



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Discernment – And the Will of God

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W. Burney Overton

The event was called a Spiritual Discernment Week. At the first gathering of those attending, we were asked to tell each other what led to our deciding to come to this event. I listened with great interest as each person responded, telling something of their spiritual quest and of their sense that it was God's will for them to be involved in this special activity.

My story was pretty uncomplicated. Dr. Ben Johnson, the Director, having talked with me about the Spiritual Discernment program, had expressed the wish that I might, at some time, be a participant. While I was certainly interested in accepting his invitation, the dates he had scheduled usually conflicted with dates of my own program. For instance, October 23 – 28, the time for this week-long event, was also the time that I was to direct a Spiritual Nurture Retreat. Hence, I could not attend Ben's event. And no other was scheduled that I could attend.

Three weeks before the time of the Retreat I was to direct, for quite legitimate reasons, every person who had registered had to cancel. Unexpectedly, I was free to attend the Spiritual Discernment Week if I wanted to – and I certainly wanted to. As it turned out, even at that late date, there was still a place for me, and that is how I happened to be a participant.

The reactions to my story surprised me. "It is quite evident," the others said, "that God intended for you to attend this Spiritual Discernment Week." Nothing was said about why God would want me to attend, although I really wondered.

The experiences of the week moved me mightily. The focus was on how to discern God's will for one's life. I reflected a lot about my own life, and how I see – and saw – God to have been involved. While I was quite attentive to our discussions, I also traveled in memory through the events of my life. In my belief, God was involved every step of the way. It had always been important to me that I be doing God's will. However, my belief about God's will, and about discerning God's will for me, has changed a lot as the years have gone by. Because of my reflections during the week of discernment, I am much clearer as to just what those changes were, and what I now believe.

To discern means, of course, to see, detect, perceive, or understand. As far back as I can remember, I was taught that, to be a good Christian, one must discern and do the will of God. I was taught and believed that God had a specific plan for my life. My task was to find out what it was and then follow it. Not to do so would be disastrous, for I would be out of God's favor.

My seventeenth year was miserable for me for I struggled all year over whether or not God was calling me to be a minister. For a number of reasons – sound reasons, I thought – I didn't want to be a minister. Other professions seemed much more promising and exciting to me, and I could be a good Christian in any of them. However, since I believed that God had revealed to me God's plan for my life, and since I feared the consequences if I did not accept it, I finally decided that I really had no choice but to

become a minister. I was called. I yielded to God's will, but not very willingly.

The things that then happened in my life seemed to me to confirm that I had correctly discerned God's will for me, and that I had been wise to accept it. I wanted to go to college, but had no money to pay for it. Nor did I have any money to pay for a seminary education, even though it was a requirement if I were to be a minister. I believed, of course, that since God had called me to ministry, God would provide whatever was needed for me to reach that goal. As it turned out, things "fell into place" in such a way that the money was there for me to complete both college and seminary.

Having obtained the required education, and having satisfied the Presbytery under whose care I was that I was both qualified and called to be a minister, I was ordained. I then accepted a call to my first pastorate, sure, of course, that it was God's will.

So, in accordance with God's will, I was serving the Church as a minister. Each step of the way, I confronted the decisions to be made. I considered all the factors I thought were involved. I prayed. I explored options. I consulted with my wife, and with others whose guidance I valued. I took my abilities and skills into account. I listened both to my head and my heart. I paid attention to my intuitions. I brought to bear all that I knew about how to make good decisions. And always, in the midst of the process, I sought some sign from God to assure me that I was discerning God's will. Finally, each time, feeling a deep sense of certainty, I was convinced God was saying, "This is the decision you are to make."

In all those decisions, had I already discerned God's will for me? At the time, I was sure that I had, but I have come to realize that, in actuality, I had – and have – no way to know. Interestingly enough, this realization is not disturbing to me. It is freeing.

I have come to see that the process of deciding is one in which I have a variety of options until I actually choose one and act on it. Once I do that, the others are no longer available. Nor is there any way to know what the outcome would have been if I had chosen another one. Right or wrong, for good or ill, God's will or not, the decision that I actually make and act on sets the course of events from that time on, and shapes the outcome, whatever it may turn out to be. I don't know what would have happened if I had decided against ministry when I was seventeen. I do not know what the outcome would have been had I made different decisions each step of the way. I have no resources to know. I can speculate, of course, but I cannot know.

"So," I ask myself, "Were my decisions God's will for me?" Now I have to say, "I do not know – not if it has to do with specific decisions."

It was in connection with my decision to terminate my last pastorate and to become a full-time pastoral counselor and group leader, that I seriously began to wonder if God had mapped out the course of my life and put on my shoulders the task of figuring out that course. Or was I to understand and discern God's will in some other way?

At the time, two important decisions were involved. The first – was it time for me to terminate my pastorate at the church in Knoxville, Tennessee where I had served for twelve years? The second – if I did, what would my new field of ministry be?

It wasn't difficult to make the first decision. By the usual standards, I had reached the point where I was not successful in the pastorate in Knoxville. That being the case, it seemed wise to terminate. I wondered. Did that mean it had not been God's will for me to accept that pastorate in the first place? Or had I not followed God's will while serving there? Or did it mean that I had ignored God's will and stayed longer than God intended? Or was it God's will that I stay even though I was not successful in the usual sense? Or was something else God's will? How was I to know? How could I ever know?

Therefore, under the circumstances as I saw them, the first decision was easy. However, I was beginning to realize that I didn't have any way to know if what I decided was God's will for me, or for the church.

I struggled with a similar dilemma about God's will as I undertook to decide about a new field of ministry. I knew that I wanted to continue in ministry, and I needed some kind of income-producing work so that I could meet my personal and family financial obligations. Surely, I thought, it is God's will that I do something that produced income. But what?

As it turned out, I had three opportunities. All three offered the possibility of a challenging ministry. Two of them offered income security. The third did not.

I chose the one that did not offer income security.

Was that choice God's will? Or had I ignored God's will? I did not know, and I do not know. I have no way of knowing. If I go by how my life has turned out since making that decision, I would be inclined to say, "Of course, it was God's will. Look how well it has turned out." Is that the criterion that affirms that a decision is God's will? I think not.

Also, I remind myself that I do not know how it would have turned out if I had made one of the other decisions. Would either of them have turned out as well, or even better? I have no way of knowing that either. What are the criteria that affirm that a decision is God's will? I don't know that either.

At first, I was dismayed when I realized that I have no criteria by which to know that I have correctly discerned, and am doing, God's will.

And then I began to feel curiously liberated as it occurred to me that I could discern the matter of God's will for me in yet another way.

As I have said, I labored mightily over the question of my future after I had decided to end the pastorate in Knoxville. “God, what do I do now? What do You want me to do?” I asked over and over. And then I saw that my prayer was being answered, but not in the way I had thought it would be. In effect, God was saying to me, “I have given you everything you need to be able to make the decision. Therefore, you decide and you carry the responsibility that goes with your decision. You are not to turn that responsibility over to Me. The decision is in your hands. This is My will for you.”

Given my background and my beliefs that came from that background, I could hardly believe that I had correctly discerned God’s will for me. My first thoughts were, “God, don’t you care? Don’t you love me? Aren’t you going to direct me and support me?”

I heard God’s answer. “Yes, I care. Yes, I love you. Yes, I support you, but not quite as you have believed. I care about you and love you enough not to take your freedom and your responsibility for your decisions and your life away from you.”

God went on to remind me that God had loved me from the beginning. God had given me my life, my abilities, my talents, my interests, my limits, my everything that is mine. God had breathed God’s spirit – God’s very life – into me. God had given me a mind, insight, intuition, feelings, the ability to discern. God had made me a decision maker, and provided what I needed to be able to make decisions and act on them. God had given me both freedom and responsibility – the freedom to be responsible. And God knew, in God’s wisdom, that to take any of that freedom and responsibility away from me by imposing God’s decisions upon me would remove the opportunity to experience the fullness of life God had made possible.

I saw it very clearly. If God were to decide for me, and then put the burden on me of trying to ascertain God’s decision, God would take away from me the opportunity to become and be in this life the image of God I am created to be.

God’s will for me is that I be the decider and actor God has created me to be. What specific decisions I make aren’t so important. Only, they are important, for they need to be my decisions, on which I act, and for which I accept responsibility.

When I confronted the issue of what I was to do after I terminated the pastorate in Knoxville, I discerned that it was God’s will that I carefully consider all that was involved in all my options; that I decide on one; and that I act on it.

That is what I did.

However, I am well aware that what I discerned about God’s will for me is not the whole story about God’s will, or about God’s involvement in my life. God is involved. Things frequently turn out in unexpected ways. I don’t know about other people, but I have experienced “things falling into place” for me many more times than in connection with the Spiritual Discernment Week. It is as if there has always been a guiding hand,

and I am quick to confess that I don't begin to know all about how God is involved in God's creation. I am sure, however, that God is involved in some way – intricately involved. I am equally sure that God expects me to be the decision-maker in my life.

I am not God, but I expect my children to function as free and independent persons who make and act on their own decisions and accept responsibility for them, even as I believe God expects me to.

I have four children. Of course, by now, they are all grown and going about their own lives. From their birth, I have been involved in their lives. I have desired good things for them. I have wanted them to be happy and successful. I believed that I had a great deal to teach them that would equip them to find and enjoy that good life that I really wanted them to have. It was a constant temptation to plan for them and to attempt to guide them in the direction of my planning for them. After all, I had already been through what they had yet to experience. I loved them so much that I wanted to do everything in my power to protect them from harm and to enable them to make right and wise decisions. I wanted their lives to be truly fulfilling for them.

In a word, my will for them was that they be worthwhile in every way.

Wisely or foolishly, I knew that I could not decide on the course of their lives and then expect them to figure out what I had in mind and follow what I had decided for them. If they attained that fulfilled life I wanted for them, I knew that they had to take full responsibility for themselves. I couldn't and wouldn't decide for them and then require them to abide by my decision. I couldn't and wouldn't try to influence and control them by giving and withholding my approval. I couldn't and wouldn't try to pressure them into decisions because they thought it was what I wanted.

In other words, in adulthood, they are free, independent and responsible people doing with their lives what they are choosing to do, without that choosing being in response to what they perceive to be my favor or my will for them.

Of course, I want the very best of life for them. I am sad when things don't go well for them. I am glad when they do. I am distressed when they decide and act in ways that I fear are harmful to them. I am happy for them when they decide and act in ways that seem wise to me. I don't want them to get into trouble. I want them to live constructively. I don't want them to squander their lives. I want them to be useful and to enjoy their lives.

If what I want is to take place, I must not impose my will on them. I am always available to them. I support them in every way that I know how, as long as I can see that it is helpful and not harmful. When it is harmful, it isn't really support.

I am sure of their love for me, even as I believe they are sure of my love for them.

I like for them to do things that please me out of their love for me. I would be

very unhappy if I thought they did things to appease me, or to keep me from being displeased with them, or to obtain my favor. My will for them is that they take full responsibility for their lives and their decisions. I want them to be discerning people, weighing the pros and cons, deciding and getting on with their lives.

In a similar manner, maybe that is God’s will for me.

I wonder what my decision would have been if, when I was seventeen, I had believed what I now believe about discerning God’s will. Of course, I do not know. I have no way of knowing. I notice, however, that on some basis, people seem to be drawn to certain professions – doctor, lawyer, musician, scientist, explorer, minister. Maybe not everyone, but some seem to be called to a particular way of life. How does that happen? Is it inevitable? Is it God’s will? Is the element of decision not involved? I do not know, and I think I do not need to know.

If I had made another decision about my life work, would things have “fallen into place” as they did after I chose ministry? I do not know. Maybe they would have. Maybe they wouldn’t have. If things hadn’t “fallen into place,” would that have been a sign that I hadn’t followed God’s will? I think not.

I think not simply because I cannot know what the outcome would have been had I made another decision.

Discernment – and the will of God. I believe it is the will of God that I make use of God’s gifts to me to discern my decision in any given situation. When I do, I believe I am following God’s will for me.