

*The Divine Conspiracy* by Prof. Dallas Willard

Review by Barbara Buzzard



The first sentence of the introduction to this book so gripped me that I knew I had to write a review: “My hope is to gain a *fresh hearing for Jesus*, especially among those who believe they already understand him.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly noted author and scholar Dallas Willard had my attention. In Jesus’ case, “Presumed familiarity has led to unfamiliarity, unfamiliarity has led to contempt, and contempt has led to profound ignorance.”<sup>2</sup> This is a picture which several other authors I have reviewed identify with.

Equally galvanizing was this: “It is the failure to understand Jesus and his words as reality and vital information about life that explains why, today, we do not routinely teach those who profess allegiance to him how to do what he said was best.”<sup>3</sup> Prof. Willard’s emphasis upon the words and teaching of Jesus is rare and even disputed in its importance. For example, “Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus’ teachings, but that is not so...Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon Himself our guilt and die in our place.”<sup>4</sup>

Prof. Willard often includes the phrase “and his words” when he speaks of Jesus. I read him as revealing that popularly we have a Jesus *without* his words and hence not the genuine individual. Willard finds that not only do we not do what Jesus said, we don’t know how to do it; and we don’t seriously attempt it. He actually says that there is a stranglehold of ideas and concepts that shunt Jesus aside and he speaks of the “real” Jesus, indicating that there is a false one. This is an amazing state of affairs, if true, because he is essentially telling us that the established church hides the words of Jesus. Historically, Jesus brought vital information; currently we disregard it and use other material. Willard doesn’t say it quite so starkly but that is the gist of it (in my opinion).

Willard notes in his introduction that his hope is to provide an understanding of the gospel that will enable Christians to obey or “do” it. This too, is radical. How can one “obey” that common understanding of the gospel — Jesus’ dying and being raised? Willard can be pretty scathing in his words, speaking of a “mindless orthodoxy” and urging instead “intelligent, careful, intensive but straightforward reading.” He speaks of apprenticeship to Jesus (and his words!)

Willard writes with enthusiasm and has a gift for portraying his ideas. I enjoyed his humorous “stand up for your responsibilities” version of the usual “stand up for your rights.” Also “practice routinely purposeful kindnesses” instead of “practice random acts of kindness.”

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God, HarperSanFrancisco, Introduction

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. xi

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xiv

<sup>4</sup> “How I Know Jesus Is God,” Truths That Transform, Nov. 17th, 1989.

Prof. Willard emphasizes God's invitation to His kingdom and Jesus' role of being the Way into this kingdom life. "But intelligent, effectual entry into this life is currently obstructed by clouds of well-intentioned *misinformation*. The "gospels" that predominate where he is most frequently invoked speak only of preparing to die or else of correcting social practices and conditions...Our usual "gospels" are, in their effects—dare we say it—nothing less than a standing invitation to omit God from the course of our daily existence."<sup>5</sup> Thank God that Prof. Willard dared to say it. In the year 2013, it surely is not possible that we do not really understand what the *gospel* is – or is it?

I think that Dallas Willard's manner of asking acute questions is very effective in helping us to see what "the system" has done to us. (He reminds us that genius is the ability to scrutinize the obvious, and perhaps he has this genius.) He asks: "Does Jesus only enable me to 'make the cut' when I die?" And by this he means – is "heaven" all there is? Do we not differ profoundly in our new lives as believers from our prior selves? Willard answers: More likely, we currently do not understand who he is and what he brings."<sup>6</sup> He is here introducing the Kingdom of God, the gospel that Jesus preached, but so often *not* recognized as being a part of the gospel. As Willard sees it, the rule of God is now accessible to everyone and he deems it a "remarkable new opportunity." (Mark 1:15)

Willard says of Jesus: "He simply was the good news about the kingdom. He still is."<sup>7</sup> I applaud Prof. Willard for his inclusion of the kingdom as part of the gospel and for his insight into what Jesus came to do, which was very much more than to die and be raised (Luke 4:43). Try this test: (not in the book) – what did the disciples preach as gospel for a total of 31 chapters in Matthew, Mark and Luke *before* they understood that Jesus was to die and be raised? The answer of course is the Kingdom of God.

Willard puts the greatest part of his emphasis by far on the present kingdom. I would think that in this case, it would be like having a grand party but without the guest of honor. I.e. how could you possibly have a kingdom without the king? Yes, absolutely we can have a foretaste of the kingdom now; we can attempt "kingdom living," "kingdom morality," but in the absence of the king, we do not experience the whole of it, or even the climax. (Especially as the current ruler of this age is the evil one – 2 Cor. 4:4!) We are schooled by the Scriptures to anticipate the coming of Jesus who will inaugurate and usher in his Father's kingdom. According to Mat. 25 which gives us a time frame: *when* Jesus comes, *then* he will sit on his throne and *then* he will give the kingdom as an inheritance to the saints and *then* the wicked shall be punished.

This is how I understand the history of this kingdom controversy: since the end of the 1800's a battle has raged over the question of whether the kingdom is essentially future or present. Albert Schweitzer shocked the theological world with his well known "bombshell". He pointed out that Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God was apocalyptic, that the kingdom would be established by a worldwide revolution at the second coming. An opposing school of interpreters maintained that such an idea of the kingdom was quite unsuitable for modern man. C.H. Dodd at Cambridge proposed that the kingdom was strictly and only present in the ministry of Jesus. And Bultmann "demythologized" the apocalyptic idea of the kingdom. The Jesus Seminar arbitrarily declared all the future kingdom statements of Jesus to be inauthentic. What havoc this has caused! Willard is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 12, emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 17

right to complain about gospels of sin management, and right to stress the ethics of the Kingdom taught by Jesus, but he himself speaks unclearly about the all-important future aspect of the Kingdom. Certainly it will be a restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) but more precisely this will entail a new Messianic political order on earth supervised by Jesus and the resurrected saints of all the ages. (The popular notion of heaven at death has tended to displace the future kingdom hope.)

Willard does not perceive the kingdom as a political one. This is his definition: “God’s own ‘kingdom,’ or ‘rule,’ is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done.”<sup>8</sup> However, he then says: “Thus, contrary to a popular idea, the kingdom of God is not *primarily* something that is ‘in the heart of men.’ That kingdom *may* be there, and it may govern human beings through their faith and allegiance to Christ. At the present time it governs them only through their hearts, if at all. But his kingdom is not something confined to their hearts or to the ‘inner’ world of human consciousness. It is not some matter of inner attitude or faith that might be totally disconnected from the public, behavioral, visible world. It always pervades and governs the whole of the physical universe—parts of planet earth occupied by humans and other personal beings, the satanic, slightly excepted for a while.”<sup>9</sup> This I find bewildering.

My delight at seeing that this author actually acknowledged *Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom* was dampened when I read that “thy kingdom come” in Willard’s thinking means “to take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded.”<sup>10</sup> My own test of whether the kingdom was here or not would be to ask: 1) Has Jesus returned? 2) Have we been “changed” into immortal beings? 3) Have the enemies of God been destroyed and Satan bound? 4) Is the earth filled with the knowledge of God? 4) Are the saints administrating the world under Jesus? 5) Is Jesus ruling the entire earth from Jerusalem? I was happy to see that Willard does speak of a “not yet” element to the rule of God but I did not find this future aspect clear.

Prof. Allen of Oxford, writing on the subject of the kingdom, sees unequivocally the centrality of the kingdom and also its inauguration: “The Kingdom — the central subject of Christ’s doctrine. With this he began his ministry (4:17) and wherever he went he taught it as Good News [Gospel] (4:23). The Kingdom he taught was coming, but not in his lifetime... And the disciples were to preach the Good News [Gospel] of the coming Kingdom (10:7, 24:14)... At the end of the age, the Son of Man will come to inaugurate His Kingdom...There is nothing here nor elsewhere in this Gospel to suggest that the scene of the Kingdom is other than the present world renewed, restored and purified.”<sup>11</sup>

Prof. Willard’s most brilliant insight as I see it, is that we have been led to believe that the atonement is the whole story. “If you ask anyone from that 74 % of Americans who say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ what the Christian gospel is, you will probably be told that Jesus died to pay for our sins, and that if we only believe he did this, we will go to heaven when we die... In this way what is only one theory of the “atonement” is made out to be the whole of the essential message of Jesus...this issue – what the faith that saves is – is a flash point of current controversy.”<sup>12</sup> There is the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 25

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>11</sup> W.C. Allen, MA, Prof. of OT at Oxford, on the Kingdom of God

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 42, 43

crunch, the nub, the jugular – what is the faith that saves us? I note that in Mark 10:17, 25, 26 - being saved is equated with believing in the kingdom, a radical concept to be sure. But if the gospel *saves*, and we have not understood it – what advantage do we have over the *unsaved*? This equation is also made in Mat. 19:16-25. Willard cautions that one cannot have a saving faith without obedience to the *teachings of Jesus*.<sup>13</sup>

The following observation bears directly on his prior “not the whole gospel” finding: “...those who profess Christian commitment consistently show little or no behavioral and psychological difference from those who do not.”<sup>14</sup> He has just given us two absolutely astounding findings: a partial gospel, and lives that do not bear witness to genuine Christianity. Note Willard’s summation: “When all is said and done, ‘the gospel’ for Ryrie, MacArthur, and others on the theological right is that Christ made ‘the arrangement’ that can get us into heaven. In the Gospels, *by contrast*, ‘the gospel’ is the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever...”<sup>15</sup>

Willard further notes that we have substituted for religious belief, many other practices, social ethics and some morally upright ideas such as freedom for all, using religious language and inclusivism. “This is the gospel of the current Christian left: Love comes out on top.”<sup>16</sup> The American Dream fits right in here. And Willard dramatically describes the message which the Christian left have given us as a “gospel of sin management.”

It is for insights such as these that Prof. Willard has become so famous. In fact, this book has been called “A masterpiece and a wonder...the book I have been searching for all my life.”<sup>17</sup> Another brilliant point: Willard refers to “the case of the Missing Teacher”, meaning, of course, the One who should be our rabbi, our Master Teacher. Rather, we have substituted “faith in Christ” but as a separate entity from the “faith of Christ.” “We settle back into *de facto* alienation of our religion from Jesus...Right at the heart of this alienation lies the absence of Jesus the teacher from our lives.”<sup>18</sup>

“At the 1974 Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, Michael Green asked rhetorically, ‘How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God?’ His answer was, ‘Not much. It is not our language. But it was Jesus’ prime concern.’”<sup>19</sup>

“During the past sixteen years I can recollect only two occasions on which I have heard sermons specifically devoted to the theme of the Kingdom of God...I find this silence rather surprising because it is universally agreed by New Testament scholars that the central theme of the teaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of God.”<sup>20</sup>

Again, upon reflection on the kingdom: “I cannot help wondering out loud why I haven’t heard more about it in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly read about it enough in the Bible...But I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God. As I rummage

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<sup>13</sup> This view quoted from John MacArthur

<sup>14</sup> *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 43

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49, emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>17</sup> From the Foreword by Richard Foster

<sup>18</sup> *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 55

<sup>19</sup> *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, Anthony Buzzard, pp. 14-16

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16n as quoted from *The Expository Times*

through my own sermon barrel, I now realize that I myself have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?”<sup>21</sup>

Willard’s conclusion is jolting: “Does what we have discussed in this chapter not make it clear that serious difficulties currently bar people of good intent from an effectual understanding of Jesus’ gospel for life and discipleship in his kingdom?”<sup>22</sup> But I thought that the church was the institution which was to provide answers, not to *bar* people from an understanding of what is involved in being saved! Professor Willard, have you not turned our world upside down? I am mindful of the saying that it is not that Christianity has failed; it is that it has not been tried yet.

One chapter subheading is this: “the God of Jesus and His People”. I should love to know what Prof. Willard was thinking when he wrote this. On first reflection I imagined that he was speaking *not* of a divine conspiracy, but of a divine truth – that Jesus has a God. God obviously does not have a God, since He *is* God. If Jesus *has* a God – he cannot *be* God. I was disappointed that the keynote scripture in all of scripture, Ps. 110:1 which explains so very much about the makeup of our universe was missing from the scripture index.

The divine conspiracy, as I understand it, is that anyone who *wants* to can see and understand, but that no one *has* to see. (I would think that this is a great offense to Calvinists!) It includes the mystery of the kindness of God in His Gospel invitation through His Son. Our part would be to believe in that Kingdom, and to act upon that belief – i.e. with obedience.

Sometimes a writer can so inject himself into his writing that you feel you know him. Along with his brilliant insights (e.g. Christian trinkets!) and observations came a sense that Willard liked/loved his fellow man. He was no carping critic but one who could see that all was not well in the established church -- where there has been a failure to identify and teach the gospel that Jesus preached.

This review covers only the first three chapters and the tenth (last) one. As a kingdom enthusiast, I was simply riveted by Willard’s thinking on that subject, and I have used up all my space. *Do* read this book. We all need to be challenged. I guarantee that you will be. The final chapter is entitled “The Restoration of All Things” and a subtitle reads: “Why We Must See A Future”. I was thoroughly relieved. In fact, I confess that I had to skip ahead. Willard makes the point that the future must make sense to us. I couldn’t agree more. “A human life or a human world is one that holds together in terms of the future. It essentially involves meaning. Meaning is not a luxury for us. It is a kind of spiritual oxygen, we might say, that enables our souls to live...The meaning of present events in human life is largely a matter of what comes later...From Jesus we learn of the ultimate context, God and his kingdom.”<sup>23</sup>

Prof. Willard thinks that Jesus made the present reality of the kingdom the basis of his gospel. Is it possible that he has overbalanced in his zeal and in his keen observations that all is not well within the church community? Books show us the world; Willard has shown us that the church world is ailing badly. It would not seem that the churches we know could be accredited by Jesus, as they preach a different gospel. “...the disconnection of life from faith, the absence from our churches of Jesus the teacher...is

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<sup>21</sup> *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, pp. 14, 15

<sup>22</sup> *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 59

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386

largely caused and sustained by the basic message that we constantly hear from Christian pulpits. We are flooded with what I have called ‘gospels of sin management,’...while Jesus’ invitation ...remains for the most part ignored and unspoken.”<sup>24</sup>

“We who profess Christianity will believe what is constantly presented to us as gospel. If gospels of sin management are preached, they are what Christians will believe. And those in the wider world who reject those gospels will believe that what they have rejected is the gospel of Jesus Christ himself – when, in fact, they haven’t yet heard it.”<sup>25</sup>

Quite simply, I don’t see how it is possible to explain the kingdom without the second coming; and I did not find it in this book. As you will readily see from this quotation of C. S. Lewis – ignorance and confusion reign: “They (the four gospels) are not ‘the gospel,’ the statement of the Christian belief.”<sup>26</sup>This lack of understanding the gospel is enormously serious business for a culture that considers itself Christian.

A leading evangelism expert, observed: “We seem to be faced with what can be called an **eclipse** of the Kingdom of God lasting from the apostolic age to the present, particularly in our theology of evangelization.” He adds: “The Kingdom of God is God’s own dream, His project for the world and for humanity! He makes us dreamers and He wants us to be seduced by His dream and to dream with Him...It is not we who dream but God who dreams in us.”<sup>27</sup>

Scripture speaks of the *blessed hope* and all revolves around it; we have been mostly ignorant of that blessed hope. In truth, when our hearts are captivated by God’s promise, God’s dream, that blessed hope, then we will find that there is good news for life.

Respectfully submitted,  
Barbara Buzzard  
September, 2013

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 57

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>26</sup> *Letters to Young Churches*, C. S. Lewis, p. 10 of introduction

<sup>27</sup> *Announcing the Reign of God*, Dr. Mortimer Arias, Fortress Press, 1984