



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

The Will of God

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What is the will of God?

More specifically, what is the will of God for me –for my life?

That question has come to me many times, the most recently from a lovely lady deeply committed in her church vocation. She wants to do the will of God, but some of what she has been taught is confusing to her. It does not seem consistent with a God of love. Yet she is anxious and fearful about her ability to live her life so that it pleases God.

So she wrote and asked, “How do you see it to be? What is the will of God as you understand it?”

“The chief end of man,” some say, “is to discover God’s will and to obey it.” Others say that God has specific plans in mind for each person. They believe God intervenes to prevent choices contrary to His will, and to cause choices that conform to His will. Still others are of the opinion that there is an over-all plan, and that persons have free will within that plan. And some say that it is all up to the person. All these shadings and differences of view only add to the complexity of trying to find an answer.

No single answer seems to be enough, but the person devoted to God wants an answer. It is very important to believe that one lives within the will of God.

As I remember my early religious beliefs, I was taught that God had a script for my life. I didn’t know what it was. It was up to me to figure it out. I had the Bible – and preaching – and the Sunday School Class – and prayer – and daily devotions at home – and all the religious exposures within which were the clues to enable me to discover what my script was. One way or another, God would speak to me, and I would know. Then all I had to do was to decide whether to obey or not.

The belief was clear and firm. God had a plan for and directed each individual life. Often, however, the clues were clouded and uncertain enough that I could not be sure that I knew just exactly what I was supposed to decide or do. I worried a great deal, searched diligently, and prayed ceaselessly.

Finally, I decided to trust my inner feeling. Somehow I would “just know” deep inside me what I was supposed to do and to be. The indication of the accuracy of my knowing would be in the opening and closing of the doors of opportunity.

It was not for me to consider the pros and cons of a decision. It didn’t make any difference if a course of action was promising or not. The only criterion to consider was the will of God.

I searched the Bible for signs to let me know I had made correct decisions. Most frequently, I turned to the book of Judges and read the story of Gideon and his struggle to

be sure that he spoke with God and that God would do as He said. Repeatedly he tested God, asking for a sign, and the sign was given to him. But, for all his searching and all his testing, Gideon never seemed truly satisfied that he knew God's will.

The more I worked with the issue of the will of God, the more difficulty I had with it. In time, I realized that the core of my problem was in the belief that God had a specific plan for every life. I could not equate that belief with any belief about the will and responsibility of the person.

Nor could I make it fit with my belief that God loves His people unconditionally.

If God had a specific plan for my life and if He required of me that I figure out what it was and then be obedient to it, I didn't see that I had much choice. When I thought about the dire threats of what would happen if I were disobedient, I didn't see much love in it.

It didn't work to throw the whole thing out. There is too much in the Bible about the will of God to do that. If what I had believed is not the will of God, then what is? What is His will for each person, and for all people? How can I know? How can I be sure?

At the time I was struggling most with these questions, my four children were very young, and I was also struggling with trying to be an effective parent. We had high hopes, and desires, and ambitions for them. In my effort to be clear about the will of God, I began to see some parallels with my will for my children, and I gave expression to it.

Even before our first child arrived, Miriam and I discussed at length our will for our children. We knew that we wanted them to know for sure that they were loved for themselves. We wanted them to be equipped to confront the challenges of life and make mature decisions for which they would be responsible. We knew that we could not protect them from threats and dangers by isolating them from the possibility. We realized that, at some point, we would need to release them completely from dependence on us, and from our dominance and authority. We came to understand that, if we really loved them, we could not write a script for them. Nor could we give and withhold our favor to keep them obedient to our desires for them. We also came to the conclusion that there was no love in expecting them to guess what would please us and what would not.

In the early years of their lives, we instructed them. We set limits for them and maintained them. We let them know what was required and expected of them. We gave them many opportunities to confront situations and make decisions.

Most of all, we tried to communicate our love for them.

As they grew and became more experienced, we continued to instruct, but gradually withdrew the limits so that they were more and more on their own responsibility. They grew up and went about the business of living their own lives.

The bond between us remains strong. They come back to us to share their good news and bad. They come to discuss the cares and concerns of their lives and are eager to hear our responses and reactions. In a very real sense, they are responsive to our will for them. They are who we want them to be.

Had we tried to write a script for each of them, it would have been different from the way their lives are turning out. Maybe what we would have written would be better—maybe not. No, I think it definitely would not have been better. We could not do more for them than to do all in our power to equip them for their own adult life as free and responsible individuals.

So I see it to be with God. I am one of His children. I believe that it is His will for me that I grow and become the person I have the potential to be. I believe that He is there with me every step of the way. We talk with one another. I study the Bible. I observe people and how they cope with life. I look for God's guidelines and instructions. I use the intelligence He has given me. I make decisions. I accept responsibility. I practice what I have learned. I stay open to further learning.

I believe that, in so doing, I am functioning within God's will for my life.

Is that all there is to it? I do all these things and I stay within His will for my life? No, that isn't all. In order to stay within His will, I believe that I must be continuously at the task of knowing Him better and better. I believe that I am created in His image, and that the most significant way I can live is to be like Him.

I am like Him. I was created that way. But I can't stay like Him unless I know about Him, and know Him, and make the decisions that enable me to give expression to being like Him.

I believe that God reveals who He is in two main ways. He discloses Himself in the Bible, and He makes Himself known in the loving behavior of people. What people write and say also helps me to grow in my understanding of who God is.

I turn to the Bible, and I find God. His values and standards are set forth. His encounters with His people are told. The evidence of His love is there, both in His involvements with His people, and in His instructions.

As I read and study, I realize that there are really two portraits of God. He is presented as authoritarian—conditional – demanding – wrathful – arbitrary – capricious. It is possible to bargain with Him. He can be swayed and pressured into changing His mind. He withholds His love and His favor until His people do as He requires of them. When they do not, He is very punitive, threatening even eternal hell as the price of

disobedience. He is harsh and cruel to those who oppose Him or stand in His way. He inspires fear and anxiety in His subjects. All together, He is unloving and unlovely.

God is also presented as unconditionally loving and completely committed to the relationship with His people. His is an eternal covenant to be God to His people. He is kindly, and merciful, and understanding, and wise. He is very patient and consistent. He makes it clear that He desires a relationship marked by complete and absolute trust into which people enter by their own decisions.

All through the Bible, God opens to the reader who He desires His people to be. He instructs in specific situations, and with guidelines that apply to all of life. The Ten Commandments are guidelines. The Sermon on the Mount has many instructions for how to live in human relationships. Virtually every passage opens to the reader treasures of God's instructions.

I believe all these to be expressions of the completeness and totality of God's love for His people. He attaches such value that He says, in effect, "I want you to be all that you have the potential to be. I love you enough to give you freedom of will, and to let you know your choices and options. I care too much to leave you without information or resources. You can know My will for your life. You can live in My image."

There is no detailed script for my life. God does not dictate specific decisions and actions to me. Rather, it is His will that I choose to be in relationship with Him; that I study and observe so that I can know His values and standards; that I be motivated in all that I say and do by my desire to express the same kind of unconditional love with which He loves me; that I be a servant as He is servant; that I confront the opportunities of my life and select the course of it so that it bears witness to who God is, and who I am by His grace.

I don't have to worry about incurring God's wrath and disfavor. I don't have to be concerned about His love being withdrawn. It is not necessary for me to search anxiously for His exact will in a specific situation, nor fear that I will fail to gain heaven.

I already have His favor. His love is certain. Loving me as He does, it is His will for me that I accept that love, and reflect that love in how I live. If I believe this to be His will for me, I do not need a script. I need only to study, and learn, and express how it is with me because God loves me.

If I decide against responding to His will in this way, I choose to be out of relationship with Him. Even so, I cannot move outside His love.

If I decide to respond to His will, and, somehow, I fail to express it, that is O.K. God continues to love me and to forgive me. He continues to be with me and instruct me. And I turn back to my studying and learning and expressing how it is with me because God loves me.