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A Conspiracy Revealed: The Divine Conspiracy (by Willard, D.)

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A CONSPIRACY REVEALED

Willard, D. (1998)

The divine conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God. San Francisco, CA: Harper-SanFrancisco. Hardcover. xviii + 428 pp. \$22.00. ISBN 0-06-069333-9.

Reviewed by PAULA A. JOHNS and STEVEN J. SANDAGE

Theologian and scholar Dallas Willard has long been an eloquent voice for the relevance of God in daily living. His ground-breaking books, In Search of Guidance and The Spirit of the Disciplines, forever changed the way thousands of Christians experience their faith. He is a professor at the University of Southern California's School of Philosophy and has held visiting appointments at UCLA and the University of Colorado.

When I (Paul) first obtained Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy*, I could not help but notice the attractive painting of two ripe plums on the cover. "What a nice touch," I thought. "A fine painting—a little color, artistic shapes, and angles. It grabs my attention." But after feasting upon the wisdom behind this finely decorated cover, I came to appreciate the symbolism of fruit on the tree.

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard gives maturing Christians an opportunity to reconceptualize their place in the kingdom of heaven. As a fitting completion to Willard's wisdom-filled "trilogy on the spiritual life" (p. xvii), *The Divine Conspiracy* stresses discipleship to Jesus as the heart of the gospel message. He challenges the reader to set aside common misconceptions, what he calls "consumer

Christianity" and "bumper-sticker faith," to reclaim one's present position in "the kingdom among us."

The "kingdom of the heavens," as Willard sees it, is a reintegration of "the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God" (p. 27). This kingdom is not only a place of future rest and glory, but also the realm of "eternal life now" (p. 27) when God makes us a part of His life and His life a part of ours. Willard encourages reconsideration of traditional understandings of what it means to be a Christian. He asserts that a single moment of forgiveness has too often been the focal point of Christian spirituality. Or, Christians have been encouraged to look forward to the day that our names will be read from the Book of Life. Still others have focused on combating social evils and heralding a gospel of community and justice. Although Willard believes all are vitally important spiritual dimensions, he suggests much has been lost.

Willard asserts that as we focus primarily on eternity beyond death or on eradicating sin's effects on earth, we begin to accept a gospel of sin management (Chapter 2). Thus, we strive to gain God's acceptance by receiving a checkmark in our soul, so to speak, indicating our membership in the kingdom of heaven. Transformation of life and character finds no place in the mind of the believer because it is often thought unnecessary, too difficult, or even impossible. Willard advances a view of Christian spirituality that integrates faith with the whole of life.

After laying initial theological groundwork on the kingdom of God, Willard offers an in-depth interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. Uniquely and powerfully, he brings the words of Christ to bear on the life of a Christian. Far more than teachings about moral behavior, this "Discourse on the Hill," as Willard calls it, has a purposeful sequence for the transformation of the whole Christian. Willard relates the Scriptures about anger, adulterous behavior, and attitudes about divorce, to name a few, to everyday life and human personality with profound pastoral and philosophical insight.

Traditional distinctions between theology, ethics, and psychology are blurred as Willard weaves together "a curriculum for Christlikeness." He invites the reader to become a disciple of Christ, not in order to strictly avoid evil and do good, but to be inwardly and outwardly changed in thought and action. By repeatedly addressing the "arrangement of human personality" (p. 325) in such areas as the soul, will, mind, and emotions, Willard advances what could

be described as a biblical psychology. He addresses topics such as relational bonding and the drive for significance. He draws on diverse bodies of knowledge, including philosophy, literature, biblical studies, psychology, natural science, and a variety of spiritual writings. For example, in Chapter 3 Willard develops, with superb integrative insight, a connection between the human spirit and the body that builds on Emmanuel Levinas's provocative motif of "the face": The human face, eyes, and hands are "where the spiritual reality of the person becomes present to others" (p. 76). The face of a child reveals his or her spirit since most children have not yet learned how to hide it. Willard suggests that the spiritually mature are "childlike," surrendering the need to use their face and body to hide their spirit, as many adults have unfortunately learned to do.

Willard's section on anger and contempt offers another area of psychological and clinical relevance. He argues that anger is a spontaneous, vital function in response to a threat and is not inherently wrong. He suggests, however, that anger is dangerous, often resulting from a "wounded ego," and usually includes "an element of self-righteousness and vanity" (p. 149). Willard sees contempt (i.e., a cold-hearted effort to exclude others by attacking the natural desire to belong) as having more destructive potential than anger. This section of the book may be most relevant to pathological anger, and those who appreciate liberation or empowerment views may feel Willard could have given more legitimacy to the value of moral anger in the work of justice. Although it would be a mistake to narrowly categorize a work as rich as Willard's, his emphasis on the mind and thinking patterns (especially in Chapter 9) suggests his model of spiritual change extends parallels to cognitive-behavioral schools of psychotherapy.

Although Willard is able to demonstrate how academic integrative scholarship may be helpful in weaving the concept of the kingdom among us with the tangible and intangible realities of this world, he takes integration to a more spiritual level. By becoming a disciple of Christ and being accepted into the present "kingdom of the heavens," one is progressively enlightened with a fully integrative view of reality. Furthermore, obedience to God's commands is not a result of law, but of transformation of a renewed heart and mind. As Willard puts it, "Kingdom obedience is kingdom abundance" (p. 312, author's emphasis). Hard distinctions between "theological" and "secular" disciplines are unnecessary when "our

human life ... is not destroyed by God's life but is fulfilled in it and in it alone" (p. 14). The relationship between our faith and psychology, for example, does not remain in the mind, rather it becomes a lived reality growing out of our discipleship to Christ and our awareness of our membership in the kingdom.

The Divine Conspiracy is probably most appropriate for readers with considerable biblical knowledge or interest in philosophical reflection, such as clergy and Christian educators. However, many psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and others who work to promote spiritual growth and change will find this book challenging and enlightening.

The title, which Willard has utilized without detailed explanation, leaves much room for interpretation. The term *conspiracy* might, in many cases, connote a secretive and hidden plot for change. Even though conspiracy may accurately reflect how Willard *believes* God has chosen to spread the gospel throughout the world, the term may also confuse the reader. God the Victor can be seen as God the Conspirator—likely, for many, a drastically new way of thinking about God's will and purpose. Yet, conspiracy feels provocatively accurate upon reading what Willard has so diligently and sensitively conveyed. *The Divine Conspiracy* is a comprehensive exposition on what it means to believe in and obey God and extend God-like love to others as crucial facets of our everyday existence.

I was surprised and impressed that Willard often seemed to anticipate my (Paul's) questions. He challenged my intellect yet sensitively nurtured my emotions. I found the book personally stimulating, providing new perspectives on my life in Christ, and causing me to reflect deeply upon how I can better realize God's kingdom in my personal and professional life. After reading the book, I took another look at the painting of the fruit on the cover. No longer was it simply artistically printed plums. The plums hanging on the tree limb were ripe and ready to be immediately picked and consumed. To wait would be to miss the perfect time to enjoy their freshness. Perhaps Willard wants us to see a similar spiritual reality. Above all, he seems to be encouraging us not only to see beauty and joy in the heavens following our departure from this world, but also to see that God desires to give us a fuller life right now. But we must be willing to reach out, pick the fruit of life from the tree of grace, and consume it daily, allowing it to nourish us spiritually in a way that we can feel and

others can see. *The Divine Conspiracy* challenges one to reflect on the availability of such grace to actually effect change, which focuses on questions at the heart of the task we call integration.