family in the formation of self affirms YSCCs' family orientation but also calls for redeeming the negative aspects of their experience with their parents. Despite the criticisms levelled against Willard's individualistic and inward-looking self, he does recognise the importance of the missional and ecclesial aspects of formation. He also calls for practising solitude and silence to maximise the formative effect of prayer and Bible study. A hermeneutical study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in dialogue with Willard's exegesis of the same supplied an identity based on a relationship with a merciful Father who is always near, with Jesus the preeminent Teacher, and with others in agape. By engaging YSCCs' recovery experiences with these findings, this thesis concludes that Willard's ideas of spiritual formation, contextualised for YSCCs, provide a robust basis to overcome their achievement-based identity.

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I dedicate this thesis to the KEYS youth leaders and youth group and my nephew Ryan Moi that they may be perfect as our Father is perfect.

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NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

DOS	Singapore Department of Statistics
YSCCs	Young Singaporean Chinese Christians

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship and spiritual formation of young Singaporean Chinese Christians (YSCCs) aged 13 to 35 have been compromised by a reductionist view of personhood that defines people by their achievements. YSCCs basing their identity on their academics and other achievements experience a sense of emptiness, diminished self-worth, debilitating perfectionism and depression over failure (Liew 2018, Yip 2018, Zhang 2018, Tan 2019, Amy n.d.). Their situation is troubling given that a biblical view of personhood should have formed their identity. Using a qualitative, conceptual approach that engages YSCCs' testimonies and context with the writings of American philosopher-theologian Dallas Willard (1935–2013), this thesis proposes a theology and practice of spiritual formation for YSCCs comprising four aspects: an identity anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God, achievement as cooperating with God's power, a holistic model of self and its formation, and spiritual disciplines of abstinence and engagement.

There is a lack of scholarly research and theological reflection on the discipleship and spiritual formation of YSCCs and the formative influence of an achievement-based identity. C. Chong (2016) surveyed the state of youth ministry in Singapore churches by interviewing youth leaders with general insights for discipling youth. Wong (2015) proposed a communal disciple-making process in his church but did not focus on the young. Lim (2018) considered the model of a missional family church and implemented it for his church's young adults but did not reflect theologically on YSCCs. Other scholars writing on YSCC-related topics did not focus on discipleship or spiritual formation. C. Chin (2017) analysed the perception of Christianity as a rational religion among young Chinese Singaporean converts; Goh (2018) and T. Chong (2018) studied how Pentecostal megachurches attracted young converts.

This thesis argues that Willard's theology and concept of spiritual formation can correct YSCCs' achievement-based identity. His initial five books on Christian spirituality and moral knowledge, published from 1984 to 2009, "constitute a unified body of work that together present a comprehensive account of the nature and means of spiritual formation in Christ" (Porter 2018, 19). However, there is a lack of scholarly engagement with Willard's work generally (Porter 2018, 22) and for the Asian context. An exception is Tang's (2014, 137–141) study of Christian spiritual formation paradigms in Malaysia's English-speaking

Presbyterian Churches. He examined Willard's Renovation of the Heart as one of three theories of faith formation and accepted Willard's emphasis on volition, but criticised his approach as individualistic and neglecting the communal aspect of spiritual formation. This thesis will address his criticisms.

A dialogue with Willard's theology will consider his North American culture (e.g., individualism) with YSCCs' experiences and context, such as the Asian relational self (Capaque 2014, Alexander 2014) and the importance of family ties and filial piety (Ho 2018, The Youth STEPS team 2019). This thesis will add to the secondary literature considering Willard's ideas both for the Asian context and in the light of it, interact with a wider range of Willard's works than Tang did, and cover new ground in the context of Singapore and YSCCs.

Chapter 1 considers YSCCs' experiences of an achievement-based identity. Chapter 2 engages YSCCs' context for contributing factors to this identity. Chapter 3 is a critical textual study of Willard's theology and concept of spiritual formation. Chapter 4 is a hermeneutical study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in critical conversation with Willard's exegesis of it. Chapter 5 engages YSCCs' recovery experiences with the findings to develop a theology and concept of spiritual formation for YSCCs to overcome their achievement-based identity.

CHAPTER 1: THE TROUBLING SITUATION (YSCCS' TESTIMONIES)

Amy (pseud.)

Amy (n.d.) struggled with anxiety over her undergraduate thesis and high expectations of herself. She found it difficult to wake up, had "completely no emotions" and broke down. Her body started "heating up" when she thought too hard. She realised she was a "perfectionist" after seeing a counsellor: "I was extremely hard on myself, and found it challenging to just let go". The moment she felt better, she would think of all the things she needed to do to "make up for lost time." Then, "like an automatic light switch, my brain would shut off in response to the stress and I would not be able to think properly again." She wanted an "instant solution, but God was not giving" it to her. She considered herself "to be able to connect well with people and with God", but she could not hold a regular conversation, pray or read the bible. She was troubled over "losing" her faith.

Raphael

Raphael (Zhang 2018) also became aware of his perfectionism while writing his thesis: "I wanted so much for my thesis to be perfect that I began putting a lot of pressure on myself. Soon, the pressure became overwhelming and I went into a mild depression." Two factors drove his perfectionism. Firstly, shame was "a constant struggle": "Shame slithers up now and then and hisses at me, '…You're not good enough'." Fearing people's rejection, he would apply his best efforts to relationships, work and ministry. "However, shame would…whisper, '…they liked you only because of what you did, not for who you are. If they knew what you're really like, do you think they'd still approve of you?" Shame and the fear of rejection would drive him again to perfectionism: "I've often tied my sense of self to the work of my hands...striving for excellence, not purely out of love for God and people, but from an anxious desire to quell my insecurities and shore up my self-esteem." Secondly, he had "an unhealthy thought pattern" of life as all-or-nothing: "Everything I did was a high-stakes endeavor that permitted no room for failure." He would procrastinate on a task because it seemed "incredibly risk-filled".

Darren

Darren (Yip 2018, 78) did well in his Advanced Level ("A levels") examinations but felt useless after an unspecified failure:

> I wasn't in a very happy place because I was trying to do things on my own strength…After A levels, the pride got to me that I did well. I thought I could conquer the world. When that didn't really happen, I saw myself as not worthy…that I wasn't good enough for this world. I was not being as good as the person next to me. Seeing myself as lousier than (whomever) I was friends with…My self-esteem basically dropped. That was because I had this mentality that I achieved all of this on my own. So, when I couldn't achieve something on my own, I was useless.

Ying Hui

Ying Hui (Y. Tan 2019) was a relatively young believer when she published her testimony. It had been four years since her friend brought her to church. She was a "hardworking student" who placed "immense pressure" on herself to do well academically. This became harder because the streaming system "pits you against brighter students each time you go up a level". A "hardcore planner", she began Junior College (JC) knowing exactly what she needed to do to "score the best chances" of entering her desired university course. She studied hard and scored As and Bs which "set the bar high" as she "wanted to improve for every subsequent exam." She also decided to "push" herself to try a sport Co-Curricular Activity (CCA): "Call me a wimp, but that period of continued failure at the sport and the lack of support from my coach made me feel worthless." Like Raphael, she began hearing condemning voices in her head:

> The combined stress from studying and performing badly in CCA took a severe toll on my mental health. I went through a similar phase back when I was in Secondary 2 and 3, but something about the A-Levels being "the most important exams" made it so much worse…I battled with the monstrous voices in my head, which constantly reminded me of how useless I was. So I turned back to cutting again. I don't know why I did it, since it never released my stress, nor did anything good at all for my state of mind. Somehow, sadness had become a feeling that I'd allowed myself to indulge in and be consumed by, and the blood and scars on my wrist fed that vicious cycle.

Stephenie

Stephenie (Liew 2018, 410–417) grew up in a Christian family that attended church services every Sunday. Her parents, being private tutors, placed a "heavy emphasis on education", which "led to a desire to excel in school since young":

> As I did well in school, I became confident in my abilities and firmly believed that I could achieve anything as long as I put in hard work…Unknowingly and gradually, my identity was built on the fact that I excelled in everything I did. A competitive spirit started to breed within me…Excelling and being the best was my goal in life…It was always "what's in it for me". (Liew 2018, 411)

When a schoolmate fought cancer but still cared for others, she had an epiphany that "the past 17 years of my life have been solely in pursuit of achievements for my self-interests" (Liew 2018, 412). Her identity was shaken again in university when she failed to meet the grade requirements of her scholarship programme and dropped out of it in her third year:

> When I lost the scholarship, I felt as if my identity had been stripped away from me. As I broke down, my church leaders reminded me that my worth is not tied to my ability to excel in school...but I could not stop my heart from feeling the disappointment and even embarrassment that I was here crying over something so trivial. I could not help but start to doubt in my own abilities. "Know who are you, Steph. Your identity is in Christ," my church leader said. Is this God really that firm foundation on which I can build my identity and purpose? (Liew 2018, 415)

During her six-month exchange programme in Paris, each travel experience and each night of partying left her with "a sense of emptiness inside". She became "tired of this endless search for meaning and purpose" (Liew 2018, 415).

All five YSCCs cite Singapore's competitive education system in their struggle. Chapter 2 will consider it and other socio-cultural factors shaping their achievement-based identity.

CHAPTER 2: YSCCS IN PRAGMATIC SINGAPORE

This chapter considers the contextual factors shaping YSCCs' achievement-based identity by exploring Singapore's historical development, its philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy mediated by the education system, Confucianism's cultural influence, the impact of globalisation and the Singapore church.

From Third World to First: Singapore's Historical Development

Singapore is a small, densely-populated city-state in Southeast Asia with a multiracial, multi-religious society and a strong economy. Its 728-sq-km land area (Singapore Department of Statistics (DOS) 2021) holds more than 4 million residents and 1.6 million foreigners (DOS 2020, vi). A former British colony, Singapore separated from Malay/Muslim-majority Malaysia in 1965 and became an independent nation, comprising a Chinese majority (74.3 per cent), Malays (13.5 per cent), Indians (9 per cent), and other races (3.2 per cent) (DOS 2020, 5). Its secular government "actively intervene(s)" (Shanmugam 2020) to maintain religious harmony among Buddhists and Taoists (43.2 per cent), Christians (18.8 per cent), Muslims (14 per cent), Hindus (5 per cent) and the non-religious (18.5 per cent) (DOS 2016, vii). Singapore is a global hub in trading, finance, shipping and aviation with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US$65,232.9 in 2019, 13.5 times the average GDP per capita of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (US$4,827.4) (Asean 2020, 41).

The official story of Singapore's rapid development from Third World to First in less than 50 years emphasises a survivalist mentality. Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong observed that in a newly-independent country without natural resources, Singaporeans "had to fight our way in the world" and "depend on our wits and our abilities". Singapore invested in the people through the education system to "make them hardworking…productive and proud of themselves", and welcomed multinational companies for jobs, technology and new markets. As the economy grew annually by 10 per cent, the growth was shared with Singaporeans through good education, healthcare and housing. PM Lee thickened the survivalist narrative by noting that Singapore was "lucky" to have peace with its neighbours but "(we) cannot be

sure that the next 50 years, we will be as lucky." Implicit in the Singapore Story is "the strong state and the principles that undergird its practice" (K. Tan 2019, 5), especially its philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy.

Marks of Singapore's Pragmatism

K. Tan (2019, 5–9) outlines Singapore's pragmatism from the statements of government leaders. Firstly, it has not been tied to any dogma but has its "sacred cows". For example, Singapore is "vulnerable" in a "hostile geopolitical environment" and economic growth is the "preeminent" goal. Secondly, it emphasises "doing" and is impatient with theorisation and critical thinking. Thirdly, it learns from best practices instead of reinventing the wheel. The downside is, again, impatience for quick, certain results. Fourthly, it takes a realist view of human nature as unchangeably selfish, greedy and prone to abuse state welfare. Fifthly, it adopts a managerial approach and focuses on measurable results through cost-benefit analysis and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Intangibles (e.g., community) without immediate economic value are sacrificed. KPIs reduce people to numbers and fail to serve them. Singaporeans measure all things by money and think "all things work as markets work".

Although K. Tan (2019, 14) thinks "top-down" formulations of pragmatism may not affect Singaporeans in "any deep sort of way", this thesis argues that meritocracy, so integral to Singapore's pragmatism, exerts a pervasive influence in and through the education system. Moreover, as K. Tan (2019, 14) recognised, Singaporeans admit they are pragmatic: They are of "immigrant stock", like their forebears who sought their fortunes in Singapore; materialistic, practical and cynical about human nature.

Meritocracy as National Ideology

Two speeches from Singapore's leaders illustrate how meritocracy is pervasive as an ideology and in practice. In 2018, then-Education Minister Ong Ye Kung (2018) defended meritocracy despite its drawbacks. Meritocracy "recognises talent and ability over wealth and circumstance of birth, and motivates society and people to work hard". However, as families do well, parents "spare no effort" to invest in nurturing their child's abilities, resulting in

"different starting lines" between children from well-off families and those from poorer backgrounds. Hence, Singapore should "double down" on meritocracy by moving away from "a narrow focus on past academic merit, to recognise and celebrate a broader range of skills, talents and strengths", which should then "translate into tangible changes in the way we hire people, admit students to tertiary institutions, grant awards and scholarships, and accord respect to fellow Singaporeans". Ong's proposal reveals meritocracy's influence through the education system in hiring practices, admission to tertiary institutions, granting of awards and scholarships, and respect for others or the lack thereof. Singapore's President Halimah Yacob (2020) similarly upheld meritocracy as "a crucial pillar of our society" but recognised it could create excessive competition and social stratification. She said: "Society must value people for what they contribute, in every job and every role" and "look after our most vulnerable members" such as students from disadvantaged families, people with disabilities and seniors. Her comment suggests that meritocracy has caused some Singaporeans to look down on those who cannot achieve as much as they can.

From Equal Opportunities to Efficient Resource Allocation: Historical Development

Singapore' idea of meritocracy evolved over the years. Desker (2016, 7) notes that Singapore's merger with Malaysia in 1963 "precipitated a contest" between a leadership in Kuala Lumpur dominated by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) committed to protecting the special rights of Malays and a People's Action Party (PAP) leadership in Singapore that advocated meritocracy to give all ethnic groups equal rights and opportunities. When Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence in 1965, meritocracy became "tied to the fight against a culture of patronage and the drive to build a clean and effective public service". To ensure that public servants advanced by "merit, not connections", the Government established open recruitment and appraisal systems, paid public servants market-competitive, performance-linked salaries and removed poor performers. K. Tan (2016) argues that meritocracy, through the education system, also supported the efficient development of scarce human resources and allocation of talent especially for leadership positions in government, the economy and society. It then exerted a broader influence on society by creating "a widespread competitive culture that worked in tandem with an acute national instinct for survival and determination to succeed". Meritocracy was also a non-discriminatory approach to develop and deploy people in

Singapore's multiracial society. It became "the legitimizing basis of social stability, a principle of governance and a pillar of national identity".

An Instrumental, Competitive Education System

The influence of Singapore's pragmatism and meritocracy is seen in the education system. T. Tan (2015, 3–6) argues that Singapore students' achievement in maths, science and reading in international rankings is "driven by the view that education's main role is to produce good workers, that learning is instrumental in value, and that the best results are obtained via a highly competitive system." The system sorts out students by ability through high-stakes examinations to differently-ranked schools and classes. To earn better marks for school entry, parents send their children to tuition. A hard-to-score subject like literature is dropped at the principal's urging. Sports are a way to boost school rankings "rather than a good in itself". Teachers trying to teach in new ways for "more rounded" outcomes are "told to stick to the tried-and-tested method" to score in tests. Initiatives to reduce the workload on students by teaching less content or introducing project work "move the competition elsewhere". Consequently, children are "not given the chance to blossom as people, and lack social, emotional, physical, psychological, spiritual and values development". They "lead lives dominated by fear of falling behind, excessive work, insufficient sleep, and lack of variety in other pursuits and the pleasures that follow".

Heng & Pereira (2020, 5–12) similarly write about "an instrumental and high-performance school culture". It is "driven by economic prioritisation"; school reforms aim to "enhance economic competitiveness and resilience"; "the growth of the student as a person is curtailed to meet functional economic ends, and the worth of a school and its activities is tied to the attainment of measurable achievement outcomes". Even moral education "develops students in national values important for social cohesion and economic success", not "intrinsic commitment to the understanding and practice of values". This background informed the authors' study of the development of purpose among Singapore adolescents. An earlier survey (Heng et al., 2017, 312, 315) of 577 mostly Chinese students aged 15 and 16 from two Singapore schools found that they were significantly less satisfied with school and life than Israeli adolescents even though they had higher achievement scores than the Israelis. Heng & Pereira (2020, 8–14) interviewed 28 of the 577 students and found that their school and life

goals are “largely self-oriented with a focus on the immediate goals of school achievement”. Only about one-third showed “nascent beyond-the-self or prosocial qualities”, “a sense of thriving” and “an understanding of mutuality and interdependence of self and their place in the larger community”. In contrast, self-oriented adolescents “spoke about the importance of working hard for a good career and a life that seems premised on economic viability and material stability”. Another group that the authors called drifters “tended to be self-oriented and preoccupied with their current school and life challenges”. Stigmatisation and labelling in the lower vocational education stream left adolescents like Shawn, a Singaporean Chinese, “seeing little worth in what they do”. Shawn’s “self-worth and self-perception seemed to be largely in economic terms and potential earnings”, coupled with “a sense of purposelessness” when he described his school, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), as “toxic” and “It’s The End”, playing on the acronym ITE.

Students in all groups reported feeling “performance and academic stress” (Heng & Pereira 2020, 12–13). One student, Matthew, lamented that school was more like an “exam preparation centre”, not a place to develop curiosity and a love of learning. Some students see school as “a battleground” for “*chionging*” national examinations. *Chiong* in Chinese dialect means “charge” as in a battle cry. *Chionging* “connotes a determined, single-minded and survivalist approach to studying”. This “narrows” the purpose of education to examination preparation and its “fixation on achievement outcomes obscures the importance of more holistic intellectual and moral growth”. Hence, students’ experiences are “often not consistent with education policy rhetoric about developing passion, curiosity and creativity in learning”.

Another feature of high-performance schooling is “the imperative of accountability measures” (Heng & Pereira 2020, 13). Compulsory participation in Community Involvement Project (CIP) is coupled with earning points for participation that count towards students’ admission into higher education. One student, Alina, said she did CIP “not because I want to help people but mainly because I need the specific number of points”. She “did not learn anything for CIP” and gave “politically correct answers” for reflection exercises. Heng & Pereira warned that “students may learn undesirable lessons in giving inauthentic feedback for the sake of compliance and expediency.”

Heng & Pereira (2020, 14) argue that an education model that aims for “pragmatic socialisation of adolescents for social cohesion and economic success” creates tensions

between their aspirations for meaningful learning and the demands of high-performance schooling, and dulls the development of purpose: "The weight of the pragmatic focus with high expectations for academic success to contribute to Singapore's economic development places a large psychological burden on students". They then forego or postpone their search for purpose and meaning during their school years to strive for academic outcomes that "lead to viable economic futures". Such pragmatism accounts for the self-focused, achievement-oriented syndrome in Singapore known as *kiasu* (Chinese dialect for "scared to lose"). *Kiasu* is "a cultural signifier developed from the national habitus of survival amidst crisis construction and preparedness so that Singapore's economy might not lose out to others"; this pervasive form of social anxiety includes "the fear of being left behind or coming in last in a society that puts a premium on achievement and goods" (Heng & Pereira 2020, 14).

Pang and Lim (2019, A18) provide a thick qualitative description of students' perception of the impact of meritocracy based on more than 300 submissions from business undergraduates at Singapore Management University (SMU). Most of them belonged to middle-income families with non-graduate parents. Many had gone to a "neighbourhood" school in a public housing area that accepted students with lower examination scores than those in "elite schools": "They are the assumed 'winners' of a meritocratic paper chase." As expected, few students expressed reservations about meritocracy and most students accepted "the national and dominant family narrative—that success comes from doing well academically and working hard" and is defined "in purely material terms":

> A remarkable number remember their exact grade for every subject at every examination, and associated GPAs (grade point averages). They vividly recall their own and their parents' reactions to the grades, and related dreams and nightmares…It is a rare student who mentions anything akin to a "love of learning", or something learnt in school or university which excited and inspired the next stage of his or her education or professional choice. Even co-curricular activities are mentioned less with enthusiasm or genuine interest than as another "resume requirement" to make it to the next gate.

Their idea of success came with "a keen sense of the opportunity cost" for family relationships:

> As some students see it, their parents work extremely hard and long hours, demanding and expecting in return only outstanding academic performance. To them, it seems that every resource, nearly every interpersonal interaction, is to ensure the material

> success of the next generation. A good number of student contributors feel emotionally neglected, with an unmet yearning for unconditional love and acceptance by parents for who they are. They regret lost time not spent together unrelated to the collective goal, and feel that their parents do not understand, appreciate or even love them, since their worth as children is defined largely in terms of academic results.

Faced with school and family pressures, many undergraduates "mention periods when they felt life was 'meaningless' and exhibited symptoms of depression; several had suicidal thoughts…A few 'escaped' by turning to and becoming addicted to gambling, alcohol, smoking or sex".

Pang and Lim observed that "parents are responding to external incentives in the wider economy and society, and children, to the school system that sorts them for future roles in it". SMU business students who chose the programme "to get a good, high-paying job" were "simply following the path of meritocracy, Singapore style, to which they have been inured since childhood". They "exemplify the pragmatic bent" of a "hyper-competitive" society that is "dedicated to promoting material prosperity".

Confucianism's cultural influence

The parental and societal emphasis on education in Singapore can also be attributed to Confucianist influence, as is the case in China, Japan and Korea (Thomas 2018, 48). Confucius' (551–479 BC) teachings became official ideology in the Han period (circa 200 BC–AD 200), giving the state and society "a standard code of morals" and prescribing "the nature of the relationship between those who govern and those who are being governed" (Thomas 2018, 46). Confucianism "dominated the political and ethical vistas in China for the next 2,000 years". Confucian education in China dates back to 124 BC "when the first imperial academy and the national exam system were established to train civil servants in Confucian classics" (C. Tan 2019, 2–3). Migrants to Singapore from China before the 20th century passed down Confucian norms and practices. Singapore's political leaders also used Confucian teachings for governance, emphasising society before self, family, respect for elders and education (C. Tan 2019, 5).

C. Tan (2019, 57) argues that parents and other educational stakeholders in the high-

performing education systems of Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong exhibit a "Confucian habitus" comprising "unconscious and ingrained worldviews, dispositions, and habits that reflect the standards of appropriateness" in a Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). Characteristics of a CHC include:

> achievement-orientation, the importance of education, continuous development, educability of and perfectibility for all, the centrality of personal effort and resolve in learning, collectivism, high expectations of parents of their (children's) academic performance, attribution of success to effort, high status of teachers, exam-driven schooling, and a hierarchical social structure. (C. Tan 2019, 58)

Singapore, Shanghai and Hongkong display a Confucian habitus through "a sociocultural emphasis on diligence in studying, parental dependence on private tutoring, and public support for terminal exams" (C. Tan 2019, 58). These reflect dimensions of *li*, which is the "ethical, communal, and personalised standards of appropriateness that inform, and are performed by, members of a CHC". Diligence in studying conforms to the ethical and personalised dimensions of *li*. Researchers found that children with poor examination results are scolded by their parents for not being diligent. Parents believe that success comes from their children's persistence and effort measured by the time invested within and outside school. By doing lots of homework, attending tuition classes and excelling in exams, students "present and validate their personal virtues and moral character" and "demonstrate their moral cultivation of *li*" (C. Tan 2019, 58–59). Parental dependence on private tutoring reflects the communal aspect of *li* (C. Tan 2019, 60). Researchers found that parents feel highly responsible for their children's education and make sacrifices for it. They prioritise academic achievement but pay for enrichment classes so that their children can "become top scorers and all-rounders". Parents, students and educators support terminal national exams, stressful as they are, because exams are transparent, meritocratic and fair: "Standardised assessments embody the moral values that undergird *li* such as self-cultivation, meritocracy, fairness, and accountability" (C. Tan 2019, 61–62).

Parental authority, upheld in a Confucian habitus, can sow the seeds of a child's perfectionism when wrongly exercised. Hong et al. (2017, 409–412) tracked the development of maladaptive perfectionism in 302 Singaporean children over five years from age 7 to 11. Maladaptive perfectionism consists of "excessive concerns over one's mistakes and imperfections, and one's perception of others having unrealistically high expectations of

oneself", accompanied by "psychological turmoil and distress". Children with maladaptive perfectionism tend to have parents, particularly the mother, who are "overly controlling and intrusive", and "often set high performance standards for, and do not accept failure from, their children". Negative parenting (e.g., harsh discipline and parental criticism of the child's academic performance) is another factor. Hong et al. (2017, 409) found that six in 10 of the Singaporean children had high and/or increasing critical self-oriented perfectionism, and nearly eight in 10 had socially-prescribed perfectionism. Parental intrusiveness and negative parenting predicted a high and/or increasing trajectory of critical self-oriented perfectionism, while child temperament (e.g. "high activity level, positive affect, approachability to novelty") predicted a high trajectory of socially-prescribed perfectionism. Both kinds of perfectionism tended to occur together, "suggesting a mutually-reinforcing process". Hong et al. (2017, 418–419) drew three implications. Firstly, perfectionism beliefs emerge during childhood. Secondly, one must consider the social ecology under which perfectionism occurs: "The maladaptive perfectionism trajectories reflect Singaporean children's reactions to a prevailing culture that strongly values academic excellence." Thirdly, parents must be mindful of being "overly intrusive and using excessive negative control on children". Controlling parents "deprive children of the opportunities to learn (even from making mistakes) in a nonthreatening environment". Their intrusiveness tells the children that "they are not good enough" and makes them "overly concerned about committing even the slightest errors".

Globalisation: Competition and Consumerism

Schreiter (1997, 5) describes globalisation as "the increasingly interconnected character of the political, economic, and social life of the peoples on this planet" characterising the latter part of the 20th century. Communication technologies have "compressed time and space", "social relationships are realigned, cultural production is at once homogenized and fractured, and peoples migrate and mix at an unprecedented rate, creating a cultural melange" in urban centres (Schreiter 1997, ix).

Singapore is particularly porous to the influence of globalisation. Her survival and growth have been historically tied to the global economy. Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing (2018) observed that Singapore benefitted from the "free flow of trade, factors of

production, ideas and talent" and could never close her borders to globalisation: "For a small city state to survive and thrive, the world must be our hinterland from day 1". PM Lee (2020) noted that Singapore developed from a trading hub to an international seaport to a hub for aviation, finance, and telecommunication. Large parts of Singapore's economy—manufacturing, biotech, financial services, logistics—serve regional and world markets, while retail, F&B and entertainment rely on tourism.

This openness comes with challenges. Minister Chan (2018) warned that companies and people cannot be insulated from global competition: "Given the technological product cycles, having 10 to 15 years of compulsory education will be necessary but insufficient for a lifetime of employment". Workers have to be "quickly reskilled or risk being displaced by technology or more competitive sources elsewhere". Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong (2020) encouraged Singapore youth to accept that "competition is a fact of life" but recognise that it "drives us to excel" and "pushes us out of our comfort zone to be more than what we thought we could be and realise a better version of ourselves". The pressures of a competitive, changing environment can reinforce YSCC's achievement-based identity.

Globalisation also enables the spread of worldview-shaping ideas. Consumerism elevates the self through possessions and underwrites greed. YSCCs with an achievement-based identity may work to earn more money to consume more for pleasure, status and security.

Singapore Church: Pragmatic and Achievement-oriented?

Singapore Christians comprise 220,900 Catholics and 395,200 Protestants and other Christians (DOS 2015, 240). The larger Protestant denominations are Methodists (more than 44,000 members in 46 churches) and Anglicans (more than 22,000 members in 27 churches). Many also attend megachurches such as New Creation Church (more than 30,000 members) and City Harvest Church (16,000 members) (E. Tan 2020, S. Lee 2020). Singapore Christians are mostly Chinese (85.4 per cent) and middle-class and above: Close to one-third of Christians live in a landed property, condominium or private apartment, nearly double the national average of 17.4 per cent. Almost 45 per cent of Christians have a university degree, compared to the national average of 27.4 per cent (DOS 2015, 240, 244, 246).

Has Singapore's pragmatism and meritocracy influenced the church? Graceworks (2020, 4, 22, 27) interviewed 26 Singaporean Christians aged 19 to 39 across eight denominations and five independent churches. It found that they perceive their churches as over-structured and over-programmed to the detriment of building relationships, and over-oriented to performance and modifying behaviours. They felt like "a cog in the machinery" and that their worth was determined by the function they fulfilled in the church. They said: "Church is becoming more and more like a secular organization, it's mainly about getting people to fill gaps"; "When I told the church that I could no longer serve in ministry as often as before, the only thing they said to me was to try and find someone to take over my duties." Churches had a performance system where members were "explicitly told or implicitly hinted at on what are desired or unwanted behaviors which will be 'rewarded' or 'penalized'". This system "results in a spirituality that aims at and is contented only with external behavioural modification with no real internal change". They said: "Christians can be good at 'doing church' and getting the 'affirmation' there but we may all be empty inside"; "Often, church can be very manipulative in its efforts to produce the right behaviour". The study's observations of over-programming, secular corporate culture and a "performance system" suggest the influence of pragmatism and meritocracy on the church.

This influence has been observed in other ways, such as the view of Christianity as a moralistic religion and the appeal of a prosperity gospel that conforms to Singapore's ideas of success. In an interview (McCraken 2018), Simon Murphy, the senior pastor of Redemption Hill Church in Singapore, whose 1,000-plus congregants of locals and internationals are mostly students and professionals with an average age of 28, observed that while most churches preach the Word and display the love of Christ, "the gospel is merely assumed in some churches, and the way it intersects with one's life and circumstances is not clearly grasped". Christianity is then seen as "either a moralistic religion, where the approval of God needs to and can be earned or as a contract between God and man, where faith and/or works results in security and prosperity". Meritocracy poses the biggest discipleship challenge, exacerbated by living in a competitive society: "Singaporeans constantly feel assessed by their performance" and think that "people deserve the outcomes they've been dealt (with)". The most insidious idols in Singapore are material affluence, which is "rooted in the need to build and maintain a certain image/reputation/lifestyle and not fall behind in a high-pressure society that assesses worth based on achievements"; and legalism, which is "deeply rooted in

Singapore given the practice of meritocracy". Receiving and extending grace is "counterintuitive" and "offensive" in a culture where only the deserving are rewarded. The gospel is also seen as "redundant" after conversion given the "weak grasp" on its relevance to sanctification and discipleship. Christians then tend to slip into legalism, where one becomes acceptable to God by works, service or right behaviour.

Murphy's concerns are shared by Guna Raman, founding pastor of Agape Baptist Church, in the same interview. "Approval" is an idol in Singapore. The country desires to be "the best in everything, from our seaport to airport to education system to smart-city pride", and Singaporeans "crave recognition and success at all cost" for themselves and their children. They feel "great shame" when they fail and that "God is punishing them when tragedy hits their lives".

YSCCs' accounts corroborate with the observations of Murphy and Raman about the "constant feeling" of being assessed by one's performance, the drive for success and recognition, and the shame of failure, which reinforce the ideas that one must earn God's approval and God's love is tied to one's performance. If church life has become pragmatic and achievement-oriented, and the understanding of the faith has tended towards a moralistic, legalistic religion of earning one's righteousness before God, then the Singapore church will be weakened in correcting YSCCs' achievement-based identity and may even reinforce it.

This study of YSCCs' context found that Singapore's philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy and cultural Confucianism, mediated by the education system, contributed to their achievement-based identity, while globalisation reinforced it. Of concern are the signs of such influences in the Singapore church. This thesis turns next to Willard's ideas on spiritual formation as a resource for correcting YSCCs' achievement-based identity.

CHAPTER 3: WILLARD'S THEOLOGY AND CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

This chapter begins with an overview of Willard's theology and concept of spiritual formation, with his emphases on Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God as a present reality, the recovery of Jesus as the Teacher, and inner, holistic transformation. This chapter then explores Willard's treatment of identity and achievement, and elaborates on his holistic model of the self and its formation, and his understanding of spiritual disciplines.

Overview

Five books published in Willard's lifetime capture his theology and concept of spiritual formation. He outlined his focus for his first three books in The Divine Conspiracy (1998, xv). In Search of Guidance (1984), revised and published as Hearing God (1999)[1], attempts to "make real and clear the intimate quality of life" with Jesus as "a conversational relationship with God". As this relationship is not received by "passive infusion", The Spirit of the Disciplines (1988) shows how disciples of Jesus can "interact with the grace and spirit of God to access fully the provisions and character intended for us in the gift of eternal life" through spiritual disciplines. The Divine Conspiracy (1998) presents discipleship to Jesus as "the very heart of the gospel" and eternal life as a life in his kingdom "now on earth and available to all". Renovation of the Heart (2002) elaborates on how each essential dimension of a person is transformed into Christ-likeness. Knowing Christ Today (2009) attempts to make clear "the indispensable role of knowledge in faith and life" and that "a body of uniquely Christian knowledge…is available to all who would appropriately seek it and receive it", including the knowledge of Christ in the spiritual life (2009, 7).[2]

[1] This thesis uses the 2012 expanded edition including new introductory comments from Willard.

[2] This thesis focuses on the initial five books that capture Willard's essential ideas and refers to articles, interviews and talks collected in The Great Omission (2006) and published posthumously in Living in Christ's Presence (2014), Renewing the Christian Mind (2016), Life Without Lack (2018) and Called to Business (2019). Not cited are three posthumous publications: The Divine Conspiracy Continued (2014), The Allure of Gentleness (2015) and The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge (2018).

Each of Willard's five books corresponds to and develops four critical concerns that he made known before his death to J. P. Moreland, whose summary is as follow (Moon 2018, 193–194):

1) A robust metaphysical realism (The Divine Conspiracy): There is a world and the "invisible" entities within it (e.g., soul, spirit, the Holy Trinity, the Kingdom of God) that are independent of one's thinking about them.

2) Epistemic realism (The Spirit of the Disciplines, Hearing God): "…the intentionality of the mind places it in direct contact with its various objects of attention" so that "nothing stands between the knowing subject and his or her items of knowledge in cases of direct awareness". For example, one can interact with the Trinity "in such a way that knowledge can be obtained and new habit patterns established".

3) Models of the human person and Christian spiritual formation (Renovation of the Heart): "…one's view of the nature and practice of formative beliefs and exercises should flow as naturally as possible from one's view of the human person". Willard believed in the need to develop "comprehensive, sophisticated, integrative models of the person" and that "human beings are uniquely designed to experience God".

4) "Christian spiritually formative practices produce results that are objectively testable" (Knowing Christ Today): Willard sought to "establish Christian spiritual formation and its practices as items of genuine knowledge". Spiritual formation is "measurable" and has "a place in the university alongside other domains of public knowledge".

Kingdom of God as a present reality

Willard focuses on the kingdom of God, "the range of his effective will" (1998, 25), as a present reality albeit with a future fullness. Being "from everlastingly earlier to everlastingly later" (1998, 260), it is not a social or political reality, or in a person's heart. The socio-political realm and the human heart are the only places "in all of creation where the kingdom of God…is currently permitted to be absent" (1998, 25). Jesus thus taught his disciples to pray "Your kingdom come" that human kingdoms may be displaced or brought under God's rule (1998, 259–260). Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was now here in him and available (1998, 288) to anyone who placed their confidence in him (1998, 31). Likewise,

eternal life refers to our life now "caught up in God's life": Knowing God is "a living interaction" with the Father, the Son and the Spirit (John 17:3) (2014, 20), the "practical presence of the Trinity" living in us (John 14) (2014, 110).

Living now in the kingdom of God requires a "clear-eyed vision that a totally good and competent God is right here with us to look after us" (1998, 67). The "all-encompassing, all-penetrating world of God, interactive at every point with our lives" (1998, 90) is why Jesus could assure his disciples that "our universe is a perfectly safe place for us to be" (Matt. 6:25–34) (1998, 66). The "love of God, admiration and confidence in his greatness and goodness, and the regular experience of his care" (2012b, 70) free us from having to look out for ourselves and enable us to obey his commands, even to love our enemies. While we are not exempted from suffering or evil, these are "not the Father's preferred way" of dealing with his children (1998, 267). The promise in such situations is God's "totally unbroken care, along with God-given adequacy to whatever happens" (1998, 266).

Becoming Jesus' students

According to Willard, we enter the kingdom of God by becoming Jesus' disciples, accepting that he is "the best and smartest man who ever lived" (1998, 90) against the secular rejection of "a spiritual understanding of reality in the manner of Jesus" (1998, 92). The first Christians thought Jesus held in himself all wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3) (1998, 94). Jesus mastered every phase of reality, from accessing energy from "the heavens" to create matter (physical) to an understanding of life and ethics that has profoundly influenced world thought (moral), to defeating death (spiritual). We learn from Jesus how to live in the kingdom in every aspect of our daily life in the manner that he did it, "to live my life as he would live my life if he were I" (1998, 283).

Inner, Holistic Transformation

Discipleship focuses on inner transformation, not regulating external behaviour by putting pressure on the will. The deeds of God's Law naturally flow from a heart of God's agape (1998, 276). Christian spiritual formation is "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself"

(2012b, 22), loving God with "heart, soul, mind, and strength" and our neighbour as ourselves (Luke 10:27) (2012b, 31). Accordingly, the dimensions of the self are thought and feeling (mind), will (heart), body (strength), social context and soul. Transformation requires vision, intention and means (VIM): having the vision of life in the kingdom, forming the intention to be a kingdom person and adopting the means, especially spiritual disciplines (2012b, 85–91).

Identity

Willard's most concise statement on human identity is that we are "never-ceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny (or "a unique eternal calling to count for good") in God's great universe (or "the full world of God)" (1998, 21, 86; 2006, 20, 207; 2016, 243, 464).

Never-ceasing

God would not permit us to cease to exist after physical death because he has "made a great, often terrifying, investment" in us by redeeming us through Jesus Christ (1998, 389). God "treasures those whom he has created, planned for, longed for, sorrowed over, redeemed, and befriended" and to call him "Abba" is to express "a relationship of treasuring and being treasured that simply cannot conceivably be broken" (1998, 391).

Spiritual Beings

As spiritual beings with a physical body (1998, 75), we are endowed with the powers of perception, conceptualisation, valuation, and action, and the ability to live in right relationships to God and other human beings (1988, 49–50). We are not purely physical or reducible to our body, brain or chemical processes (1988, 82; 1998, 75). The spirit is "unbodily personal power" and involves thinking, valuing and choice (1988, 64; 1998, 79–81; 2012b, 34). Only God is pure spirit (John 4:24, Exod. 3:14). He has given us a small element of spirit at the centre of our being. This is "the heart (Mark 7:21) and spirit (John 4:23) that God looks at (1 Sam. 16:7)…in relating to humankind, and in allowing us to relate to him" (2012b, 34). Our spiritual core accounts for self-determination, freedom, creativity,

personal agency and responsibility, character, dignity and purpose; and our "underivative presence and source" or "radical creativity" makes us "absolutely unique and irreplaceable" (2012b, 144–145).

With an Eternal Destiny in God's Great Universe

Governing the earth with God is a task staggering in scope (1988, 50). God charged Adam to initiate the process that was "planned to take hundreds or thousands of generations" to complete (1988, 51), not by domination, but by cooperation in "a community of love", whose basis is the life of the Trinity (2012a, 75). God gave us powers that Adam exercised to name the animals (1988, 49). Just as God rules by speaking and communicating, so he intended that we rule over animals by speaking to them and directing their lives "in cooperation with the rest of humankind and with the sovereign action of God…through natural law and…acts of divine cooperation" (1988, 51). The outcome would be harmony, love and peace, where the governed experience our rule as "doing what they would want to do anyway" (1988, 50–51).

Each of us has a kingdom, "where our choice determines what happens" (1998, 21). We were meant to exercise our rule in this limited sphere only in union with God. Our rule was distorted when we "mistrusted and distanced ourselves from God" and then from one another (1998, 23). God redeems our rule by inviting us to be "faithful to him in the little that we truly 'have say over'" and to "live in the interface between our lives and God's kingdom among us" where we "learn his cooperative faithfulness to us" and "discover the effectiveness of his rule with us precisely in the details of day-to-day existence" (1998, 23–24). Our rule for good then increases ("I will put you in charge of many things", Matt. 25:21, 23); like Jesus, we enter into the work we see our Father doing (John 5:17–19) (1998, 24). This rule will be extended into eternity with "an individualized kingdom" for every person that God has prepared from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34): "As we learn through increasing trust to govern our tiny affairs with him, the kingdom he had all along planned for us will be turned over to us, at the appropriate time" (1998, 24–25).

Our future as Jesus' apprentices is "as good and as large as God himself" (1998, 375). We will be kings and priests (Rev. 5:10) "absorbed in a tremendously creative team effort, with unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast plane of activity, with ever more

comprehensive cycles of productivity and enjoyment" (1998, 399). This is shalom as "wholeness", "fullness of function" and "the restful but unending creativity involved in a cosmoswide, cooperative pursuit of a created order that continuously approaches but never reaches the limitless goodness and greatness of the triune personality of God, its source" (1998, 400). We will reign as a community from every nation, tribe and tongue, form a special dwelling place for God that "allows his magnificence to be known and gratefully accepted by all of creation through all of the ages", and fully take on the character of Christ as children of light (2012b, 217–218).

Therefore, we are to be faithful with the "few things" entrusted to us and become the kind of person with whom God can entrust "many things" and set free "to do what we want to do", yet harmonising perfectly with his purposes (1998, 378–379). God is more interested in the person we are becoming than in our work, and we must distinguish between who we are and what we do (2018, 61; 2019, 24). Spiritual formation is "a process of character transformation toward complete trustworthiness before God" (2012b, 218).

Created for a Transforming Friendship

A variation of Willard's statement on identity says: "You are an unceasing spiritual being, created for an intimate and transforming friendship with the creative Community that is the Trinity" (2012a, 10).

The idea of "a conversational relationship with God" (1998, xv) accords with God's intent to make us his friends (John 15:13–15) and co-workers (1 Cor. 3:9) (2012a, 41), or combining both ideas, "friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other respects" (2012a, 35). In this "transforming friendship", God develops our character by encouraging "cooperative creativity" and initiative, not simply to give direction and require conformity (2012a, 38). Willard quotes E. Stanley Jones' analogy that a parent who dictates to the child everything he must do would stunt his character development: "The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same" (2012a, 34). Another illustration is prayer as "an honest exchange between people doing things together": When we work with God, we "invoke his power" and "talk about other

things besides what God wants done today" because most conversations between God and human beings are to help us to "understand things" and "grow and develop" (2012a, 39). Hearing God is sought in "a life of loving fellowship with the King and his other subjects" (2012a, 39). The unprofitable servant (Luke 17:7–10) does only what he is told to do but the worthy servant's watchword is love, from which obedience flows (2012a, 13). Just as a co-worker "sees what needs to be done and simply does it", "we don't have to be asked but are engaged in free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom" (2012a, 72).

Love dictates the nature of the "creative community that is the Trinity":

> God is in himself a sweet society of love, with a first, second, and third person to complete a social matrix where not only is there love and being loved, but also shared love for another, the third person. Community is formed not by mere love and requited love, which by itself is exclusive, but by shared love for another, which is inclusive. (2012b, 184)

Willard believes there is "no subordination with the Trinity", "not even a thought of 'First, Second, and Third'...because the members of the Trinity will not have it" (2012b, 184) and they "don't care anything about their status" (2014, 110). Just as Jesus made "himself of no reputation" (Phil. 2:7), the Father and the Spirit also practise "an eternal Alphonse and Gaston routine" of "you first" for "they love and admire one another so much" and "were enjoying themselves together" even before creation (2014, 110). With Willard, Ortberg (Willard 2014, 98) argues that "each member of the Trinity points faithfully and selflessly to the other in a gracious eternal circle of love": The Spirit reminds people about Jesus and gives glory to him; Jesus' submits to the Father's will; the Father draws people's attention to his Son at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. Willard seems to understand subordination as opposed to mutual submission and love for one another. His view aligns with the Western emphasis on the equality of the three Persons and the egalitarian ideal. However, S. Chan (2014, 66–68) argues that "the hierarchical view of the Trinity has greater claim to universality than the egalitarian model" based on the Catholic and Orthodox doctrine of the monarchy of the Father. He also cites Barth's view of the Father sending his Son who obeys the Father. Subordination there is based on "the hypostatic distinction of Father and Son, not an essential distinction; therefore, it does not imply subordinationism"; their relationship is also "a fellowship of love" brought about by the Holy Spirit. We need not resolve these differences here except to note with S. Chan that "the ideal Asian family" is "an ordered

relationship with differentiated roles and reciprocal responsibilities" that reflect the archetypical Trinitarian order; it is not a cultural ideal projected on the Trinitarian order.

Willard's theology and concept of human identity is anchored on a relationship with the great and loving God under which the other aspects of identity—being a "spiritual" self-determining agent, our interpersonal relationships and reigning with God and others—are properly ordered. The focus on relationship with God is supported by several of Willard's statements. Firstly, Willard says "the human self requires rootedness in others", "the most fundamental 'other' is God, and "this is primarily an ontological matter—a matter of being what we are" (2012b, 36). This affirms the concept of identity as "being-in-relation" following the Trinitarian pattern of a "tri-unity of differentiated persons" (Scorgie & Reimer 2011, 78). Secondly, Willard links our identity with our relationship with God when he says we are "created for an intimate and transforming friendship with the creative Community that is the Trinity" (2012a, 10) and we are "never-ceasing" because of "a relationship of treasuring and being treasured" with God that "cannot conceivably be broken" (1998, 391).

Willard observes that through our relationship with God, the powers he gave us (e.g., perception, valuation, the ability to live in right relationships) are properly ordered (1988, 66). Our properly-ordered capacities enable us to fulfil our eternal destiny to reign with God as his co-workers and friends (2012a, 41) and with others in agape (2012a, 75). An understanding of human identity as anchored on a relationship with God can bind the traditional theological anthropology of self-transcending being with spiritual capacities for self-determination, to the modern focus on the relational nature of human beings (S. Chan 1998, 56) and the functional concept of human identity as reigning with God, with an eschatological perspective.

Achievement

Meshing with God's Kingdom

According to Willard, God intends that we reign with him by "meshing" or integrating our power with his power and our kingdom with his kingdom. God designed human beings to

"carry out his rule by meshing the relatively little power resident in their own bodies with the power inherent in the infinite Rule or Kingdom of God"; their rule would be "complete and effective within the range God intended because their power was used in conjunction with God's" (1988, 54).

This principle is observed in the nature of life to reach beyond itself. Jesus' statements about saving our life by losing it (Luke 9:24–25) and a grain dying to bear a harvest (John 12:25) are laws about "how life actually works" (1988, 56). Firstly, "anything with life in it can flourish only if it abandons itself to what lies beyond it"; it is "lost as a separate being" but lives on with others (1988, 56). Secondly, life is the "inner power" to contact and draw from what is beyond it to "enhance and extend" itself (1988, 57). This inner source of activity constitutes the individuality and preciousness of living things (1988, 60). Thirdly, life involves growth in internal complexity and external scope that "multiplies the effect of its inherent powers" and allows it to "extend its powers into its external surroundings" (1988, 60–61). We make tools and use social organisation to extend our reach: "The more power we get, the more power we can get—for good or evil" (1988, 61).

Disconnected from God

Our problem is that we live cut off from God and the spiritual realm for which we are made (1988, 62–63). When Eve and Adam ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they "died" to God and "ceased to relate to and function in harmony with that spiritual reality…at the foundation of all things and of whose glory the universe is an expression" (1988, 66). Normally, our "higher" powers of thought, valuation and choice enable the continuance of our "lower" powers that we share with animals (powers of perception and motion) and plants (powers of taking in nourishment and procreation) (1988, 58). Disruption of higher powers wrecks our thinking and deforms the lower powers. With the Fall, the powers in our bodies still function "but the connection to God through which those powers would have been "properly ordered and fulfilled was broken"; we lost "coherent wholeness" as our "lower powers set themselves against the Spirit, and the Spirit against them" (1988, 66).

We were dead in sin. Only a relationship with God will make us alive. A plant sickens when "robbed of a vital nutrient"; likewise, "robbed of spiritual truth and reality", "the social,

psychological, and even the physical life of humankind is disordered" (1988, 63). Yet, when a human being is brought into "a willing, personal relationship with the spiritual Kingdom of God" and "sucking in orderliness" from the kingdom, he is transformed, like a corn stalk in drought transformed by rain, the contact with water changing the plant inwardly, then outwardly (1988, 65). We become alive to God through his initiative but the extent to which our total being integrates with the kingdom order "significantly depends" on our initiative through training in spiritual disciplines (1988, 68–69). Only by re-integrating our rule to God's can we "mesh" our kingdom with the kingdoms of others. This is "why love of neighbour is the second, not the first, commandment" and we seek first the kingdom of God (1998, 26).

Living the "With-God" Life

The "with-God" life (2009, 161–162) consists of not only changes in our beliefs, attitudes and emotional conditions, and receiving "communications" from God, but also experiencing the "light burden" and "easy yoke" of Jesus as a "regular quality" of our life. We can count on him to act with us so that what we have to do "does not crush us" and the outcome of our efforts "far exceed" what is humanly anticipated. Willard (2006, 22) observes that when we act in Jesus' name and on his behalf, he "always involves himself in the process" and "will certainly teach us as we expect him to move in our circumstances and are attentive to his actions". Willard experienced Jesus' interactions when handling family matters, writing projects and repairing a water pipe. When our "sincere intent is to glorify God and bless others" and we are "not motivated by unloving attitudes", we will see God's hand move with us.

New Age Spirituality?

Meshing or cooperating with God's power is not manipulating God for power or becoming God, as in New Age and other spiritualities. Willard (2016, 95–97) distinguishes Christian spirituality from these alternatives. The spirit (invisible, non-bodily power) may be personal or impersonal, and may exist within human beings or lie beyond them ("transcendental"), or both. I can approach an impersonal spirit (e.g., "force") with an engineering mentality by finding out how to "work it" for my purposes. If the spirit is personal, with choice and moral

personality, it directs the outcome. If the spirit is within me, I may learn to engage my powers to achieve my desired results or discover that I am no less than God. Christian spirituality holds that the spirit is personal and transcendent (2016, 101). On the human side, I invoke the spiritual realm and develop ways to understand it and participate in its activities. On the transcendent side, the Holy Spirit is a person in charge of the world and works in human affairs to bring about good but "leaves room for human beings to reject him". The spiritual life "takes on the character of a personal relationship between individuals", marked by "reciprocal attention, care, provision, assistance or service, emotional interaction, expectations, comfort, joy, and development or growth". To exercise the kind of power seen in Jesus though never to the same degree, we must grow in Christ-like character, "for power requires substance of character…to be used for Christ's purposes"; prayer is then "a matter of learning to exercise power in a way that is both profitable and safe" (2016, 282).

Holistic Model of the Self and its Formation

Willard follows the early church fathers in construing biblical references to the mind, heart, soul and body as the embodied human personality which has "essential importance" to understanding the life in Christ (1988, 113). Willard's holistic model of the self and its formation is more specific than most contemporary treatments of Christian spirituality that discuss soul, mind and spirit "without settled definitions or distinctions" or an account of how they inter-relate in the transformation process (Porter 2018, 46–47). Some attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions in Willard's model have produced clarifications and corrections while affirming his overall concept (Green 2016, ii; Moreland 2018, 55).

Thought

Our thought life consists of ideas and images. Willard (2012b, 96–97) defines ideas as "very general models or assumptions about reality" and patterns of interpretation that are "historically developed and socially shared". Our idea system grew up with us from childhood "out of the teachings, expectations, and observable behaviors of family and community". Images, which mediate the power of ideas, can obsess and "cause one to act in ways contrary to all reality and good sense" (2012b, 99–100).

Behind all temptation is the idea that God cannot be trusted so "we must take matters into our own hands and act contrary to what he has said" (2012b, 100). False ideas of the self can lead to self-rejection. Willard quotes Henri Nouwen saying that "self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved'" (2012b, 101).

Our goal is to take on the mind of Christ, "his ideas, images, information, and patterns of thinking" (2012b, 116). The first objective in "a curriculum for Christlikeness" (1998, 320–321) is to enthral the mind with the "great and beautiful God" so that we "dearly love and constantly delight" in him and are certain that there is "no limit to the goodness of his intentions or his power to carry them out".

God comes before our mind through his creation, his public acts in human history and our experiences of him (1998, 326). Willard's (1998, 332–334) narrative of God's public acts emphasises his interactive, personal relationship with humanity. Jesus' followers understood themselves as continuing and fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham through Jesus. Hence, "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".

Our experiences of God give us confidence about the "unqualified goodness" of our existence (1998, 337–338): "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" and "that nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us".

We also use our ability to think, "to and with the Word of God", to search out "what must be true, or cannot be true, in the light of given facts or assumptions", extend the information we have, see the larger picture, and undermine false ideas and images (2012b, 104).

Feeling

Our feelings include sensations, desires and emotions (2012b, 120) inclining us "toward or away from things that come before our minds in thought" (2012b, 32). Feelings can move our lives well as "good servants" or badly as "disastrous masters" (2012b, 122).

We enjoy being moved by feelings because "they give us a sense of being alive" (2012b, 121). Some depend on substances and activities to give them feeling even if such dependence harms them and those near them (2012b, 121). In a life away from God, their soul is dead and lacks "drama to provide constructive feeling tones that would keep life from being a burden", so they seek feeling "for its own sake" and "satisfaction in feeling alone…demands stronger feeling. It cannot limit itself" (2012b, 125).

The spiritual formation of feelings addresses the underlying conditions and "allow the feelings to take care of themselves" (2012b, 123). We do not try first to root out destructive feelings (e.g., fear, pride) but cultivate the conditions of love, joy and peace based on faith and hope in God (2012b, 136). Love, joy and peace are "the three fundamental dimensions of the fruit of the Spirit"; faith, as confidence in the reality of the unseen, and hope, are important in "properly structuring the feeling dimension" but "in subordination" to love, joy, and peace (2012b, 128).

Love (2012b, 130–132) as "will to good" has four movements: "We are loved by God who is love, and in turn we love him, and others through him, who in turn love us through him". Love eliminates pride and fear because it "nullifies our arrogant presumption that we should get our way" and assures us that "our good is taken care of without self-will".

Joy (2012b, 132–133) is "a pervasive sense" that "all is well" amid suffering and loss. We receive it as a gift by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) but we may "allow joy to dissipate" by focusing on past sins and failures, present struggles or future problems. Instead of placing our hopes on ourselves, we "look to the greatness and goodness of God and what he will do in our lives", as Paul did, with contentment and rejoicing (Phil. 4:4, 11).

Peace (2012b, 134) is "the rest of will that results from assurance about 'how things will turn out'". We no longer strive to "save some outcome dear to (us) or to avoid one that (we)

reject". Peace with God comes from accepting his gift of life in his Son so that we no longer "justify ourselves before God and others".

We cultivate love, joy, and peace by receiving them from God and those living in him and extending the same to others (2012b, 137). We come to "honest terms" with our destructive feelings and agree with the Lord to abandon, replace or revise them.

Will

Our will, spirit or heart is "the executive center" of our life where choices are made but we do not consistently do what our will says is good because it is "divided into incoherent fragments" (2012b, 30). We must confront our duplicity, forsake it and decide to do God's explicit will. We cannot do it by willpower alone; other dimensions must be transformed (2012b, 155). The goal is "single-minded and joyous devotion to God and his will" and to serve him and others (2012b, 143). Transforming the will comprises four stages (2012b, 150–152): surrender of our will to God; abandonment to all circumstances of life; contentment with God's will; participation in accomplishing God's will in our world.

Body

Our body is "our personalized 'power pack'" and the "focal point of our presence in the physical and social world" (2012b, 35). Our body works mainly by habit. Our inclinations to wrongdoing inhabit our body parts (e.g., tongue) as bad habits (2012b, 166–167). Spiritual disciplines disrupt bad habits and replace them with good habits so that our body is "poised to do what is good and refrain from what is evil" and to serve as "a primary ally in Christlikeness" (2012b, 159).

God made our body for good, which is why the way of Christ is "incarnational" and we care for our body as "a servant of God", not as our master (2012b, 160), and honour it as "the habitation of God" (2012b, 168). Taking our body out of this context robs it of "spiritual resources meant to sustain its life and proper functioning", leaving us with "nothing to trust and worship but our body and its natural powers" (2012b, 169). Instead, we release our body to God and no longer idolise or misuse it (e.g., overwork) but care for it through nourishment,

exercise and rest (2012b, 172–174). Rest gives clarity to our mind, whereas confusion is "the enemy of spiritual orientation" and weariness can make us seek gratification from food, drugs, illicit relationships and "egoistic postures" that pull us away from "reliance upon God and from living in his power" (2012b, 175–176).

Social Dimension

Our social context consists of circles of sufficiency, such as the parent-child relationship, which emerge when we are assured that others are "for us" (2012b, 179). A child well-received by its parents will have a "rootedness" by which it can withstand human rejection, "carry its solid relationships" through life and "receive a steady stream of rest and strength from them", whereas an inadequately-received child can "be incapable of giving and receiving love in decent human relationships for the rest of its life" (2012b, 180–181). Willard's observations align with attachment theory in developmental psychology. Kimball (2001, 353–354) notes that "children with secure attachment internalize representational models of attachment figures as available, responsive and helpful, and correlative models of themselves as at least potentially lovable and valuable persons", so they tend to grow up valuing the self and develop similar relationships with their spouses and children. Children with unmet security needs see themselves as non-valuable and the world as untrustworthy. When they become parents, they have difficulty "understanding and responding to their children's cues that communicate the need for love and intimacy".

According to Willard, wounds in relationships come from assault (acting against what is good for others) and withdrawal (being indifferent to others' well-being or despising them) (2012b, 181–182). Both evils oppose God's intent for the social dimension to be "a play of constant mutual blessing" and of "goodwill and respect, with a readiness to acknowledge, make way for, or assist the other in suitable ways" (2012b, 188). Change must begin with the family (2012b, 190) and the marriage relationship (2012b, 193) because they are the closest relations where assault and withdrawal defeat love. Broken families result in the "spiritual malformation of children": With their souls hardened in a defensive posture of withdrawal, they are primed for addiction, aggression and self-destructive behaviour (2012b, 192). Broken circles of sufficiency find their healing in the only self-sufficient circle, the Trinitarian God (2012b, 180).

Spiritual formation of our social dimension (2012b, 194–197) begins with receiving God's vision of our wholeness in Him. Then we abandon all defensiveness, manipulation and pretence, and are willing to be "known in our most intimate relationships for who we really are". This "can occur only in a social context where Christ dwells…among his special people". Genuine love then presides in our gatherings of disciples. Finally, we devote our lives to serving others, beginning with our family.

Soul

Our soul "correlates, integrates, and enlivens" all the dimensions of the self (2012b, 199). A person with a soul ordered under God can respond to life situations "in ways that are good and right". The disordered soul cannot coherently draw together these dimensions "to form a whole life devoted to God and to what is acknowledged as good" (2012b, 201).

Meaning is the most basic human need (2012b, 203). Its absence leads to a dead soul; its presence, the liveliness of soul. A dead job, relationship or religion is carried on in boring human routine by mere willpower, whereas the presence of meaning has a power of "carryover" or transcendence that "relieves the pain of effort and makes even great strain exhilarating…as if a power beyond us meets our action and carries us".

Strong desires "war against the soul" by "enticing us to uproot our dependent life" on God. This will "deprive our soul of what it needs to function correctly in the enlivening and regulation of our whole being" (2012b, 210). Conversely, the law of the Lord restores the soul (Ps. 19:7) by "bringing it into harmony with what God is doing" so that we are no longer divided within (2014, 122). Our soul finds rest when we take on Jesus' yoke and learn "how to use his strength and ours… to bear our load and his" and "abandon outcomes to God, accepting that we do not have in ourselves...the wherewithal to make this come out right" (2012b, 209).

Does the Soul Exist?

Willard's view of the soul as a non-physical entity or substance within a person contradicts the view that a person is only the physical body. Non-reductive physicalists disagree that the capacities of rationality, emotion, morality, free will and relationality to God can be "exhaustively explained by means of genetics or neuro-biology" (Murphy 1998, 2) but still propose physicalist explanations. For example, Brown (1998, 221) argues that the "soulish" capacity for deep, meaningful personal relatedness emerges from "the operation of an interactive web of core cognitive abilities, each of which (is) present in lower primates, but markedly more developed in humans". Combined with a theological reading of the person as uniquely relational and an integrated, embodied whole with no separable, non-material existence called the "soul", an argument is made that cultural development (e.g., community, interpersonal relations) and "higher brain capacities" that promote rich interpersonal relationships—not the soul as understood by Willard—make human beings unique (Brown 1998, 224–225).

Willard rightly argues that because the soul is not a physical entity, knowledge of it cannot be achieved by "sense perception or physical theory" (2006, 139). Empiricism, which arbitrarily specifies the senses as "boundary markers for knowledge and reality", can never be an empirical theory and so "stands self-refuted" (2006, 140). Biblical revelation about the soul aligns with the insight from Plato and Aristotle that the source and ordering principle of life lie deep within the personality, and "the order or disorder of life as a whole is to be traced to order and disorder at that deep level" (2006, 142–144). The soul integrates the body, including the brain, into one life, with a person's other dimensions, as a computer (a distinct entity) coordinates the activities of a car production system (2006, 144; 2016, 159–160). The soul is such a deep, fundamental dimension of the person that in Scripture, the soul often refers to the whole person. However, the soul is not the person (2006, 145–146; 2016, 158).

Priority given to thought

Willard's model of the self and its formation gives priority to reforming thoughts of God alongside feelings, will, body, social context and soul. Enthralling the mind with the "great and beautiful God" is the first objective in a curriculum for Christ-likeness (1998, 320–321).

Our thoughts set "the emotional tone out of which our actions flow" and project "the possible courses of action available to us" (1998, 324). However, our distorted will refuses "to retain God in our knowledge" (Rom. 1:28) and our desires can enslave our will, which then enslaves our intellect to "provide rationalizations" to satisfy our desires (2012b, 154). This is also why the will alone has so little power and is dependent on the other aspects of our person (e.g., thinking, feeling) to keep its orientation toward instead of away from God (cf. 2021b, 118; 142–143). So we must take "constant care over the direct placement" of our mind and "form the insights and habits of (our) mind so that it stays directed toward God" (1998, 325). The priority given to thought assumes that one is living under God and according to the Spirit (2012b, 41). The human spirit, in right relationship to God and aided by him, brings the soul into subjection to God and the mind (thought and feeling) into subjection to the soul; the social context and the body are then subjected to the mind (2012b, 199).

Is Willard's emphasis on the power of thought too cognitive, seeing the emotions as something to be "controlled" rather than "experienced or redirected" (Tang 2014, 140)? Willard's concern is that we idolise our feelings (they "must be satisfied"), selectively resisting them instead of not having them (2012b, 118). Not having destructive feelings is not to deny or repress them but to replace them with good feelings or subordinate them "in a way that makes them constructive and transforms their effects" (2012b, 122).

Is Willard's use of the power of thought no different from that of other spiritual and secular practices? Willard (2012b, 115–116) recognises that the power of thought is "so great that it gives rise to many practical plans for remedying the human situation outside of Christ and obedience to him", from cognitive therapy to one great world religion "based entirely upon the effects on emotion, will, and body of focusing the mind in certain ways and coming to 'enlightenment'". We should study the reality of the power of thought and "thoughtfully and prayerfully" examine if other practices are "sufficient to meet the human need for spiritual formation" and "equivalent to or better than" Christian spiritual formation when correctly and fully practised. Then we must "clearly contrast" biblical transformation with other ways even if they use "what looks like biblical language".

Not Missional or Ecclesial Enough?

Tang (2014, 139) criticises Willard's model as "individualistic", fostering "inward-looking" Christians who are more concerned with their inner spiritual lives than with "the world at large" and treat their faith community as "a supplier of spiritual goods". Christian spiritual formation is not only about one's inner transformation but also to "become a people of God, and be God's agents for his redemptive purposes" (Tang 2014, xix). For Peace (2004, 168–169), although Willard calls on the local congregation to make spiritual formation its primary goal, the goal of formation should be to "become blessings to others". Moreover, Willard does not "delve deeply into how the congregation can and should be a formational (transformational) body".

This thesis argues that Willard's approach to spiritual formation is not individualistic but sees the renovation of the person as the vital first step to transform one's family, society and nation. His approach is ultimately missional. He recognises the communal and ecclesial aspects of spiritual formation and develops them in some detail.

Willard situates the renovation of the individual's heart in the "revolution of Jesus" (2012b, 14). Jesus is gathering and sending trainees to make students to him from all ethnic groups, and bringing all human life under his direction. Renovating the heart is the basis of transforming social institutions and laws because a "renovated 'within' will not cooperate with the public streams of unrighteousness" (2012b, 15). Churches as local assemblies of such people will then be the "primary and inevitable expressions, outposts, and instrumentalities of the presence of the kingdom among us" (2012b, 16). They are "children of light", "the light of the world in the character and power of Christ himself" (2012b, 229). Therefore, Willard's emphasis on the formation of the individual's heart is not intended to develop inward-looking Christians with a consumerist attitude towards their church. Instead, it is consistent with Jesus' method of discipleship and mission to the world through renovated individuals, families and churches. Willard's priority to change the heart first instead of structures and systems is an evangelical approach which liberation theologians will challenge but that debate need not detain us here. The point is that Willard's model is missional. Willard's view of the missional purpose of local congregations should also not be construed as implying that the church's basic identity is functional ("an instrument to accomplish God's purpose in creation", to redeem fallen creation) and not ontological ("the expression of God's

ultimate purpose itself") (S. Chan 2006, 21). Elsewhere, Willard (1998, 386) writes about God's "precreation intention" to bring out of human history "an eternal community" that will not only "pervade the entire created realm and share in the government of it", but also be "a special dwelling place or home" where God will be "its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant". His purpose is to meet "a need of God's nature as totally competent love", for "love unknown is love unfulfilled" and the redeemed community makes it "possible for God to be known in his deepest nature". What may be problematic is Willard's approach of prioritising personal formation (the individual heart) largely in relation to God and the community (e.g., family), and giving less attention to the formative role of the church in one's personal life, a point to be taken up later.

Tang and Peace, however, are right to warn about becoming so wrapped up in renovating our heart that we fail to engage the world. Willard's model contains elements that turn Christians "outward", particularly in the effects of each renovated dimension. For example, a transformed thought life causes us to worship God not merely for meeting our needs but also as "uniquely and supremely worthy" (2012b, 106–107). As our feelings, will and social context are transformed, we respectively extend love to others (2012b, 137), participate in "accomplishing God's will in our world" (2012b, 151) and serve others (2012b, 196).

Willard recognises the importance of formation-in-community. To renovate our thoughts, we take in Scripture "in close association with others who know the realities of spiritual formation by such means" and study how "older practitioners of the Way", from John Wesley to Francis of Assisi, lived with a transformed mind, and adapt those details to our life (2012b, 114–115). Transformation of our feelings involves first receiving love from God and "those already living in him" (2012b, 137).

On the local congregation being formational, Willard's analysis is theological and practical. Local congregations at their best are made up of children of light but the reality is more like a hospital "with people at various stages of recovery and progress towards health" (2012b, 234). The main problem is distraction or "vessel trap" (2012b, 235–239). Most congregations major on the minors of church structure and church life (the "vessel" of "human, historical contingencies") and fail to focus on discipleship to Christ and growth in Christ-likeness (the "treasure of the real presence of Christ in our midst"). To avoid vessel trap, local congregations must organise their efforts around God's plan for spiritual formation (Matt.

28:18–20): make disciples of Jesus, immerse them in the Trinitarian presence (Willard understands "baptise" as more than water baptism) and transform them inwardly (by teaching) so that "doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but is the natural outcome or side effect" (2012b, 239–240).

On implementation, Willard (2012b, 244–245) warns against making outreach a primary goal when the congregation "have not become clear-headed and devoted apprentices of Jesus". Who we are in our inmost depths matters the most, he says, quoting Ray Stedman: "God's first concern is not what the church does, it is what the church is. Being must always precede doing, for what we do will be according to what are". We immerse apprentices in the Trinitarian presence by eliminating human performance in local gatherings (2012b, 246–248). Ministers lean on the sufficiency of Christ, not techniques. People gather not to see how the speaker performs but to "encounter the Trinitarian presence" and "find Christ in others". Instead of playing on emotion, ministers move people's will with "insight into truth and reality" by teaching them the Word of God. We look to the Christian past for resources on spiritual formation and adapt them for today: "We must be Spirit led, Bible informed, intelligent, experimental, and persistent" (2012b, 249). Local congregations openly expect Jesus' apprentices to do the things that he taught them to do and announce that the church will teach people to do them (2012b, 250). They can start with "simple things like being genuinely kind to hostile people or returning blessing with cursing" and practising it in their family: "Develop understanding of such situations, role-play them, take testimonies of success and failures, and give further teaching and practical suggestions."

Despite Willard's recognition of the importance of formation-in-community and his analysis of the local congregation's role in formation, a case can be made that the emphasis he gives to the church in formation is not as strong as it should be. Willard's (1998, 388–389) ontological view of the church occupies only two pages in the 438-page The Divine Conspiracy, while in Renovation of the Heart, he speaks of the church functionally as "instrumentalities of the presence of the kingdom among us" (2012b, 16), and the children of light and the hospital (Willard 2012b, 234). His focus is that the church must prioritise discipleship and spiritual formation. He could have addressed more thoroughly the critique of many evangelicals in the West, for whom "private religious experience is everything, and the church is some kind of suburban association for those initiated into the mystery of personal

conversion, which the church 'experience' is intended to promote" (Badcock 2009, Kindle Locations 32-33).

Willard's ecclesiology and concept of ecclesial formation could be supplemented by the writings of evangelical theologians to provide a more holistic theology of spiritual formation for YSCCs. For instance, Treier (2019, 325–326) identified six theological models of the church, of which the church as a "community of disciples" would support the emphasis on discipleship in Willard's ecclesiology, while the church as "herald", "servant" and even "sacrament"[3] would enrich Willard's understanding of the church as "instrumentalities of the presence of the kingdom among us" and the children of light. The church as "mystical communion" would resonate with Willard's ontological view of the church in the light of the triune God's precreation intention to form an eternal community, or in the words of Jenson and Wilhite (2010, Kindle Locations 708–709), "the people called of God and united in Christ by the Holy Spirit". This "communion" model, which includes the communion of saints across time and place, may even enrich Willard's idea of learning from "older practitioners of the Way" without having to accept the idea of intercession by already-glorified saints. As the church is also "institution", Willard's concern that the church not be distracted by non-essentials arising in part from institutionalism, still begs the question of the necessary church order and structure that accord with her intrinsic nature and are also conducive for spiritual formation, particularly of her leaders.[4]

Ecclesiology could also inform the relationship between personal and corporate practices of spiritual disciplines. Believers with an individualistic orientation may view church practices as extensions of and optional support for personal disciplines. However, Treier (2019, 327) described personal disciplines such as Scripture reading and prayer as "extensions of communal practices, oriented by church teaching and public worship". Jenson and Wilhite (2010, Kindle Locations 1633–1634) similarly argued that "it is in the church that we learn

[3] The church as "sacrament" mediates God's gracious presence to the world or, in the words of Jenson and Wilhite (2010, Kindle Location 782), serves as "an earthly sign of a heavenly reality (all questions of efficacy aside for the moment)" and "a sacred embodiment" of the gospel "through both word and deed".

[4] Willard may find support from Bird (2020, 858–859), who argued that "the single most important factor in the governance of the church is not the structure or model it is based on but the Christian character of the men and women who lead it". He affirmed that "any form of ecclesial government can foster a healthy church…if the men and women entrusted with authority are genuinely committed to loving God and loving God's people", with "a Godward passion, spiritual depth, and Christlike attitudes". However, one still has to ask how the governance of the church could be structured to positively influence the formation (and growth) of Christian character among church leaders.

all the disciplines of the Christian life", including how to pray. For example, the Lord's Prayer, in its praise of and petition to "our Father" and not "my Father", "is the Christian's prayer precisely as it is the church's prayer". A similar point could be made that a Christian learns to read Scripture in the church not only by being taught biblical knowledge but also by imbibing the "virtues of humility, patience and deference before the text of scripture" (Jenson and Wilhite 2010, Kindle Location 1721). Furthermore, one cannot read the Bible apart from the church and its tradition of reading and hearing of Scripture in the Holy Spirit. Tradition "allows for (by shaping and mediating) a reading of Scripture informed by the rule of faith" even as it is "at other points checked and corrected by that very reading of scripture" (Jenson and Wilhite 2010, Kindle Locations 1759–1765). Therefore, a look at how church practices necessarily shape the practice of personal disciplines would be profitable for developing a theology of spiritual formation for YSCCs.[5]

Another contribution comes from S. Chan (2006, 24), who argued for a clearer theological understanding of the church's ontological relationship with the triune God, and the church as "the worshipping community making a normative response to the revelation of the triune God" (S. Chan 2006, 42).[6] This response is the age-old liturgy of the church based on Word and sacrament (baptism and the Lord's Supper), which evangelicals need to recover and strengthen. Liturgical practices also have a formative effect, turning "disparate individuals into a worshipping community" (S. Chan 2006, 45–46). The liturgy of worship that S. Chan has in mind is not the "contemporary" worship that has imbibed a consumerist, market-driven culture, which may reinforce rather than reform YSCCs' individualistic achievement orientation[7], but one that is more truly theocentric as it is corporate. This view can be brought

[5] One way to understand how church doctrine and practices shape the Christian life is that of rehearsing or acting out a drama. Bird (2020, 807), referring to Kevin Vanhoozer's concept of doctrine helping individuals to "perform the theo-drama of the Christian life", noted that "the church gathers together scripted by Scripture, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, illuminated by our traditions, to be built up into Christ". He added: "We go to church to rehearse, to celebrate, and to better understand the drama of redemption that reaches us in the gospel of Jesus Christ."

[6] Jenson & Wilhite (2010, Kindle Location 543) also argued that "worship is an essential aspect of the church, and this tells us something thing about what the church *is*. Church that does not celebrate the sacred is not church".

[7] Bowler and Reagan (2014, 187–188) argued for the Prosperity Gospel's "significant" impact on contemporary Christian worship music in the United States through the rise of megachurches, including Hillsong, whose songs are also popular with YSCCs. These megachurches pioneered forms of worship music inspired by "arena rock" performed in large, professional rock music venues with "an orchestrated experience of timing, lighting, volume, and performance". These megachurches had the resources and entrepreneurial spirit to partner with the expanding worship music industry to produce, market and distribute their new sound, even customising the worship experience with market research to target audiences for church growth (Ibid., 202). Their expression of the blessed life through "arena rock" worship "leveraged (on) and supported the narrative of

into dialogue with Willard's (2012b, 229–230) criticism that "one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation in Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of 'regular church services,' of whatever kind they may be." He did not justify his view of their inefficacy, however, except to qualify that "though they are vital, they are not enough". S. Chan (2006, 165–166) recognised that the formative effect of the liturgy will not be immediate, but he argued that it will come by understanding the meaning of the liturgy, "with its carefully crafted language, sights, sounds and movements that could best assist us in that personal encounter (with truth as a living Person)", and through active participation, and practice. Also needed is humility: The fruit is ultimately a work of grace and the Spirit, "cultivated only in the spirit of humble acceptance" which is "the stance of the church at worship before the incomprehensible God" (S. Chan 2006, 94–95).

The final example comes from Badcock (2009, Kindle Locations 35–37). He argued that the church of the Western world has assumed the values of the prevailing culture of "political, social and economic liberalism", from anthropocentric conceptions of social inclusiveness to feminism that opposes a transcendent God as oppressive patriarchy. In response, ecclesiology must begin with the "Christian doctrine of the triune God of grace" (Badcock 2009, Kindle Locations 2004), where the church as people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Spirit corresponds to the Trinitarian "moments" of divine outreach by, respectively, election, incarnation and indwelling (Badcock 2009, Kindle Locations 2024–2026). Ultimately, the church is "the product of a divine initiative of grace…not only in its origins but all along the way" (Badcock 2009, Kindle Location 4357–4359). Badcock's critique of Western liberalism on ecclesiology, and his approach to strengthening the church's self-understanding can inform a similar critique of Singapore's pragmatic and meritocratic culture, and the ecclesiology and ecclesial practices of the Singapore church that support its values (see chapter 2). This critique can reveal the ways that the church negatively shapes YSCCs in their spiritual formation, and propose ways of correction and reform starting from a proper understanding of ecclesiology.

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success, abundance, and celebrity that marked prosperity theology" and reinforced the message "that God had blessed his children with power, talents, youth, and beauty" (Ibid., 210).

Contextualising for family-oriented YSCCs

Tang's concern about individualism raises the question of contextualising Willard's ideas for YSCCs. Willard theologises within and for the North American society and church, especially American evangelicalism (Black 2013, 1). As Western society wrestles with the excesses of individualism, the Western social sciences have advanced understanding of the self in its social context (S. Chan 1998, 56) and Western theologians have returned to Trinitarian theology for resources on relationality to address the lack of meaningful, intimate relationships and social inequalities (S. Chan 1998, 28). However, "Western societies still tend to emphasize the individual and individual rights" (Alexander 2014, 77). This same tension can be observed in Willard's writings. Despite the criticisms levelled against Willard's model of the individualistic and inward-looking self, he does recognise the importance of the missional, communal and ecclesial aspects of spiritual formation. However, Willard's concept of human identity as spiritual beings emphasises individual freedom to make choices. He draws analogies of the divine-human relationship from parent-child relationships that emphasise the individual (e.g., raising a child to be a self-determining, creative agent) (2012a, 34) and from egalitarian relationships (e.g., the co-worker/ friend relationship is superior to the master-servant relationship because the former is based on love and the latter on duty) (2012a, 13).

In contrast, YSCCs in a Confucian Heritage Culture value filial piety (The Youth STEPS team 2019, 2; Mathews, Lim & Selvarajan 2019, 79) and family support has a significant positive influence on their happiness (Ho 2018, 114), notwithstanding the influences of self-centred consumerism, "selfish" meritocracy, and the postmodern emphasis on the individual as self-constructed (S. Chan 2006, 101–102). The biblical commandment to honour one's parents can mean respecting them as authority figures and deferring to their wishes. Duty and love need not be mutually exclusive, nor must the ideal relationship be egalitarian. YSCCs can exercise filial duty with self-giving love in a hierarchical relationship. The familial aspect of their identity ties in with the personal, relational orientation of Asian spirituality, where "persons take precedence over things, thus good relationships must be maintained", and "the family is the paradigm of the human community" (Capaque 2014, 66).

Willard's prioritising of the family in the formation of self affirms YSCCs' family orientation but also calls for redeeming the negative experiences of family life, especially the parent-

child relationship. When discussing Jesus' command against condemning others (Matt. 7:1–5), Willard (1998, 219) writes that families would be "healthier and happier if their members treated one another with the respect they would give to a perfect stranger", especially parents towards their children. Families can also model a non-condemning way of life. As a child, Willard (1998, 227) was impressed with how the family of his sister-in-law Bertha lived "a strong and good life without using condemnation to punish and control others", including him, though he frequently deserved it. Bertha learnt it from her parents "and, through them, from Christ". He also recognises that people may sacrifice their family to their job or ministry and proposes differentiating their job (what I get paid to do) and their ministry (the part of God's work entrusted to me for my time and place) from their work (the total amount of lasting good I will accomplish in my lifetime) (2018, 60–61; 2019, 24). For many, "our families will be the largest part of the lasting good we produce" (2018, 60).

Willard writes on two occasions about the "deep, biological need" (1998, 263) to honour one's parents. On the Lord's Prayer (1998, 262–263), we can pray and expect God's help to forgive our parents as God forgives us. Forgiving them opens the door to honouring them by being thankful for their existence and respecting their role in giving us life, and being thankful for our existence. We usually need to pity them as well because they have been wrong in many ways. On enthralling our mind with God through our experiences of him in our family (1998, 337–339), the promise in the fifth commandment is rooted in the realities of the soul: "A long and healthy existence requires that we be grateful to God for who we are" and we cannot do so "without being thankful for our parents, through whom our life came". Our parents are a part of our identity so "to reject and be angry with them is to reject and be angry with ourselves".

Willard's insight into parents and relatives deeply forming a child's soul supports and extends Chapter 2's observations of Singaporean parents shaping their child's achievement-based identity and maladaptive perfectionism because the soul is an entity that performs an important integrative role in the whole person and its deformation has wide-ranging consequences. His call to differentiate one's job from one's work can be counter-cultural for parents who work hard and long hours to ensure the material success of the next generation but necessary if they have neglected their children's emotional needs, as the SMU undergraduates recounted. Willard's proposal for children to forgive and pity their parents can also be counter-cultural in hierarchical families but biblical and psychologically sound

where wrongs have been committed. However, his observation that parents should "respect" their children may create unnecessary dissonance for Confucian-influenced families where children are brought up to respect their elders but not the other way around. Paul's instructions for children to obey their parents and for fathers not to exasperate (Eph. 6:4), embitter or discourage (Col. 3:21) their children but to bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord, more appropriately convey the spirit of mutuality that Willard appears to be aiming for but in "an ordered relationship with differentiated roles and reciprocal responsibilities that reflect the order of the Trinity" (S. Chan 2014, 66).

Spiritual Disciplines

For Willard, a discipline is "any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort" (1998, 353). Through practice or indirect preparedness, we achieve unconscious readiness. Not all discipline is practice. We are usually not practising sleep or rest when we do them but they enable us to stay in "good emotional and physical health" and be "loving and sensitive to our family and co-workers", which we cannot do by direct effort. Spiritual disciplines are "activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order" (1988, 68). They enable us to "withdraw from total dependence on the merely human or natural" and increasingly live in a power from God and his kingdom to do what Jesus commands (1988, 68; 1998, 353).

Spiritual disciplines involve bodily behaviours and "offering our bodies as living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:2) (1998, 353–355). Our body is "the first field of energy beyond our thoughts that we have direction over", "the chief repository of the wrong habits" and "where new habits are to be instituted". We can, within limits, "command our body to do things that will transform our habits", especially of thought and feeling, and make it "a reliable ally and resource for the spiritual life". For example, by meditating on Scripture, the order of God's kingdom becomes the order of our mind and life.

We follow Jesus in his practices but "appropriately modified to suit our condition" (1998, 354). Jesus nurtured his life in the Father with solitude, silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, study of scripture, and service to others (1988, ix). He practised these things "not

because he was sinful and in need of redemption…but because he had a body just as we do" (1988, 29) and they had a "disciplinary aspect in his life" (1998, 355). Some practices are "more necessary for us than they were to him, because of our greater or different need" (1988, ix).

Disciplines of abstinence (e.g., solitude, silence, fasting, secrecy) counteract tendencies to sins of commission, and disciplines of engagement (e.g., study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship), sins of omission (1988, 175–176). These disciplines must be done with the appropriate intensity (1998, 356) and "require one another to achieve their maximal effect" (2006, 156). For example, prayer and Bible study are held up in many Protestant churches "as the activities that will make us spiritually rich" but "very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome" (1988, 186). Prayer and Bible study cannot bring about soul transformation "precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented, and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged in and by and large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals" (2006, 154). However, "lengthy periods of solitude and silence, including rest", can make prayer and Bible study "very powerful" (2006, 154). In solitude, we abstain from interaction with other people to break the "patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God" and which we are locked into by our day-to-day interactions (1988, 160). These patterns of responses mainly exist at the "epidermal" level, the "first point of contact with the world", and are almost "automatic", just as we speak of people pressing "our buttons" or of being "triggered" (1998, 358). Solitude and silence (escaping from noise and ceasing from talking) create the "inner space" or "psychic distance" to break our rush through life so that we become aware of what we are "doing and about to do" and see "in the light of eternity, the created things that trap, worry, and oppress" us (1998, 358; 1988, 161). We come to terms with our "epidermal" responses towards people and events, and replace them with different responses aligned to God's will (1998, 358). Solitude and silence also get us away from life's distractions and break our habit of "thinking about everything else" so that we may devote our attention and love to God (1998, 360).

Grace, Effort and the Spirit

One objection to spiritual disciplines is that they become meritorious "works" (2006, 61). Porter (2018, 33–34) asks: What sort of human effort is required to be conformed to the image of Christ "in a manner that is consistent with God's sanctifying grace", "given *sola gratia* and *sola fide*"? Willard argues that grace is not opposed to effort (an action) but to earning (an attitude) (2006, 61). We need God's grace for not only the forgiveness of sins but also a holy life (2006, 62). We "grow in grace" until "everything we do is assisted by grace" (2012b, 93). The greatest saints consume the most grace and are "saturated by grace in every dimension of their being" so that "grace to them is like breath" (2012b, 94).

Willard (1988, 4) also appeals to a principle of life: "A successful performance at a moment of crisis rests largely and essentially upon the depths of a self wisely and rigorously prepared in the totality of its being". We are saved by grace "alone" but "grace does not mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically 'infused' into our being in the moment of need", a claim supported by "the experience of any Christian". The training will not be done for us but we also cannot do it by ourselves. Jesus' taught that "without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), but "in general, if we do nothing it will certainly be without him" (1998, 346).

However, achievement-oriented YSCCs can abuse spiritual disciplines to impress God and others, doing them for the sake of personal achievement or merit. For Willard, excessive asceticism loses sight of "the end of a healthy, outgoing union with the healthy, outgoing and sociable Christ who also loves himself and all of God's creation" (1988, 144). Spiritual strength is manifested not by practising the disciplines extensively, which indicates our weakness, but by "little need to practice them and still maintain full spiritual life" (1988, 137–138). If we find it easy to engage in a certain discipline, we probably do not need to practise it. We should practise those disciplines we are not "good at".

Inner Christ-likeness, moreover, requires more than well-informed human effort. It is "finally, a gift of grace" (2006, 105). Formation is by "the interactive presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who place their confidence in Christ", as well as by the "spiritual riches of Christ's continuing incarnation in his people, past and present—including, most prominently, the treasures of his written and spoken word" (2006, 105–106). The Holy Spirit

first moves "within our souls, and especially our minds, to present the person of Jesus and the reality of his kingdom" (1998, 348) through the word of the gospel, which

> awakens those "dead in their trespasses and sins" to the love of God and to the availability of life in His Kingdom through confidence in Jesus Christ. This makes possible their acceptance of Christ as Savior, which then opens their souls to the influx of divine life, making them "participants of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) and in that sense children of God. (2006, 106)

After we have received the new life, the Holy 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'…of the Spirit'" (1998, 348). As we keep seeking God to grow in Christ-likeness, the "initiative of the Spirit, of the Word, and of those who in various ways minister the Spirit and the Word never ceases in the process of spiritual formation" (2006, 106).

The relationship of spiritual formation with the fruit and gifts of the Spirit is mutually supporting (2006, 115–116). We bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) because "we have received the presence of Christ's Spirit" through spiritual formation, and the Spirit, "interacting with us, fills us with love, joy, peace". As the fruit increases, it sustains and enhances a life of faith, so that the fruit and spiritual formation become "mutually supportive". The gifts of the Spirit are "specific supernatural abilities…distributed among those who make up the earthly body of Christ in order that every member can benefit from all of those gifts as needed" (1 Cor. 12:6–7). We must be "incorporated in a body of believers" to receive the benefit of the gifts that others have, otherwise, the fruit cannot be produced and sustained. Also, we can only rightly use the gifts of the Spirit if we are formed in inner Christ-likeness. Spiritual formation thus "lays the foundation and provides a suitable framework for the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit by the individual and group", while "the appropriate exercise of the gifts by the individual for the group, and within the group for the individual" is necessary for spiritual formation. Yet, the gifts by themselves do not form the spirit and character of those who exercise them. This is also true of reliance on the Spirit's action on or in us. As much as the Spirit's action is "indispensable", whether by "public manifestations of God" or revivals or by the gifts, fruit, baptism and filling of or anointing by the Spirit, "it will not by itself transform character in its depths" (1998, 348). Formation takes

place through ordinary events or "trials" in our life and our practice of spiritual disciplines (1998, 347).

This chapter's textual study of Willard's theology and concept of spiritual formation yielded four aspects of formation:

1) Identity as anchored on a relationship with the great and loving God.

2) Achievement as cooperating with God's power through the concepts of "meshing" kingdoms and a "with-God" life.

3) A holistic model of the self and its formation with priority given to reforming thoughts of God alongside feelings, will, body, social context and soul. Willard recognises the missional, communal and ecclesial aspects of formation and affirms YSCCs' family orientation but also calls for redeeming the negative aspects of their experience with their parents. A stronger emphasis could be placed on ecclesiology and ecclesial practices.

4) Spiritual disciplines of abstinence and engagement as depending on each other for maximal formative effect (e.g., prayer and Bible study need solitude and silence to be effective) and compatible with sanctifying grace by enlisting the body to access it for whole-person formation.

These four points of spiritual formation are not unique to Willard. Willard (1998, 369–371) said the same of his proposed curriculum for Christlikeness to put Jesus' words into practice. It may seem "radical and new" from the perspective of "consumer Christianity" and much contemporary Christian practice. In fact, it was "anything but new", for it stood in continuity with Paul and other biblical writers, with classical treatments of discipleship to Jesus such as The Rule of Saint Benedict, The Imitation of Christ, and The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, and with "the founding persons, events and literature" of traditions such as "the Lutheran, Reformed (Calvin), Puritan, Mennonite, Friends (Quaker), and Methodist". Yet, Willard is the person of choice for this thesis for the following reasons. Firstly, the choice of Willard is a subjective, personal one. I had studied his writings in a Christian Spirituality course and found his theology and concept of spiritual formation helpful for me. So I wanted to test his ideas for the leaders and members of the church youth group in which I minister,

who are all YSCCs. Secondly, Willard's theology of spiritual formation reflects his North American context of "consumer Christianity" which may have resonance for YSCCs. Thirdly, his intellectual and philosophical approach, as well as his emphasis on the thought life, may be more readily accepted by YSCCs who are degree or diploma holders as profiled in this study and may have a more rational bent. Thirdly, the four critical concerns that undergirded Willard's writings may be relevant for YSCCs. Confidence in metaphysical realism and epistemic realism may be shaken by what they learn in school or find online. Competing models of the human person and spiritual formation are adopted by various religions and "secular" spiritualities in multi-religious, globally-open Singapore. Christian spiritual formation among evangelical churches is generally neither well understood nor consistently practised, so few embrace it as genuine knowledge that produces objectively testable results.

The next chapter will focus on a passage of Scripture to continue to develop a theology of spiritual formation for YSCCs.

CHAPTER 4: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The previous chapter examined Willard's theology of spiritual formation to develop a response to YSCCs' achievement-based identity. This chapter pursues the same aim through a hermeneutical study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7:29, hereon "Sermon") in critical conversation with Willard's exposition of the Sermon in The Divine Conspiracy.

For Willard (1998, 97–98), the Sermon concisely states Jesus' teachings on how to live in "God's present kingdom" and answers the questions of who has the good life and who is truly a good person. This view of the significance of the Sermon is well-accepted. For instance, the patristic period read it as "casting a foundational vision for the virtuous Christian life" (Pennington 2017, 5); Augustine saw it as "filled with all the precepts by which the Christian life is formed" (Guelich 1982, 15). Although medieval interpreters limited the Sermon's demands to "counsels" for only those seeking perfection (Bryan 2005, 737) and American Dispensationalists "relegated the Sermon to the millennial Kingdom" (Guelich 1982, 18), evangelicals have maintained its relevance for all Christians. It is "the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counter-culture" (Stott 1978, 19), "forms the manifesto by which the new community Jesus is forming should live" (Blomberg 1992, 95) and is "a vision of life for all" (Bryan 2005, 737). Given the richness of the Sermon for spiritual formation, this chapter will not only engage Willard's exposition of the Sermon but also study the Sermon itself for resources to overcome YSCCs' achievement-based identity.

Kingdom Message

The Sermon is Jesus' first major teaching in Matthew's gospel and develops Jesus' message of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 4:17, 4:23, 9:35). To the crowds and his disciples, Jesus taught that no one was beyond being blessed in the kingdom (Matt. 5:3ff). He illustrated the greater righteousness of the kingdom (Matt. 5:20) with case studies of the Law in interpersonal relationships (Matt. 5:21–48) and warnings against the false securities of reputation (Matt. 6:1–18) and wealth (Matt. 6:19–34) and managing people by condemnation and forcing "good things" on them (Matt. 7:1–6). Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the

Father's kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10) and seek first the Father's kingdom (Matt. 6:33). Only those who do his Father's will shall enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:21). This means putting Jesus' words into practice (Matt. 7:24–27), underlining the importance that Jesus ascribed to his Sermon for kingdom living.

Human Identity and Purpose

The Beatitudes have been interpreted as rewards for virtues (e.g., Chrysostom in Young 1997, 242–247), imperatives for Christian conduct (Stott 1978, 31) and, in a more recent scholarly work, invitations into "flourishing virtues" and words of comfort with the "promise of God's coming deliverance" (Pennington 2017, 146). In these readings, the Beatitudes refer to positive or virtuous conditions.

Willard (1988, 236) argues to the contrary that the Beatitudes illustrate reversals for "the unblessables according to common human appraisal". They include "the spiritual paupers" (Matt. 5:3), "the depressed and grief-wracked" (Matt. 5:4), "the 'wimps' and pushovers" (Matt. 5:5) and "those consumed by injustices done to them" (Matt. 5:6). The "rewards for virtues" reading makes the Beatitudes seem like impossible ideals, imposes a false burden of guilt and promotes pride and legalism in those who think they conform to these virtues (1998, 99). It also resists God blessing people just because of their need, bypasses contact with Jesus by giving automatic access to the kingdom due to a "meritorious" attitude or circumstance, and excludes from being blessed those without the said virtues (1998, 103–104). Read as entrance requirements into the kingdom, the Beatitudes promote works-based righteousness.

One response, with Luther, is that the Sermon (including the Beatitudes) shows both the non-Christian he cannot obey the law by himself and directs him to Christ to be justified, and "the Christian who has been to Christ for justification how to live so as to please God" (Stott 1978, 36; cf. Guelich 1982, 16–17). The latter argument is still made: The Beatitudes "define the character and conduct of those whom God has already claimed as his children" (Quarles, quoted in Pennington 2017, 59); "Those who repent receive these character traits in principle but must cultivate them in the process of discipleship" (Turner, quoted in Pennington 2017, 59). Such readings still ascribe blessings for virtuous attitudes or conditions. The same goes for some interpreters who appear to favour a reading close to Willard's reversal for the

unblessables. One example is Guelich (1982, 102–103), for whom the Beatitudes are eschatological blessings, not entrance requirements. However, he says the meek have "an attitude of total dependence upon God…arising out of our helpless condition", while the poor, mourning, meek and hungry and thirsty are "those who, conscious of their own inabilities and dependency upon God alone, turn to him for his acceptance and help". They are blessed because of their virtuous attitude of dependence on God and not in spite of their helpless condition, as Willard observed (1998, 408n4).

Willard's "reversals for the unblessables" reading is not without problems. Blomberg (2004, 1–2) agrees that the poor in spirit, mournful and meek can embody character traits "often deemed undesirable" but ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman moralists "regularly approved" of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those persecuted because of righteousness. Isa. 61:1–2 and Ps. 37:11, the background to the first three Beatitudes, describe traits of Yahweh's servants, not spiritual paupers. Hence, Blomberg deems Willard's approach "highly implausible". Even a sympathetic assessment from Willard's student Ten Elshof (2018, 77, 81) recognises Willard's "implausible read of the more positive sounding beatitudes": the pure in heart as miserable perfectionists, the merciful as those constantly being taken advantage of, and the peacemakers as those caught in the middle and hated by both sides. Willard (1998, 119) recognised disagreement with his negative reading of "hunger and thirst for righteousness" and "pure in heart", but he argued for a consistent approach to all eight Beatitudes because it is "unlikely to the extreme that Jesus would have been doing one thing with the remainder of the Beatitudes and then switch back for these two alone".

This thesis argues for just such a hybrid reading. With Powell (1996, 460), the first four Beatitudes promise "eschatological reversals for the unfortunate", and the next four, "eschatological rewards for the virtuous". The term "eschatological" refers to "inaugurated kingdom eschatology" (Blomberg 2004, 3): Those in the kingdom of God may already but not fully experience reversals and rewards. This reading aligns with Willard's reading of reversals for "unblessables" for only the first four Beatitudes.

Four arguments are made for this hybrid reading: structural, analogical, contextual and canonical. Structurally, with Powell (1996, 461–462), a precedent for dividing up the eight Beatitudes comes from Hebrew poetry, where "synonymous parallelism normally occurs in

sets of two, three or at most four lines", not eight. Each group of four Beatitudes exhibits parallelism, contains exactly 36 words in Greek and concludes with δικαιοσύνη (righteousness) (Matt. 5:6, 10). Also, the first four Beatitudes describe groups alliterating with π: the poor (πτωχοὶ) in spirit, those who mourn (πενθοῦντες), the meek (πραεῖς) and those who hunger (πεινῶντες) and thirst for righteousness. Willard's point about the unity of the Beatitudes is valid: The list is bracketed by "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" in Matt. 5:3b and 5:10b. However, there is no need to force a link between the two groups of four Beatitudes to preserve unity, as with Powell's (1996, 475–477) proposal that God blesses the disadvantaged through the virtuous who allow God to use them in this manner to the extent that they suffer these same disadvantageous conditions but, ironically and paradoxically, they are rewarded for being so virtuous. It is sufficient to say, with Ten Elshof (2018, 86), that Jesus is citing "a full spectrum of conditions" including virtues and unfortunate conditions to make clear that the kingdom life is available to everyone. Ten Elshof supplies the second argument for the hybrid reading: The Beatitudes are analogous to Paul's teaching in Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11 that in Christ there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female, slave or free. Being a slave, a woman, uncircumcised or a Scythian might be thought to disqualify one from full participation in Christ but not being a man, a Jew or free. Paul, as with Jesus, is "presenting as wide a spectrum as possible in order to highlight the irrelevance of these distinctions to the life available in Christ Jesus". Willard (1998, 125–126) similarly recognised the range of human distinctions that had been rendered irrelevant in Christ Jesus when he cited both passages to make the point that "Paul's policy with regard to the redemptive community simply followed the gospel of the Beatitudes" but he did not bring it to its natural conclusion to develop a hybrid reading as Ten Elshof has done.

The third argument is contextual. Willard (1998, 107, 112) correctly observed that Jesus the preeminent Teacher taught concretely from his immediate surroundings and correctively to challenge prevailing assumptions, which left a lasting impression on his hearers and changed many lives. The hybrid reading agrees with Willard (1998, 116) that Jesus drew his illustrations in the first four Beatitudes from the needy crowds before him to declare the availability of God's kingdom even to them. He also challenged the assumptions of who is truly well off in God's kingdom and that certain conditions excluded people from blessedness. This aligns with his teaching about reversals where God lifts up the downcast and casts down the proud, and human "lasts" become divine "firsts" (Luke 4:18–19, Matt. 11:5, 20:16) (Willard 1998, 121). In God's kingdom, their deprivation and low status are or

will be reversed ("theirs is the kingdom of God", "comforted", "inherit the land") and their yearnings "filled".

The fourth argument is canonical. The first four Beatitudes reflect the Father's concern for the poor and the meek, comfort for mourners (*pace* Blomberg (2004), Isa. 61:1–2 and Ps. 37:11 do not refer only to Yahweh's servants) and deliverance of "the downtrodden and oppressed, who especially hunger and thirst after the justice associated with the coming of God's eschatological rule" (Hagner 1993, 93; Ps. 107:2, 5–9; Luke 1:53, John 6:35, Rev. 7:16–17). However, Scripture does not treat the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers as "unblessables" in unfortunate conditions. Jesus taught his hearers to imitate the Father's mercy (Hosea 6:6, Matt. 9:13). The Father accepts the pure in heart who trust him alone (Ps. 24:3–4). The wisdom from heaven is "peace-loving" and peacemakers "reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:17–18). It is unfortunate to be persecuted but virtuous to suffer for Christ (1 Pet. 4:14) and persevere in the faith even to death (e.g, James 1:12, Rev. 20:4–6). The hybrid reading accounts for the different treatment in the biblical canon of the conditions underlying the first four Beatitudes and those for the next four.

The hybrid reading supports an identity based on a relationship with the merciful Father through placing one's confidence in his Son Jesus Christ. This relationship enables one to be confident of one's well-being in God's kingdom, a point which Willard also emphasised (1998, 187–188). Many who came to Jesus were desperate, socially insignificant or rejected by the arbiters of religious acceptability. But the first four Beatitudes call them blessed. The next four Beatitudes assure those who do the Father's will of their continued and future well-being. Peacemakers will be called "children of God" (Matt. 5:9) not to confer on them a new identity but to affirm their likeness to their Father (Matt. 5:48) and their vindication on Judgement Day (Matt. 7:21).

An additional perspective on identity and purpose comes from Jesus' teaching about persecution (Matt. 5:10–12) and being preservative and illumination in the world (Matt. 5:13–16). Jesus' disciples will suffer but he commands them to rejoice. Their joy rests on the promise of great reward in heaven, the exemplar of the suffering prophets and the sufficiency and justice of God. Willard (1998, 119) made similar observations but located them in the disciples' sufficiency in God: "Your reputation stands high before God the Father and his eternal family, whose companionship and love and resources are now and forever your

inheritance." Developing from his reading of the Beatitudes as blessings for the desperate and rejected, Willard (1998, 125) argued that "it is they, not the 'best and brightest' on the human scale, who are to make life on earth manageable as they live from the kingdom" because God will give them light ("truth, love and power") and make them salt ("to cleanse, preserve, and flavor the times through which they live"). One may develop this point further to say that they represent the Father before a watching world for his glory, just as God's chosen people were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for other nations to know him (Exod. 19:5–6). Jesus also warned his disciples against losing their saltiness or hiding their light by failing to persevere in persecution and compromising their distinctive witness.

Kingdom Righteousness

The teaching that the "unblessables" could be blessed and be salt and light contravened the assumptions of the Pharisees and the scribes and the version of the law that they practised. People might think Jesus had come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. He clarified that he had come to fulfil them (Matt. 5:17).

Willard (1998, 141–142) rightly argues that God's law is central to human life and possesses an "inherent beauty" in contrast to the "cut-down and distorted version" of the law practised by the Pharisees and the scribes. God's law is "not the source of rightness, but it is forever the course of rightness". So Jesus affirmed that the Law would remain intact until "heaven and earth disappear" and "everything is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18) at his second coming and on Judgement Day (Matt. 7:22). He ceded no ground to antinomianism that leverages on what he would accomplish on the cross. His disciples were still to "practise and teach these commands" (Matt. 5:19). Jesus implied that those who set aside these commands and taught others accordingly were the scribes and the Pharisees: It was their kind of righteousness that the disciples must surpass to enter the kingdom (Matt. 5:20). Later he warned against imitating the "hypocrites" who practise showy righteousness (Matt. 6:1–2, 5, 16), challenging the prevailing view of the Pharisees and the scribes as righteous (Matt. 23:2, 5–7). With Willard (1998, 142–145), they focused on the externals but lacked the "true inner goodness" (δικαιοσύνη) from which the deeds of the Law naturally flow. Jesus imagined them assiduously cleaning the outside of the cup and dish but inside "they are full of greed and

self-indulgence". Jesus' remedy for them affirms the priority of forming the inner life: "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Matt. 23:26).

Inner change comes by God's gracious actions but we receive them by hearing and putting into practice the words of Jesus our only Teacher (Matt. 7:24, 13:23, 23:8, 10). Jesus' teaching aligns with the Torah's priorities and values. Wright (2014, 158–184) summarises its priorities: obedience as a response to grace in a redemptive relationship with God and obedience motivated by gratitude to God, imitation of God, being different (holy) and assurance that the Law is for our good. In the Torah's scale of values, God comes first before society, family, individuals, sex and property; persons matter more than things; and needs matter more than claims. Jesus fulfilled the Law by "bringing into full clarity" the Torah's priorities and values; his teaching "built on and surpassed" the Law but faced "the same direction" (Wright 2014, 184). Jesus' teaching also went deeper than modifying behaviour to transforming the heart where evil thoughts come (Matt. 12:35, 15:19). With Blomberg (2004, 7), the greater righteousness is "not a quantitatively better obedience to the Torah but the qualitatively different responsibility to follow Christ". It is the "more stringent demand" but with the "greater empowerment" of Jesus' easy yoke and light burden (Matt. 11:30).

Jesus' illustrations of the greater righteousness begin with anger (Matt. 5:21–26). Murder is punishable by death (Num. 35:16–21) but Jesus says anger towards one's brother or sister is also subject to judgment. With Willard (1998, 151–154), anger escalates to contempt ("Raca"), then verbal desecration ("You fool") with a corresponding progression to greater punishment ("court", "fire of hell"). Guelich (1982, 240) concurs with "the ascending order of judicial proceedings" but argues that the offences of anger and saying "Raca" and "You fool" are not significantly different. He proposes that Jesus was being "ironic" in juxtaposing the similarity of offences with the escalating severity of judicial proceedings to counter the understanding that "one's status before God could be determined by legalistic means". Guelich's reading requires conjectures about Jesus' implicit intentions. More straightforward is Willard's argument that contempt is a greater evil than anger because it is a "studied degradation of another" and "spits on" the deep need to belong. Verbal desecration hurts more deeply because it involves malice. In all three cases, Jesus reveals "the preciousness of human beings" (1998, 154). Both Willard and Guelich are right to observe that Jesus is not laying down another set of laws but illustrating the kind of person who does right. For Willard, when we treasure those around us and "see them as God's creatures designed for his

eternal purposes", we do not "make an additional point of not hating them", for that is "simply a part of the package" (1998, 155). Laws dealing only with actions cannot reach the source of actions, the human heart, but a "graceful relationship sustained with the masterful Christ certainly can" (1998, 155). With this foundation ("therefore" Matt. 5:23), Jesus teaches positively to reconcile with an offended brother or sister and quickly settle just claims made by an adversary.

Adultery by sexual intercourse is forbidden but Jesus says a man who looks at a woman lustfully has committed adultery with her "in his heart" (Matt. 5:27–30). Jesus impressed on his hearers the drastic measures required by challenging them to gouge out the eye or cut off the hand that caused them to stumble. He could not have intended mutilation, which is useless against lust and irreversibly harms the body. He spoke in hyperbole and, with Willard (1998, 167–168), used the logic of *reductio ad absurdum*. He meant to "circumcise" the heart and reform the habits ingrained in the eyes, hands and other body parts. As a concession to a hard heart (Matt. 19:8), divorce is permitted and the man who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. This concession could be abused to allow divorce for even petty matters (e.g., "my wife burnt the food" is a valid reason for the Hillel school) (Willard 1998, 169), so Jesus restricts the concession: A divorce, except for sexual immorality, makes the divorced woman commit adultery (if she remarries or becomes a prostitute) or the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:31–32).

Oaths must be fulfilled but Jesus says do not swear at all and be truthful, sincere and non-manipulative in speech (Matt. 5:33–37). Personal injury is redressed by and limited to equal punishment to prevent vengeful excess. However, Jesus not only rules out harming an evil person but also commands doing whatever is helpful for them as we would have them do to us (Matt. 5:38–42, 7:12; Luke 6:31). Loving our neighbour is extended to loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors (Matt. 5:43–48).

Jesus' six illustrations expand from relationships with our believing brother or sister (anger) and our spouse (lust, divorce) to our relations in society (oaths, personal injury) and with our enemies. There is also a psychological progression from putting to death anger, lust and deception, to putting on kindness and mercy, culminating in love.

With Willard (1998, 136–139, 216–217), a stronger case can be made for respecting the sequential order in which Jesus presented his Sermon because as master of the subject matter, he was conveying "an understanding of human life that actually works". Jesus places the indicatives in the Beatitudes before the imperatives: "The ethical imperative follows the christological indicative of the gospel of the Kingdom" (Guelich 1982, 262). A precedent comes from God redeeming his people from Egypt and reminding them of his blessings before giving them his law (Blomberg 1992, 98). With Willard (1998, 158), only after receiving Jesus' teaching on blessedness can we accept his teaching on anger. For instance, we can abandon hostility and bitterness, and sacrifice our interest for others' sake, because in the kingdom of God, "nothing that can happen to us is 'the end of the world'". Our assurance of blessedness also relieves us from worrying about our daily needs (Matt. 6:25).

Why did Jesus begin with anger and lust? For Willard (1998, 137), they are "the deepest roots of human evil", appearing on the list of seven deadly sins codified in the fourth century (S. Chan 1998, 72). When we are assured of our blessedness and increasingly free from anger, contempt and absorbing desire, we can then receive the teaching against retaliation for personal injury: We can see our injurer under God including his "pitiful limitations", as Willard (1998, 176) observed. We can be vulnerable because we are "invulnerable" in God's hands (1998, 181). We know Christ's way is the easier and only way. By not retaliating and even helping the offender, we allow "the kingdom of God, with all its resources, to begin its work": "As anger feeds anger, so patient goodness will normally deflate it" (1998, 180).

Jesus' anti-theses culminate in a life of agape. This corresponds with the Torah's priority to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39) whose true intent Jesus brought out by counting enemies as neighbours. His apostles follow his lead. Paul says loving one's neighbour sums up the commandments and fulfils the law (Rom. 13:8–10) and love is the virtue that binds other virtues together (Col. 3:14). Peter traces a progression through faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness and mutual affection to love (2 Pet. 1:5–7). John exhorts his hearers to love one another because God is love (1 John 4:16). There are thus good reasons to see love as the primary virtue (S. Chan 1998, 90).

The teaching not to condemn others also rightly comes after the teaching about anger. With Willard (1998, 221), anger desires to hurt and condemnation hurts deeply. The condemned then responds with anger in a vicious circle. So, "more than half the battle with condemnation

is won once we have given up anger and contempt". Having also given up manipulation that pushes the things of God on others (Matt. 7:6), we can simply ask others for what we want from them (Matt. 7:7–8) (1998, 232). The "ask, seek, knock" verses are usually read as about praying to God and separate from the preceding section but Willard (1998, 231–232) makes a psychological-theological link between them: When we are non-manipulative and listen to others, they do not have to protect themselves from us and can open up to us as their ally. They sense that their problem is themselves or a situation they have created. We can then "help them in any way they ask of us" and ask God to work in them. Asking is "the great law of the spiritual world through which things are accomplished in cooperation with God and yet in harmony with the freedom and worth of every individual" (1998, 232). The latter is premised on God having "paid an awful price to arrange for human self-determination" because it is "the only way he can get the kind of personal beings he desires for his eternal purposes" (1998, 230). Also, our posture towards God must be the same as our posture towards each other. Just as we cannot love God and hate human beings (1 John 4:20), bless God and curse people made in God's likeness (James 3:9) or ask God for forgiveness and fail to forgive others (Matt. 6:14–15), so we make requests of others as we make requests of God. Willard calls this "the unity of spiritual orientation" (1998, 232).

Jesus' commands of non-retaliation and loving one's enemies are so countercultural that people have rejected these commands as impracticable. Yet, Willard and other commentators maintained that they can be obeyed, predicated on the agape love of God as described by Willard. Yoder (1971, chap. 2) said as much by referring to the "unconditional character of His love" which asks for more than a limit on vengeance under the Old Covenant and entails "a special measure of love demanded by concern for the redemption of the offender". Where they differ is that Yoder seemed to see obedience and acting counter-culturally as only a matter of transformed understanding ("repentance"), perhaps divinely enabled: "We can stop loving only the lovable, lending only to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionality of the benevolence of God." He even claimed that "this is not a fruit of long growth and maturation…We can do it tomorrow if we believe". In contrast, Willard argued for a sequential order of progressive transformation which involved not only transformed understanding (1998, 325), important as it is, but also the practice of spiritual disciplines with the action of the Holy Spirit (1998, 347). As noted in Chapter 3, Willard situated this transformation in the reality of the kingdom, by which one may access the divine resources and be so secured in God as to act counter-culturally. He also

emphasised being before doing—good works flow from the inner transformation of character. One may add that Jesus' Sermon teaches that interpersonal relationships, particularly close relations, can be crucibles for the spiritual formation of our heart (Matt. 5:28), our body (Matt. 5:29–30) and our thoughts, such as the preciousness of human beings (Matt. 5:22) and our Father's mercy (Matt. 5:43–45).

Jesus' Revelation of the Father

This section focuses on an aspect of the Sermon which Willard's exposition does not, in various parts, fully develop or consolidate, but it is essential for his theology of spiritual formation. This aspect is the understanding of the character of God the Father. To think rightly about the Father, one must look to Jesus because his words, deeds and character reflect and reveal the Father. This section will focus on Jesus' words in the Sermon about the Father. He knows the Father: His commands align with his Father's will (Matt. 5:48, 7:21). By meditating on and memorising Scripture, including the Law's fundamental demands (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10), he shared the mind of his Father. His teaching reveals the Father (Matt. 11:27).

Jesus' teaching on oath-taking expresses God as king, a point which Willard did not develop. Jesus did not want his disciples to think that because they did not swear by God's name but by heaven, earth or Jerusalem that they could swear oaths to manipulate others. They must revere God as the Great King (Matt. 5:35) ruling the universe, where heaven is his throne and earth his footstool, and over his chosen people, where Jerusalem is his city. God is not just the King over Israel, with whom he had made a covenant, but also over all creation. They must also not swear by their head as if their life were in their hands because they "cannot make even one hair white or black" (Matt. 5:36; neither can they add a single hour to their life by worrying, Matt. 6:27), but are under God's protection and watchful care.

Jesus complements the kingly image with the fatherly image. The Father causes "his sun" that he created and set in place to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous; as his children, they imitate his perfect, merciful character by loving their enemies (Matt. 5:45, 47; cf. Luke 6:35–36). "Perfect" here refers not to moral perfection but can mean "wholehearted orientation toward God" (Pennington 2017, 78). The

command to be perfect as the Father is perfect recalls the command to be holy as the LORD is holy (Lev. 19:2). The motivation for obedience in both commands is imitating God and being set apart from others (Wright 2014, 168–171). "Others" in the Sermon are the tax collectors (Matt. 5:46), pagans (Matt. 5:47, 6:7–8, 32) and Jewish religious leaders (Matt. 5:20, 6:2, 5, 16). Another motivation for obedience is gratitude: They can be thankful for the Father's merciful gifts of sun, rain and more even when they were his enemies. Willard's (1998, 182–183) reading of the instruction to "be perfect" recognises the agape love that characterises the Father but goes beyond imitating God's conduct to being the kind of person from whom loving acts naturally flow. This is possible only when Jesus' disciples are in union with the kingdom, "dwelling in love", and when they "catch" love and "discover love as a life power". By "living from God as citizens of the kingdom", they may "have the kind of wholeness, of full functionality, that he has".

Jesus revealed more of the Father when he warned about the obstacles to kingdom living. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting can become poisoned by "eye service" to secure human approval (Matt. 6:1–18). Jesus taught secrecy as an antidote and promised the reward of the Father who sees and knows all that they do in secret, and is "present (even in) the secret place chosen for prayer" (Nolland 2005, 278; cf. Matt. 6:6, 18). Willard (1998, 190) inferred from Jesus' teaching about seeking human approval that God responds to people's expectations of him. He "does not like to be present where he is not wanted". When we seek to impress others with how devout we are, "he lets us do that and stands aside" but he will "eventually have his day". However, "if we live unto God alone, he responds to our expectations—which are of him alone".

Another obstacle is misplaced security in wealth, motivated by greed. Jesus contrasted two kinds of treasures that captivate the heart (Matt. 6:19–21). Treasures on earth can be lost but treasures in heaven are indestructible. Using the image of the eye as the lamp of the body, Jesus likened being generous to healthy eyes that bring light to the body and being stingy to unhealthy eyes that cannot take in light. Just as without light, the whole body is full of darkness, and whatever "light" there is, is darkness, so the stingy person is wholly corrupted by greed (Matt. 6:22–23). Another image Jesus used is of a servant torn between two masters. Dual loyalty to God and Money is impossible, only the extreme poles of hate or love, devotion or despising (Matt. 6:24). Jesus' call to serve God alone reflects the Law's priority to worship God only and love him wholeheartedly (Deut. 5:7, 6:4–5, 13), which Jesus

exemplified when he was tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:10). Willard (1998, 206–207) read this section more broadly to encompass the effects of one's treasures on one's view of reality. One's treasure focuses one's heart so that "the person who treasures what lies within the kingdom sees everything in its true worth and relationship" whereas the one taken up with earthly treasures "sees everything from a perspective that distorts it and systematically misleads in practice" and misperceives "the relative importance of things".

If Jesus' hearers do not store up treasures on earth, then might they lack daily provisions? Jesus directed them to look at the birds and the flowers (Matt. 6:26, 28–30). God's creation tells of his character (as do the sun and the rain) and the "visual props" make his message more concrete and memorable. The good Father who feeds the birds will feed them because they are "much more valuable" than the birds. He who dresses the wildflowers more splendidly than Solomon's clothes will clothe them because they are worth far more to him than the grass that is "here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire", brief as their life on earth may be. The Father knows their needs and will provide for them as they seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:32–33). Willard said as much when he discussed this section in the light of "the reality of kingdom immediacy" (1998, 209), observing that "those who understand Jesus and his Father know that provision has been made for them. Their confidence has been confirmed by their experience" (1998, 212).

Two final obstacles to kingdom righteousness are a judgmental or condemning attitude towards others who will return it in the same measure (Matt. 7:1–5) and the tendency to force one's "pearls" on others (Matt. 7:6) "with a certain superiority of bearing that keeps us from paying attention to those who are trying to help" (Willard 1998, 229). Jesus taught self-examination and self-correction, with help from God and others, to remove the plank from one's eye before attempting to correct others in a clear-eyed, helpful manner. The plank may well be condemnation itself, not something else in our life that, if corrected, allows us to condemn others (Willard 1998, 224). Jesus' teaching on the "pearls" is often taken to mean that "holy things are not to be repeatedly offered to those who continually reject and even profane them" (Blomberg 2004, 14). With Willard (1998, 228), Jesus taught the opposite: The Father is kind to the ungrateful and wicked (Luke 6:35, cf. Matt. 5:45). The problem with pearls for pigs is not that pigs are unworthy but that pearls are inedible (1998, 229). Likewise, when we force our "precious" but unhelpful things on others, they would naturally reject our things and us.

Jesus' teaching on prayer (Matt. 6:9–15) revealed a Father who would have his children revere his name and align themselves to his rule and its fulfilment on earth. He wants them to place their confidence in him for daily sustenance (against storing up riches for "autonomous" security), forgiveness of their debts (sins), protection from trials, and deliverance from the evil one. He wants them to forgive others who owe them money and for sins done against them as he forgives them, with mercy and generosity (Matt. 6:13–15). They need not keep on babbling in prayer because the Father knows what they need before they ask him for he is not only omniscient but also concerned about and attentive to each person (Matt. 6:7–8): If earthly fathers know how to give good gifts to their children who ask them, "how much more" will the heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him (Matt. 7:9–11)? Confidence in the good Father who gives good gifts is the basis for persistence in prayer (Matt. 7:7–8), to keep asking (Αἰτεῖτε), seeking (ζητεῖτε) and knocking (κρούετε), conveyed by present imperatives "underlining the importance of continuous action" (Morris 1992, 170).

As noted in Chapter 3, a fundamental aspect of Willard's theology of spiritual formation is to grasp the present reality of the kingdom of God, which in turn requires a clear vision of a good and competent God who encompasses and penetrates the world, and is interactive at every point with our lives so much as that Jesus could assure his disciples that "our universe is a perfectly safe place for us to be" (Matt. 6:25–34) (1998, 66). This aspect of Willard's theology is reflected in his reading of the references to "the heavens" in the Sermon in relation to the Father and his kingdom.

When Jesus referred to "our Father, the one in the heavens" in his model prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), "the heavens" (τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) is in the plural but usually translated as "heaven". "Heaven" can suggest the Father is "far away and much later" (Willard 1998, 257) or convey his "transcendence and sovereignty" (Carson 1984, 169) and "infinite greatness" (Morris 1992, 144). However, Willard (1998, 257) argued that Jesus was also conveying God's immanence with "the heavens": God's presence is "as far 'out' as imaginable but also right down to the atmosphere around our heads, which is the first of 'the heavens'". God's people occasionally experienced "surrounding space as full of God" (Willard 1998, 73). Abraham heard the angel of the LORD call out to him from heaven (Gen. 22:11, 15). God came to Moses in a cloud and spoke to him in the hearing of others (Exod. 19:9). John saw the Spirit descend from heaven as a dove and remain on Jesus after his baptism (John 1:32). The

disciples witnessed the Holy Spirit being poured out on them with a sound from heaven (Acts 2:2). Peter saw heaven open and a sheet of animals being let down and heard a voice (Acts 10:11–13). A corroborating view comes from Guelich (1982, 288), for whom "heaven" refers not to "a remote residence of God but rather to the sphere from which God effects his rule and will on earth".

Willard (1998, 73–74) argued that the same idea of God's immanence is conveyed by Jesus' references to βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ("the kingdom of the heavens"), recorded 32 times only in Matthew's gospel. Willard disagreed with the common view that Matthew used "the heavens" as an indirect reference to God (Arndt et al. 2000, 739) and avoided using God's name because his primary audience were the Jews, hence "the kingdom of the heavens" is synonymous to "the kingdom of God" and the variation has no substantial significance. Willard did not make the valid counter-argument that if Matthew intended to revere God's name, why had he no qualms to use "the kingdom of God" four to five times (Matt. 12:28, 19:24, 21:31, 43; possibly 6:33 in some Greek manuscripts)? More likely, he used "kingdom of the heavens" and "kingdom of God" interchangeably (e.g., Matt. 19:23–24) with "the heavens" conveying a fuller sense of God's transcendence and immanence. Willard noted: "The very fact that heaven could be used loosely to refer to God at all is deeply instructive of how God relates to us, once you realize what 'the heavens' are." This view is corroborated by Traub (1964, 522): Even if "the heavens" is a metonym for God's name, it is "more than a substitute" by referring to "God's dealings and action" and "active lordship coming down from heaven". When applied to the Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11, 21) or the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48, 6:14, 26, 32), with the Father who sees what is done in secret (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18) and who knows (Matt. 6:8, 32), the combined picture is of the Father, "who, unhampered by earthly restrictions, knows all things, sees all things, can do all things, and is thus accessible to all" (Traub 1964, 520–521).

Jesus' Authority

As noted in chapter 3, Willard argued that accepting that Jesus is "the best and smartest man who ever lived" (1998, 90) is essential to people becoming his disciples (1998, 94). The Sermon reinforces Jesus' authority as the preeminent teacher. Jesus' teaching amazed the crowds because he taught with unprecedented authority (Matt. 7:28–29). His emphatic first-

person references of “but I tell you” (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) conveyed with ἐγὼ (“I”) followed by λέγω (“I tell”) when bringing out the Law’s true meaning, displayed not only his knowledge of and alignment with the Father’s will but also his authority to speak for and with his Father. He warned his disciples of persecution “because of me” on the same terms as the prophets were persecuted because they spoke the word of the LORD (Matt. 5:11–12). Following him and his teaching is to enter through the narrow gate that leads to life; the popular “alternative” leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13–14). In warning against false prophets (Matt. 7:15–20), Jesus implies that he is the true prophet, and his words, the true teaching. He presents himself as the Judge before whom people will give an account and who has the authority to send them away (Matt. 7:21–23). Yet, it is not enough to call Jesus “Lord, Lord” or claim to have prophesied or driven out demons in his name. One must do his Father’s will (Matt. 7:21). Such a person is known by Jesus and has a genuine relationship with him. He calls on his hearers to put into practice not the word of the LORD, as the prophets of old declared but “these words of mine”, and again illustrates the binary choice of obedience or disobedience and their eternal consequences (Matt. 7:24–27). Discipleship to Jesus involves learning from him, putting his words into practice and staying the course when persecuted for his sake.

Further insight comes from Willard (1998, 20), who situated Jesus’ claim to authority in his proclamation of the kingdom, that he himself was “the evidence for the truth of his announcement about the availability of God’s kingdom, or governance, to ordinary human existence”. Unlike the scribes who taught by citing others, Jesus was saying: “Just watch me and see that what I say is true. See for yourself that the rule of God has come among ordinary human beings.” Matthew’s record of Jesus’ healing and other miraculous acts after the Sermon corroborate his claim to divine authority.

In summary, Jesus’ Sermon has supplied an understanding of identity based on a relationship with a merciful Father “in the heavens” who is “always near”, with Jesus as the preeminent Teacher, and with others in agape. A hybrid reading of the Beatitudes as eschatological reversals for the unfortunate and rewards for the virtuous brings out the Father’s mercy in the first four Beatitudes. Together with Jesus’ declaration that his disciples will be persecuted for his sake but rewarded, and that they are “salt” and “light”, this relationship with the Father may be understood as having confidence in one’s well-being in his kingdom, obeying his will, imitating his character and representing him before a watching world for his glory. Jesus

revealed the Father as always near based on a reading of "the heavens" that conveys both his transcendence and his immanence. Jesus also established his authority as the preeminent Teacher. The transformation of interpersonal relationships in Christ's agape forms an integral part of the greater righteousness that Jesus taught. His illustrations of the greater righteousness bear out the principle of transformation from the inside out in a sequential order, from confidence in one's well-being in God's kingdom, to dealing with anger and obsessive desire, and then loving one's enemies. Willard's reading of the counter-cultural nature of the Sermon and the process of spiritual formation necessary for the Sermon to be truly lived out can help YSCCs to forge a different path than those laid by Singapore's pragmatism and meritocracy.

The next chapter will integrate these findings with those from the previous chapters to develop a theology of spiritual formation to overcome YSCCs' achievement-based identity.

CHAPTER 5: A THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR YSCCS

This chapter brings the findings of the previous chapters into a dialogue with YSCCs' recovery experiences to develop a theology and concept of spiritual formation to overcome YSCCs' achievement-based identity. This theology comprises four aspects: identity, achievement, a holistic model of the self and its formation, and spiritual disciplines.

Identity

A theology of spiritual formation for YSCCs recognises that their identity is anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God. Given the power of thought, it prioritises "enthralling" YSCCs' minds with ideas and images of the great and good God, and themselves as God's children, co-worker and friend.

With Willard (1998, 326), YSCCs retain the reality of God before their mind by reflecting on his creation, his public acts in human history, and their and others' experiences of him. YSCCs cite only the latter two aspects but contemplating God's creation can direct their thoughts to God's greatness and goodness, as Jesus' Sermon does, and refresh them in a hectic, built-up environment. Contemplation requires focused, sustained attention, so YSCCs conditioned by mobile devices to constant activity and stimulation will need the disciplines of solitude and silence. With Willard's holistic model of self, YSCCs may enlist their body for support just as Japanese "forest bathing" (*shinrin-yoku*) uses multiple senses to experience nature, from listening to rustling leaves to placing one's hands on a tree trunk. Their immersive experience must not detract from keeping before their mind God who created and sustains the natural world but is not a part of it. Theocentric reflection leads to worshipping the Creator, not his creation (Mustol 2011, 420), and trusting the Father as his children (Matt. 6:26, 30). YSCCs may also trace God's hand in creation through science though it is often pitted against the Christian faith. Science observes the operations of the physical laws in creation, where their order and complexity, apprehended in faith, reflect God's wisdom and greatness.

Through their experiences of God and understanding of his acts, YSCCs came to think of God as their loving Father and of themselves as finite and fallible but accepted by God.

Raphael (Zhang 2018) asked God what he thought of him and received an impression of a waterfall. Four days later, he heard British pastor Sam Allberry preach that "for eternity, the Father has been pouring His love into the Son", "this eternal Niagara of love", and that "Jesus says as we come to Him…become united to Him, we begin to step with Him under that same love". Raphael then knew that the waterfall image was God's way of reminding him that God loves him with a love "as abundant and extravagant as the love He pours into His Son" and "the voice of shame has no hold on me". He was imperfect but "handpicked and beloved by God". Having been "eternally accepted by Christ", he need not "chase after perfection to gain the acceptance of others". God assured him that his "delight" over him would "never fade, nor can it be haggled for".

Raphael also realised that God's idea of perfection was not so much "a life without sin" but a heart that sought to "come clean and be made right with Him". God's grace permitted "room for mistakes" and empowered him to "keep getting up and running with perseverance the race". Reading in the Bible that God saw him as "made perfect forever" (Heb. 10:14) because of Jesus' sacrifice freed him to value his "growth journey in God" and "obey God because He loves me and is pleased with me" and "I want to love my Father back". Nothing he did could change the way God saw him as "His perfect, beloved child".

Raphael (Zhang 2016) had a social need for approval because he thought of God as "a stern and silent disciplinarian who did not like me" and "would not express His affection for me, but was more than ready to express His disappointment and anger whenever I sinned or fell short of what He expected me to do". He thought he had to "earn" God's love. His relationship with his parents shaped his idea of God: They did not compliment him when he did well but were "quick to express their disapproval of and unhappiness" when he did something wrong. Through his mentor, he understood that God saw him as "His precious son" and "enjoys and treasures" him: "He is a good and perfect Father who delights in me, loves me, intimately cares for me and my needs, and is eager to lavish His lovingkindness on me."

Raphael's thoughts of his Father, their relationship and his identity anchored on this relationship were centred on Christ in two ways. Firstly, the Father loves Raphael as the Father loves the Son. To think of the Father in relation to the Son, not only universally ("Father of creation") or generically (a father figure with positive attributes), aligns with Scripture and Trinitarian theology. The Father-Son relation is not mere relation or love but "extravagant" love, brought before Raphael's mind through the impression of a waterfall and the linguistic imagery of delight, pleasure, enjoyment and treasuring. However, to focus exclusively on the Father's love for his Son is to present only one side of reality. As the Father so loves his Son, the Son so loves his Father by obeying his will. Likewise, YSCCs so loved by their Father so love him by obeying him. Raphael alluded to this "returning love": He was "learning more of what it means to obey God" and wanted to love his Father back, not out of obligation, but "because He loves me and is pleased with me". Pragmatic YSCCs could mistake reciprocity as transactional but the Son's motivation is love—"will to good" (Willard 2012b, 130). They may share his motivation by taking on his mind, "his ideas, images, information, and patterns of thinking" (Willard 2012b, 116). Furthermore, in a Trinitarian account, YSCCs are loved by the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit because God's love has been poured out into their hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Likewise, YSCCs' relational identity to God is with the Father and the Son through the Spirit because God sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts; the Spirit calls out, "*Abba*, Father", and by him, they cry, "*Abba*, Father"; the Spirit testifies with their spirit that they are God's children, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:6–7, Rom. 8:15–17).

Secondly, Raphael spoke of being "made perfect forever" because of Jesus' sacrifice for him. Crucicentrism, "a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross", is a mark of evangelical orthodoxy along with activism, biblicism and conversionism (Bebbington 2005, 2–3).
As important as Jesus' atoning death on the cross is for YSCCs' justification before God, they can think more comprehensively of Jesus and their relationship to him. With Willard and Jesus' Sermon, YSCCs are called by Jesus the preeminent Teacher to be his students. This resonates with their Confucian Heritage Culture that ascribes a high status to teachers. However, this is not to reduce Jesus to a merely human teacher of good morals or a moral exemplar. Instead, they recognise his unique authority as the Son who knows and reveals the Father and has true knowledge of spiritual reality and life. By putting into practice the Teacher's words, they obey the Father's will and have life.

In contrast to Raphael's Christocentric account of the Father's extravagant love, Stephenie's (Liew 2018, 415–416) account focuses on the reliability of God's love against other options. At a church service, she heard a new song with the lyrics, "I will build my life upon Your love, it is a firm foundation, I will put my trust in You alone, and I will not be shaken":

> It hit me that despite growing up in church, I had been wilfully relying on myself to seek for an answer to a meaningful life…I had spent years placing my identity and foundations in my own capacity, in material achievements, ever-changing worldly experiences, in others' human love for me and in my own capacity to love others—only to have fallen short. Perhaps this love, God's love will be that firm foundation that will not be shaken...That night, I decided to place my trust in God's love wholeheartedly and my life has never been the same. Day after day, I keep on experiencing a love that is so real, so deep, and so unfailing. (Liew 2018, 416)

Stephenie understood her relationship with God and her identity not so much from the objective witness of Jesus' death on the cross but on moment by moment experience and assurance of this love through the Holy Spirit's witness to her spirit (Rom. 8:16). YSCCs' confidence in the spiritual reality of God and his kingdom is rightly verified and supported by regular interactions with it, from communications with God to experiences of his empowerment in daily affairs. Stephenie's identity as based on God's love among other tried-but-failed options may be supplemented by seeing herself as a servant of God her Master against the temptation to divide her loyalty to him. The servant-Master relationship need not be oppressive or a loveless duty if taken in the spirit of trusting God alone and staying faithful to him, and complemented with other relational identities: child-Father, student-Teacher, friends, co-workers.

Both narratives focus on God meeting their felt needs: acceptance/approval (Raphael) and security/reliability (Stephenie). Is their relationship with God on which their identity is based fundamentally anthropocentric and self-serving? Not necessarily, if we first consider how pervasively Singapore's philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy has distorted YSCCs' thinking about their acceptability before God and their sources of security, and intensified their felt needs for acceptance and security. An essential step in spiritual formation is to correct these false ideas by moving from conditional, merited approval to unconditional, unmerited acceptance (Raphael) and turning from transient, unreliable sources of security to the unchanging, eternal source of God (Stephenie). However, YSCCs may become self-serving if they do not go on to seek first the Father's kingdom and his righteousness by

imitating his character, aligning with his will and doing good works so that others may glorify him. They cannot remain consumerist or limit themselves to private piety because their spiritual formation in Christ's agape takes place largely in their interpersonal relationships (e.g., family, friends, church).

YSCCs understandably interpret their relationship with God and their identity anchored on this relationship initially through their felt needs but a theology of identity should aim to be comprehensive by engaging Scripture, tradition and reason with Christian experience. With Jesus' Sermon, the Father's love for his children goes beyond acceptance and reliability to include his loving care for their daily needs, forgiveness of sins, protection from trials, reversals of their deprivations, fulfilment of their deepest yearnings and many other "good gifts". His loving care does not exempt them from persecution but their reward is great in heaven. They are to imitate and reciprocate his loving care with loving obedience so that others might glorify him. Also, all human beings made in God's image are precious, more valuable than the birds that the Father feeds, and are not to be treated with contempt. Christian tradition has understood the *imago Dei* also as ontological or substantial: YSCCs are spiritual beings with a physical body with abilities for self-determination, creativity and relating to others. Functionally, they are God's co-workers and friends to rule the earth with him and others. Eschatologically, with Willard (1998, 211), YSCCs have "an eternal destiny in God's great universe". They will reign in a manner befitting God's character and in complete alignment with his will. They will hear their Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Achievement

With an identity anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God, YSCCs no longer measure their self-worth by what they do. They can rightly think of their achievement as cooperating with God's power.

Ying Hui (Y. Tan 2019) spoke of a more authentic-to-self and God-glorifying ministry. She no longer pretended to be strong and perfect but admitted her brokenness and need for God. She learnt that "asking for help was a sign of bravery rather than weakness". She had thought that as a Christian, she "should project the best image of myself and be that one strong friend

that everyone could count on for encouragements and godly counsel". She had "missed the point that we are ultimately fallible human beings" which "makes God such a necessity in our lives". Quoting 2 Cor. 12:9–10, she said: "It is so tempting to hide behind a façade of perfection and flawlessness…when we admit our brokenness, God's glory can begin to shine in our lives."

Darren (Yip 2018, 78) was prideful about doing well in his A levels and then felt "useless" because of a failure. God "reshaped" his focus: "I didn't see myself as my own person, but a person that belongs to God…Whatever I can do…it's not only by my own strength, but also by the strength and the graces by the person that created me". This perspective "changes a lot of things, not from a spiritual viewpoint, but from a psychological viewpoint" because "not attributing it to myself doesn't make me feel useless".

God empowers YSCCs in their fallibility and finitude. Darren referred to the Creator's "strength and graces". Ying Hui quoted 2 Cor. 12:9–10 which express Christocentric empowerment: Paul endured a thorn in the flesh, along with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties "for Christ's sake" as "Christ's power" rested on him. His suffering was arguably more severe than Ying Hui's but the principle of Christocentric empowerment also applies to her. In a Trinitarian view of empowerment, the Father grants YSCCs strength through his Spirit in their inner being so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith (Eph. 3:14–17).

In a culture of perfection, the image of a high-achiever is someone who has got it all together and strives from a position of strength. This is unauthentic because human beings are finite (especially their body) and fallible and divided within themselves due to sin and alienation from God and others. With Ying Hui, the countercultural image is that of YSCCs who achieve despite their weakness because of God's power. They have "this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). YSCCs can more effectively help others when they admit their need for God and experience his presence or deliverance. His glory shines through their brokenness and draws others to him and not to them. Though fallible, YSCCs need not remain broken but can be increasingly formed in Christ, who lived in the same flesh as the perfect, sinless human being. They can be hopeful of achieving by cooperating with God as a regular quality of their life as Jesus did. However, this hope is balanced with the reality of human finitude which Jesus also accepted,

by withdrawing from ministry and resting when he was tired: “It is not casting doubt on God’s available unlimited resources, but learning to accept the God-given limitations of our humanity” (Hui 2001, 80).

Having been weak and helped, YSCCs can better empathise with the weak and point them to God. Some YSCCs who were once counted “unblessable” (e.g., from a broken family) may give thanks for God’s “eschatological reversals for the unfortunate” (the first four Beatitudes). YSCCs can also share the mind of Jesus who, by citing a full spectrum of unfortunate and virtuous conditions that are blessed, made clear that life in God’s kingdom is available to everyone who put their confidence in him. In meritocratic Singapore, “everyone” includes “lesser achievers” or failures whom society looks down upon.

However, YSCCs also achieve their goals from a position of strength through their talent, skills and hard work. One problem, as Darren noted, is pride. YSCCs think they achieved by their strength without God. Pride breeds envy, presumption (“a false estimate of oneself”), ambition (“an inordinate love of honor or authority”) and vanity (“an inordinate desire to be thought well of”) (S. Chan 1998, 74). Related problems are overwork, which is a misuse of the body and “a failure to work things out with God” for “God never gives us too much to do” (Willard 2012b, 174), and false ideas of success and wealth.

In their pride, YSCCs confuse their identity with their achievements so when they fail, they swing to the other extreme of thinking of themselves as useless. Besides anchoring their identity on their relationship with God, YSCCs can recognise, as Darren did, that they could not have achieved anything by their strength alone except with God. This is a lesson in humility before God and gratitude for his grace. With Willard, God gave human beings powers to be exercised in cooperation with him and others. When they are alienated from God and lose their unifying principle in him, they become divided in themselves. They can still do many things by their powers but not in God’s way and even with horrifying consequences. This is why YSCCs cannot truly live as “their own person”.

YSCCs are not autonomous achievers also because, with Darren, they belong to their Creator and depend on his strength and graces. God sustains YSCCs (e.g., food and clothing in Jesus’ Sermon) so that they can achieve. He may intervene directly or indirectly through others, miraculously or providentially. The worldly-minded invoke luck and chance to explain away

divine providence but YSCCs with the eyes of faith see God's hand at work and thank him for it. Furthermore, dependence on God's strength is not reliance on an impersonal power but a relationship with the personal, transcendent God. The goal is not self-fulfilment or psychological comfort (Darren's desire not to feel useless could be construed as such) but union with God. In this union, with Willard, YSCCs "mesh" their kingdom with God's kingdom and live the "with-God" life of glorifying God by doing good, having a new character and experiencing his involvement in daily life. His interactions are not merely a one-way infusion of strength but also a co-working with YSCCs in an intimate, transforming friendship and a conversational relationship. The evidence of God working with YSCCs is that regular quality of life where "what they have to do does not crush them, and that the outcomes of their efforts far exceed anything that could be humanly anticipated" (Willard 2009, 162).

YSCCs may decouple achievements from identity by recalling that God is more interested in the person they are becoming than in their work (Willard 2018, 61; 2019, 24). With Jesus' Sermon, the Father desires the "greater righteousness" in their heart and their interpersonal relationships. As they increasingly reflect his character, they naturally will do good works. Their character development in the present prepares them for ruling with God in eternity.

YSCCs may also think of their achievements with the primary goal of glorifying God (Matt. 5:16, 1 Cor. 10:31). YSCCs do "good works" by pursuing excellence in their job that benefits others, who may then glorify their Father. With Jesus' Sermon, false ideas of security, success and wealth driving YSCCs are replaced by an eternal, God-centred perspective (e.g., storing up treasures in heaven, seeking the Father's kingdom). As Jesus' disciples, YSCCs are learning to do good works in the manner that Jesus would do good works if he were in their place. They also learn from his disciples through the centuries how God acts with them. YSCCs glorify God when they achieve with his empowerment because, again, "the outcomes of their efforts far exceed anything that could be humanly anticipated" (Willard 2009, 162). His glory is accentuated when YSCCs achieve these outcomes from a position of weakness.

Underlying YSCCs' understanding of achievements is their relationship with God. In the sequential order that Jesus presented his Sermon for spiritual formation, when YSCCs are assured of their well-being in God, they do not take things into their hands. They achieve without eye-service and work hard without anxiety, trusting in the Father's provision.

Holistic Model of the Self and its Formation

Spiritual formation for YSCCs prioritises thought but in a holistic model of the self and its formation, thought, feeling, will, body, social context and soul are mutually influencing and must be transformed in tandem. For Amy (n.d.), a thesis deadline triggered her perfectionist thoughts (high self-expectations with self-doubt) and feelings of anxiety and numbness. Her will vacillated between trying to control her situation (e.g., making up for lost time) and losing control (e.g., having difficulty waking up). Her body heated up when she thought too hard. Her brain shut down in response to stress. Relationally, she could not connect with God and others as she used to: She could not pray, read the Bible or hold a conversation with others.

Amy's recovery began with seeking help from others (her social context), then correcting her thoughts and caring for her body. She first saw a doctor, who referred her to a psychologist. The psychologist attributed her condition to her high expectations of herself, suggested she inform her professor about it and taught her stress-relieving techniques. Her professor suggested she get the deadline extended, write daily for 15 minutes and see a school counsellor. The counsellor helped her to see that she was a perfectionist. In church, when the preacher spoke about how "God doesn't waste suffering", she "felt a glimmer of hope". Then a friend at church hugged her, prayed and asked: "Is your hope rooted on whether God will deliver you from this situation, or are you going to hope in God regardless of what happens?" That moment led to a "huge change" in her perspective—"even if I didn't know what the outcome would look like, I know that I will still want to trust Him". She completed her thesis, saw another counsellor and continued to "grow in self-knowledge through counselling". The "continual discovery of new paradigms of living was pivotal" to get her back on her feet: "To counter my perfectionist tendencies, I learnt to be self-compassionate—being kinder to myself, giving myself space to rest, make mistakes and figure things out." She was "slowly unlearning (the) false belief" that her self-worth was defined by her work and ministry. She still felt anxious or overwhelmed on some occasions but she paced herself and practised self-care. She learnt to "keep struggling with Him" and "voice out" her feelings.

The positive changes in Amy's thoughts about God and her situation were supported by other thoughts of self-knowledge and new ideas for living. By giving herself space to make mistakes and figure things out, she accepted her human finitude. By resting and pacing herself, she took care of her body and soul. Her thoughts, feelings and will worked together for good. When she appropriated by faith the thought that "God does not waste suffering", hope arose in her. Through a friend's words and hug, she felt loved. Her friend's encouragement to "hope in God regardless of what happens" reminded her of the goodness of her life in God, which brought her peace. In her condition of peace based on faith and hope in God, her anxiety eased and feelings of assurance arose. Her thoughts and emotions aligned to support her will to "still want to trust Him" and finish her thesis.

Although this thesis prioritises replacing false ideas of God and self, practically speaking, this aspect of thought may not be the first "port-of-call". YSCCs overwhelmed by their feelings and bodily sensations (e.g., tiredness) need to first restore their "margins", the space between their load and their limits, in emotional energy, physical energy and time (Hui 2001, 82) (e.g., reschedule commitments, rest), and to evaluate their distorted thinking process (e.g., Raphael's "all-or-nothing" thinking). Pragmatic YSCCs may welcome practical, immediate solutions more than "spiritual" solutions involving "abstract" contemplations about God that require focused, sustained attention with no immediate results. Yet, pragmatically speaking, YSCCs who practise spiritual disciplines will face less difficulty in using them and reap more benefit than those with scant experience and training with the disciplines.

Formation through the Asian Family and the Singapore Church

YSCCs' spiritual formation involves formation through their relationships with their family, community and church. Their identity and spiritual life as "beings-in-relation" are not only patterned after the "tri-unity of differentiated persons" of God (Scorgie & Reimer 2011, 78) but also sustained by the Trinity who indwells God's people (John 14:17, 23; 17:22–23); this "assumes a definite shape with the church created by Christ" (S. Chan 1998, 103). God works in and through YSCCs' interpersonal relationships which, with Jesus' Sermon, can be the crucible for spiritual formation, beginning with their close relations (e.g., their biological and spiritual family). Willard notes that "love comes to us from God" which must be "our unshakable circle of sufficiency", from which we make it our purpose to "become one who

loves others with Christ's agape" (2012b, 183, cf. John 13:34). Willard's prioritising of the family in the formation of self affirms YSCCs' family orientation but also calls for redeeming their negative experiences with their parents.

Raphael provides a case study of formation-in-family. He reported that his non-affirming, unaffectionate relationship with his parents distorted his idea of the Father, whereas through a mentor, he learnt that God saw him as "His precious son" and "enjoys and treasures" him. However, in a later article, Raphael (Zhang 2020) wrote: "I felt God challenge me to think about how my father—imperfect as he was and an unbeliever—actually helped me to understand aspects about God the Father." For example, God is always present (his father was constantly at home), faithful (he kept the same job), logical and reasonable (he explained his tactics when playing chess), self-sacrificial (he did not develop his artistic potential but went to technical school to acquire the skills he needed for a job to support the family) and creatively redemptive (he repaired broken gadgets). Willard (1998, 227) affirmed that Christian parents and relatives can reflect aspects of God's parental character but Raphael's experience suggests that non-Christian parents can also do so. Jesus also points to earthly parents to show how the Father loves "much more" (Matt. 7:9–11) even as "all human fathers are measured and judged by the Father's love of the Son" (Hauerwas 2006, 76–77, on Matt. 6:9). God in his providence makes himself and his ways known through human cultures. These "revealed" aspects are also cultural insofar as Raphael's father followed the parenting style of his own father, transmitted the values of his upbringing and conformed to the tradition of Chinese fathers who command respect as the head of the family and the family's provider. Raphael's ideal of an approachable, nurturing father who shows his affections for his child is gaining acceptance in Singapore society (N. Chin 2019) and can reflect the Father's love but this ideal is also cultural and resonates with Western egalitarian values. Because sinful human beings distort God's ways, all cultures need to be redeemed by God, including their understanding and practice of parent-child relationships. YSCCs who know God's love can progress in their spiritual formation by redeeming their relationship with their parents. Raphael (Zhang 2020) is learning to forgive his father, see that his father did not have a perfect relationship with his own father and understand that his father needs the Father. By also considering how their parents may reflect God's character, YSCCs can be thankful for their parents and God's hand in their life despite their parents' inadequacies and the wrongs that their parents have done to them.

YSCCs refer to the church's role in their recovery in terms of a significant moment during corporate worship. The Word was ministered through a song (Stephenie) and the pulpit (Amy, Raphael) but transformation by the Word usually requires sustained and sufficiently intense interactions with it (Willard 1998, 356). YSCCs' focus on the "transforming moment" reflects the tendency to structure narratives around crisis-induced turning points and need not be taken as a comprehensive review of the factors in their recovery. Their narratives could be balanced by reflecting on the more mundane, sustained aspects of corporate formation. Liturgical practices, performed regularly, can have a more subtle formative effect. For example, throughout her struggle, Ying Hui "went to church every Sunday, breaking down at countless worship sessions and altar calls and asking that God would reach in and pull me out of this black valley". She did not attribute these moments to her recovery but her routine of attending church, worshipping with others and responding to altar calls (presumably for prayers) may have sustained her faith even when her problems did not immediately go away.

Amy's and Ying Hui's accounts raise the issue of how the church can be a community that bears one another's burden. Amy (n.d.) was alone after a Sunday service when a friend sat next to her and asked her how she was. Even though she gave a nondescript reply, her friend hugged her and she started crying. They went to a quieter place to pray and she confessed to her friend, "I just felt confused." Her friend challenged her to hope in God regardless of whether he delivered her. God used her friend in church to support her and speak his word to her. Her friend took the initiative and risk to approach her, not withdrawing when she vulnerably shared about her confusion but giving appropriate counsel. Amy's vulnerability opened the door to receive comfort from another person. With Jesus' Sermon and Willard, one must listen sensitively without condemnation or manipulation, and help by asking the one in need and asking God. For Ying Hui (Y. Tan 2019), vulnerability meant not pretending to be perfect but admitting her brokenness. Singapore churches that are conversant with a theology of celebration and victory will also need a theology of suffering (G. Ong 2021). For example, Amy learnt that "God doesn't waste suffering" and she may hope in God regardless of whether he delivered her or not. Ying Hui recognised God's "purpose" in bringing her through her "distressing journey" so she would "learn never again to lock (herself) up with desolation and entertain the lies of the enemy". The strength they received by understanding their suffering in the light of God's purposes is compatible with Willard's idea of the soul being alive because of the presence of meaning and its power of "carryover" or transcendence to relieve pain (2012b, 203). A theology of suffering can be supplemented by Willard's idea

about God's "totally unbroken care, along with God-given adequacy to whatever happens" (1998, 266) and Jesus' Sermon to the persecuted that pointed to eschatological reward, the exemplars of other sufferers, God's sufficiency and justice, and non-compromise of their distinctive witness. Even as YSCCs expressed confidence about the goodness of their existence amid their struggles, there is a place for lament when the darkness has yet to lift and God seems absent, as the Psalms express (e.g., Ps. 88) or St John of the Cross described in the "dark night of the soul" (Villanueva 2014, 132–133). "Dark nights" may be "developmental transitions" where one experiences "temporary reductions in well-being" as one moves towards spiritual maturity (Sandage et. al 2008, 191). The church can teach her members to lament alongside one another and permit the faithful to doubt and express despair without condemning them (Ong 2021).

Despite the diversity of spiritual gifts in the church, Amy sought and found help from counsellors instead of her pastor, her small group or a trusted person in her church (apart from the friend who approached her). YSCCs may not turn to the church for help for fear of social stigma with mental illness, a lack of confidentiality and others over-spiritualising their problem or prescribing unhelpful solutions to "fix" their problem. YSCCs may trust a certified, trained (Christian) counsellor or psychologist more than their pastor given the professionalisation of mental health care and the perception that the problem is psychological and not also spiritual, and that these two realms are separate. The church can partner with mental health professionals to be a community for spiritual formation and healing for YSCCs.

If the Singapore church has also become achievement-oriented, then she will need to recover her identity and purpose and reorder her priorities for spiritual formation summarised in Matthew 28:18–20. The church will make disciples of Jesus by teaching YSCCs to obey his commands from the inside out. This includes teaching the spiritual reality of God and his kingdom, and its present availability for all who put their confidence in Jesus Christ, as the basis for their obedience. The church will also teach YSCCs to practise spiritual disciplines as a means of grace for inward transformation, not mere behaviour modification. The church will remove any false securities in material wealth or strategies that uncritically adopt the values and methods of secular corporate culture. Their interpersonal relationships will reflect Christ's agape and not be purely functional or utilitarian. As "salt of the earth" and "light of the world", the church's character of kingdom righteousness precedes her missions. Being precedes doing for every YSCC and the church.

Spiritual Disciplines

YSCCs report that they pray, read the Bible and have fellowship (Amy, Raphael), and participate in corporate worship (Amy, Ying Hui, Stephenie). These practices can be regularly observed as spiritual disciplines of engagement to bring before YSCCs God's greatness and goodness. In the discipline of study, YSCCs intensively internalise by "thoughtful inquiry" and "practical experimentation" the order of God's kingdom seen not only in the Bible but also in others who walk in the way and "every good thing in nature, history, and culture" (Willard 1998, 361). Study "establishes good epidermal responses of thought, feeling and action" that integrate them into "the flow of God's eternal reign" (1998, 362). The worship of God "imprints" on YSCCs' whole being the reality that they study (Willard 1998, 363). YSCCs may add to worship, the discipline of celebration, which dwells on God's greatness "as shown in his goodness to us" (Willard 1988, 179). YSCCs can gather with God's people to eat, drink and tell stories of God's actions in their lives which can make their "deprivations and sorrows seem small" and strengthen them to do God's will (Willard 1988, 181). As YSCCs pray more frequently, they think more to pray; when God responds, their confidence in his power grows (Willard 1988, 185). But prayer "has its greatest force in strengthening the spiritual life" only as YSCCs "learn to pray without ceasing", training themselves to "invoke God's presence in everything" they do (Willard 1988, 185–186). "God will meet us in love, and love will keep our minds directed toward him as the magnet pulls the needle of the compass…our whole lives will be bathed in the presence of God" (Willard 1988, 186). In fellowship, YSCCs engage in study, worship, celebration, prayer and service with other disciples where they sustain and are sustained by each other by exercising their diverse spiritual gifts (Willard 1988, 186–187). This is why "personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals".

If YSCCs were regularly practising these spiritual disciplines yet struggled with their achievement-based identity, then how effective were the disciplines or the way they practised them in overcoming the deforming effects of this identity? Their situation seems to corroborate with Willard's observation that despite the emphases on prayer and Bible study, few people "succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome" (1988, 186) and these disciplines "degenerate into legalistic

and ineffectual rituals" (2006, 154). One reason is a misunderstanding of discipleship that emphasises behavioural modification and regimentation instead of changing one's core values with such guilt-inducing accountability practices as: "Have you done your quiet time? If you have done your quiet time, have you done it at 6am?" (E. Chan 2020). Another reason is that any discipline requires pressing on against one's "burdensome" feeling but relying on willpower alone is not as sustainable as Raphael's request for God's help "to want to treasure whatever was upon His heart" (Zhang 2017). For him, prayer and Bible study are not ends in themselves but a means to enrich his relationship with God and also depends on it. A third and more fundamental reason is Willard's argument that prayer and Bible study cannot have a flourishing effect in peoples' lives "precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented, and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged in" (2006, 154). This may be why Amy's (n.d.) anxiety hindered her from communing with God through her usual practice of praying and reading the Bible, whereas discovering new paradigms of living that recognise the holistic model of self, such as giving herself "space to rest" and "figure things out", was "pivotal" in her recovery. With Willard (1988, 186; 2006, 154), YSCCs can practise the disciplines of abstinence of silence, solitude and fasting, with rest, as a foundation for and in tandem with prayer and Bible study.

In solitude, YSCCs abstain from interaction with other people to disrupt achievement-based "patterns of feeling, thought, and action" in everyday life (Willard 1988, 160). Solitude and silence also create the "inner space" for driven YSCCs to break their rush through life and interrupt their habit of constantly managing things or thinking they are in control. They learn to "do nothing" so that they can refrain from doing wrong and "be better able to do the right thing" (Willard 1998, 359). They may then discover good things: "I'm more than what I do"; "God is near". When they know who/whose they are, that "harassing, hovering feeling" that they must do something eases (Willard 1998, 360).

In fasting (Willard 1988, 166–167), YSCCs learn how they use "food pleasures to assuage the discomforts caused in (their) bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes", including "lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise". YSCCs depend on God by "finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food" and practise self-denial by learning to "suffer happily as (they) feast on God". Through constant, systematic practice, they develop "a clear and constant sense of their resources in God" to "endure deprivations of all kinds…easily and cheerfully". They also learn self-

control, moderation and restraint of “all their fundamental drives”. YSCCs may fast from other things on which they inordinately depend to relieve stress, such as YouTube videos, Netflix shows, gaming consoles and social media.

YSCCs may combine the disciplines of secrecy (abstinence) and service (engagement) to address pride and vanity. In secrecy, YSCCs “abstain from causing their good deeds and qualities to be known” (Willard 1988, 172) just as Jesus taught about giving alms, praying and fasting in secret. With God’s grace, they “tame the hunger” for fame, justification and others’ attention, and learn “love and humility before God and others” (Willard 1988, 173). In a competitive, meritocratic society, they pray counter-culturally for others to be more outstanding and rejoice in their successes (Willard 1988, 174). Through service, YSCCs also learn to please God in their lowliest acts and serve others in the spirit of Jesus, gaining “the freedom of a humility that carries no burdens of ‘appearance’” (Willard 1988, 184).

CONCLUSION

This thesis proposed a theology and practice of spiritual formation for YSCCs with four aspects: an identity anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God, achievement as cooperating with God's power, a holistic model of self and its formation, and spiritual disciplines of abstinence and engagement. Using a qualitative and conceptual approach that engaged YSCCs' testimonies and context, and Willard's writings and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this thesis concludes that Willard's ideas of spiritual formation, contextualised for YSCCs, provide a robust basis to overcome their achievement-based identity.

The thesis began with five YSCCs' accounts to show the extent to which they base their identity on their achievements with debilitating consequences. From their political, socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts, it argued that Singapore's philosophy of pragmatism and meritocracy, and the cultural influence of Confucianism, mediated by the education system, contributed to YSCCs' achievement-based identity. Globalisation, which intensifies competition and spreads consumerism, reinforced this identity. Singapore's pragmatism and meritocracy appear to have influenced the Singapore church to be achievement-oriented.

A critical textual study of Willard's theology and concept of spiritual formation yielded the four aspects of formation with priority given to reforming YSCCs' thoughts of God alongside their feelings, will, body, social context and soul. Willard's prioritising of family in the formation of self affirms YSCCs' family orientation but also calls for redeeming the negative aspects of their experience with their parents. Despite the criticisms levelled against Willard's individualistic and inward-looking self, he does recognise the importance of the missional and ecclesial aspects of spiritual formation. He also calls for practising solitude and silence to maximise the formative effect of prayer and Bible study.

A hermeneutical study of Jesus' Sermon in dialogue with Willard's exegesis of the same supplied an understanding of identity based on a relationship with a merciful Father "in the heavens" who is "always near", with Jesus as the preeminent Teacher, and with others in agape.

These contextual, theological and biblical insights were brought into a dialogue with the YSCCs' recovery experiences under the four aspects of formation. Priority is given to keeping before YSCCs' minds ideas of the great and good God. A comprehensive identity construct was proposed, anchored on YSCCs' relationship to the Father and the Son through the Spirit, with ontological/substantial, functional and eschatological aspects. An understanding of YSCCs' achievements as cooperating with God's power embraces their human weakness and relativises their strength. YSCCs must admit they are broken and need God's help, and eliminate pride in their achievements. Willard's model of the self and its formation, applied to YSCCs, suggests that although the symptoms of distress and burnout were presented through their feelings (e.g., anxiety) and their body (e.g., lethargy), spiritual deformation and reformation occurred through their thoughts (e.g., of God and self) and social context (e.g., family). This thesis affirmed YSCC's family orientation and that their parents may reflect God's character but they must redeem their negative experiences with their parents. The Singapore church needs a theology of suffering and an honest, sympathetic approach to YSCCs' mental health problems. She must address any influence of pragmatism and meritocracy within her and prioritise discipleship and spiritual formation of YSCCs. Disciplines of abstinence and engagement require one another to achieve their full effect to bring God before YSCCs' minds, increase their confidence in him, and deal with pride.

Further avenues of research

This thesis examined the accounts of "high-achieving" YSCCs in or going to university. The anecdote in Chapter 2 of Shawn, who saw little worth in his vocational education, raises the question of how YSCCs who do not "make it" in Singapore's achievement-oriented culture are deformed by it and can be formed in Christ. A theology of spiritual formation for them will address a different set of problems of low self-esteem, under-achievement and social rejection. The YSCCs studied in this thesis appear to have been raised in intact, functioning families. A theology of spiritual formation for YSCCs from broken or dysfunctional families, or who have experienced physical or sexual abuse by close relations, may need to focus on healing the deep hurts done to the soul and forgiveness in their close relationships.

This thesis took a focused approach to biblical and theological resources, primarily Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Willard's theology. The biblical research could be extended to

John's Gospel, especially Jesus' Upper Room discourse, for a more Trinitarian approach, and to the Epistles of Paul, who articulated a "psychology of redemption" (Willard 1988, 112–113). As the YSCCs' high regard for family ties revealed, a contextual, Asian theology of spiritual formation needs to be developed in critical dialogue with other theologies. This theology should interact with the multi-religious, multi-ethnic context of Asia amid secularising influences. In Singapore, Buddhist-influenced mindfulness and Hindu-influenced yoga have gained a following, and young people professing to have no religion are on the increase. Future research can interact with psychology, sociology, neuroscience and other disciplines, including how theories of human development bear on spiritual formation.

This thesis suggested the influence of pragmatism and meritocracy in the Singapore church based on interviews with 26 Singaporean Christians and two pastors. Further research could confirm this influence and examine its nature. To elaborate on the church's role in spiritual formation, one could study YSCCs' understanding of ecclesiology and whether their concept of spirituality tends towards being individualistic given the influence of North American/ Western theologies and the culture of Singapore's English-speaking churches.

This thesis proposed a theology and practice of spiritual formation for YSCCs with four aspects: an identity anchored on their relationship with a great and loving God, achievement as cooperating with God's power, a holistic model of self and its formation, and spiritual disciplines of abstinence and engagement. One could develop a curriculum or a plan for a pastor or a youth pastor to use Willard's ideas in relation to these four aspects to help YSCCs to overcome their achievement-based identity.

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