



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1998 Series, No. 2

What about God's Will?

April 15, 1998

W. Burney Overton

“What about other people? When I make my own decisions and act on them, don’t I have to take other people into account?” This was the question Jo raised at the end of our last conversation, and, of course, the one with which he started when he came back to see me.

“Jo,” I replied, “it is essential that I take other people into account when I am making my decisions and acting on them. However, I need to point out that there is a significant difference between being accountable and taking other people into account.”

“I don’t see much difference,” Jo said.

“Do you see it that I am accountable to you, Jo?” I asked.

“You accountable to me?” Jo laughed – almost snorted. There was no humor in that laugh. “You accountable to me? It is more like I am accountable to you.”

“Do you want me to take you into account, Jo?” I then asked.

“Well of course I ...,” Jo stopped in mid-sentence. Looks of both astonishment and understanding played on his face. “Oh...,” he finally said, “that’s the difference.”

Yes, that’s the difference.” I was pleased that Jo caught the distinction so quickly. “I’m not accountable to other people any more than I am accountable to God, and I do influence them. It is essential, therefore, that I take them into account.”

“You keep confusing me,” Jo said, “You influence other people? You make a blanket statement. Don’t you mean that you may have an influence, and that you ought to keep that in mind?”

“No, Jo,” I replied. “I don’t mean ‘may’ or ‘ought’. Whether or not I influence others isn’t an option nor a maybe. It isn’t for anyone. If you and I have any kind of contact, I have no control over whether or not I influence you – nor you me. The simple reality is that I do influence you – and you influence me – no matter what. We can’t have any kind of relationship without that happening – not even a very casual or occasional one. That’s how it works.”

“You mean that, right now, I am influencing you?” Jo looked both intrigued and awed by that thought. “You focus on me. You listen to me. You respond to me. I am taking your time and attention. Something is happening between us. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, Jo,” I responded, “That’s what I mean. You are influencing what happens between us, and to me. You can’t keep that from happening.”

Jo mulled over what I had said. “That means that I have a lot of power over you,

and over anyone that I am with. I'm not sure I want that kind of power, or that much of it."

"Whether or not you have that power isn't a choice, Jo," I pointed out. "What you do with it is where you have a choice."

"You see, I do have both control over and responsibility for the kind of influence I have," I continued. "That's why taking you into account is so important. Whether or not I want it or like it, I am powerful in the influence department. I affect you. I influence you. I make a difference. I can't keep that from happening. Nor can you. Nor can anyone. But I do exercise control over the kind of influence I have – as does each of us."

"What does any of this have to do with the will of God?" Jo surprised me with his question.

"Where is that question coming from, Jo," I asked? "Explain yourself."

"Just that," Jo said. "What about the will of God? What you're saying about me having influence is pretty heavy stuff for me. It feels like a major burden. If it is true, I want some relief. If I just do God's will, won't I get some relief? Won't I be safe?"

"Safe? Safe from what, Jo," I asked? "Explain yourself."

"I don't know," Jo said. "But when I listen to you talk about having that much power, I sure don't feel very safe. I feel scared. I could hurt somebody. I could cause someone to make a bad decision or do the wrong thing. Somebody could get in trouble or hurt themselves – or someone else – because of me. They could blame me, or be angry with me, or both. I feel afraid just talking about it."

"Jo, are you suggesting that, if you just do God's will, you won't have to worry about the power of your influence on another person? And then you will be safe? Is that what you mean?" I wasn't sure that I really understood him.

Jo wasn't quite ready to admit that I was correct. "Well, maybe," he said. "If I just do what God wants me to do, can't I just skip the part about my being responsible?"

"That sounds a lot like escapist theology to me, Jo," I replied.

"Maybe it does, but what's the alternative?" Jo wanted to know.

"Well," I suggested, "suppose it is God's will that you be responsible for your influence on other people. Suppose God wants you to accept responsibility for all your decisions and actions and the effect they have on other people. Suppose God doesn't have a specific set of expectations about what you are to decide and do."

"You're not going to let me off the hook, are you?" Jo fired back at me. "Now I

really do want to know about God's will for me. I grew up believing that God had a plan for my life that I must discover and follow; that, if I got off the track, God would interfere and intervene in my life to see to it that I ended up doing God's will – or I was in deep trouble.”

“I'm not off the hook either, Jo,” I explained. “I received the same teaching when I was growing up. It is pretty ingrained in me. In fact, I still struggle with it. At the same time, that belief system expresses something of what I mean by escapist theology. It taught me that my only responsibility was to figure out God's will for me, and do it. All the rest was up to God. Furthermore, if I didn't figure it out, or if I didn't obey God's will, my destination would be the fire of hell. Of course, if I did, I got heaven as my reward.”

“If that isn't how it is, how is God involved in my life?” Jo wanted to know. “How do I know what God's will is for me? For that matter, if, as you say, I am not accountable to God, why is knowing God's will for me important?”

“Jo, you ask good questions,” I told him. “Instead of just trying to give you some answers, I think I need to see if I can help you work out some for yourself. But, first, I believe I need to tell you a little bit about my own rearing and about some of my struggles with the same kinds of questions you are raising.”

“Be my guest.” There was just a tinge of exasperation in Jo's voice. I think he was thinking that it shouldn't be all this difficult to figure out God's will – and then just do it. And I knew it wouldn't do any good to try to tell him that it wasn't all that difficult.

I began my story. “Early in my formative years, I understood that a chief concern of my life was to know and do God's will. However, in my background, I learned to believe that God was quite specific about God's will for me – and for everyone, for that matter. My task was to discover God's will so that I could be an obedient servant. If I was successful, then I would please God and receive God's favor. If I was not, then I would receive the wrath and punishment of God – a most undesirable experience. I even believed, then, that when bad, or unpleasant things happened to me, I had somehow failed God.

“From the time I was nine years old, I felt a great deal of anxiety and fear about whether or not I would be able to know for sure about God's will for me. I anguished over this matter. In my early teens I was in a lot of mental and emotional turmoil.”

“In the midst of the turmoil, pretty much against my own will, and contrary to my teaching, I began to raise questions within myself – questions that, as I believed then, I should not be asking. I had already come to believe that God truly loved me, even as I quaked with fear lest I, all unknowing, failed to obey God in some way. That I must not do – so I believed.”

Bless his heart. Jo sensed the emotional tension in me as I told my story. “You were having a pretty rough time, weren’t you?” he said.

“Yes, Jo, I was, but I didn’t believe that I could tell anyone about my anxieties and my questions.” I continued my story. “In fact, I think people saw me as a happy and well adjusted teenager. And I think that, in the main, I was, despite my questioning and the turmoil within me.”

“My core questions centered around my inability to understand how a loving and caring God would structure things so that there was so much uncertainty and anxiety around discovering God’s will.”

“It was all pretty clear cut – sort of black and white –“ I continued. “God loved me. God wanted the best for me. God knew what that was and willed it for me. I just had to figure it out and do God’s will. Back then, I was quite sure that I was accountable to God. Just discover and do God’s will and everything would be OK – so simple, but so complex.”

“But you weren’t able just to let it be that way, were you?” Jo questioned.

“No, Jo, I wasn’t,” I answered, “but then, I was.”

Jo seemed genuinely puzzled – which I understood. “You weren’t – and you were? What kind of sense does that make?”

“No sense, and a lot of sense,” I tried to explain. “It says something about the power of believing. I was convinced that I had to discover God’s specific will for me. Therefore, I just had to forget about my questioning. Only I never was able to do that. And, or course, I felt very guilty and fearful.”

I knew that I had not satisfied Jo with my answer. For that matter, I wasn’t satisfied either, although I had described me in my teen years pretty accurately.

Jo didn’t say anything for some minutes. Finally he spoke. “You are saying that, early on, you believed that God loved you, and that you also believed you had to figure out God’s specific will for you and obey God, or you would be in trouble with God. Only God didn’t give you many clues so that you could be sure you actually knew exactly what God’s will for you was. God held all the power. You were answerable to God. And God, who – you thought – loved you, made you liable even for discovering God’s will.”

“Yes, Jo,” I replied, “that’s how it went together for me then. I believed that I must do God’s will, and I believed that I was accountable to God.”

“But not now?” Jo didn’t want this conversation to end just yet.

“No, Jo, not now,” I responded. “While I believed then as I have just said, I couldn’t stop my questioning of those beliefs. Eventually I had to modify my beliefs.”

Jo seemed impatient. “But if, as you say, I am not accountable to God, why is knowing God’s will for me so important?” That was the question that started this part of our discussion. I was glad he wasn’t willing to let it rest.

“All right, Jo,” I said. Why is it important to know and do God’s will?”

Jo thought a minute. “It could be to please God. Or maybe it is the way to stay on the good side of God. Or maybe it is how to keep God from punishing, or from causing bad things to happen. Or maybe it is simply that God requires us to obey God if we are to be acceptable to God. Somehow all that sounds like the escapist theology you were talking about – keeping God responsible, letting ourselves off the hook, being victims. But none of that fits if God loves us unconditionally.”

“That’s how I see it, Jo,” I replied. “None of it fits if I am not accountable to God, and if God loves me unconditionally. So why know and do God’s will?”

“Suppose, Jo,” I continued, “that God’s will isn’t tied to pleasing God, or being accountable to God, or obeying God. Suppose God doesn’t have specific things in mind for you. Suppose – going back to what you said earlier in our conversation – it is God’s will for you to be a responsible person, making your decisions and acting on them. Suppose it is one measure of God’s love for you that God wants you to be a responsible decider.”

“I think I like it better for God to be responsible,” Jo said. “I don’t know if I can handle that much responsibility.”

“Jo,” I said, “I want to tell you a bit more of my story.”

Jo agreed, so I continued, “I remember that, when I was a child, my parents were usually clear and specific about what they expected of me. I didn’t have to wonder about or search for their will for me. And I knew that the boundaries they set for me were out of love for me, to protect me, and to train me to be a responsible, decision-making adult. When I became an adult, they, in effect, turned me over to myself. They stopped being deciders for me. It was, then, their will that I be a responsible decider – not that I discover and do their will. I was not accountable to them, but to myself.

Even so, there were times, especially early in my adulthood, when I thought I would be relieved if they picked up some responsibility for me and my decisions. Now, I am glad that they were wise enough, and loved me enough, not to do that. God is wise enough, and loves me enough, to leave the responsibility with me. It is God’s will for me.”

“God is wise enough, and loves me enough, to leave the responsibility for my

decisions and acts with me. That is God's will for me!" Jo paused. "I don't have to try to discover a plan all laid out for me – but hidden. I don't have to be fearful about not finding out God's will for me and displeasing God!"

"You said it well, Jo," I replied. "Be your own person. Make your own decisions. Take both the situation and other people into account. Act on what you decide, and you will be doing God's will for you."

"OK," he said. "I can do that, but I have another question. Maybe not a question, maybe more of an observation. The Bible – especially the Old Testament – sure reads to me as if those people believed they'd better figure out God's will and do it – obey God, that is. In fact, they seem to have it figured out that, when they obeyed God, they were prosperous. And, when they didn't they were in deep trouble. And, as I recall, even when they did heinous things, they claimed to be doing God's will."

Jo paused. I suppose he was thinking about what he had just said. And he was, for he continued, "What I've just said sounds a lot like that escapist theology you were talking about."

"Maybe it is, Jo," I agreed. "Maybe, at some point, we need to talk about the Bible and God's will."

"Maybe we do," Jo replied, "but not today. I'll be back, you know."

"Yes, Jo. I do know." And with that, Jo was on his way until another time.