



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Bible and God's Will

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For some reason, Jo didn't get back to my office as soon as I thought he would. When he did, he didn't waste any time getting to what he had in mind about which to talk. "I don't think I have any real questions about the Bible and God's will. I've been pretty clear about what I believe, and why, for a long time. So I guess I don't need to spend time talk about that today," he said.

"That being the case, Jo," I replied, "I suppose we don't have much of an agenda for this visit, do we? So just what do you have in mind for our conversation this time?"

"Do I have to have something in mind before I can justify coming to see you?" Jo asked.

"Of course not, Jo. You already know you don't have to have a supporting reason to claim my time." He didn't really need my reassurance. "Even so, it helps for you to tell me what brings you here today."

"Actually, I don't rightly know, except that I just wanted to and hoped you would be here. I've thought about it a lot, though, and know that I don't really need to talk about the Bible and God's will. That's pretty clear to me. However, I just like to talk with you about anything that comes up." I appreciate Jo's candor.

"Even so, Jo, would you be willing to waste a bit of time on the subject?" I asked.

"Sure, if you want. I just don't much care one way or the other, nor see that it is particularly important to me," Jo replied.

"Indulge me, then, and tell me something. Just for me to be sure I haven't made any false assumptions, tell me exactly what you believe and understand about the Bible and God's will," I requested.

Jo thought a moment before replying, "That's easy. In a nutshell – and whole story, in fact – the Bible contains God's will. It establishes God's will. Not just contains God's will but is God's will – the only final, valid, and authoritative source for us to find out about God's will, and to be sure of it."

"You're right, Jo," I replied. "It is clear, to the point, and leaves no questions, nor room for doubting. However, Jo, as obvious as it is, I'd like for us to explore the matter a little further, OK?"

"OK by me," he responded. Jo is nothing if not compliant.

Having Joe's approval, I proceeded. "Tell me, Jo. When you decide and act on this knowledge of God's will, who holds the authority and responsibility?"

Jo is sharp. "That's a trick question," he said.

"No, Jo. It isn't intended to be," I replied. "I just want you to think about the question and give me your answer."

Jo pondered. "Who holds the authority and responsibility? Why, I do. No. God does. No. We both do. Oh, I don't know. You confuse me."

"I don't mean to, Jo. But I do want us to think about it a bit."

Jo looked very puzzled. And then I watched his face as it betrayed something of what was going on with him. "I do believe you are pointing me to that escapist theology thing again."

"And if I am?" I was curious about what he would say.

"You certainly are," Jo answered. "And now I realize that I do need to think and talk more about this business of the Bible and God's will. I need to see clearly how what I believe fits, or doesn't fit, in escapist theology."

"Tell me your thoughts, Jo," I requested.

"I wish you would talk first," Jo said. "I'm afraid I don't have it straight."

"Give it a try anyway, Jo," I suggested.

Jo took a long time sorting out his answer. "Well, like I said, everybody knows that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. That's how we know without question that we have come to believe really is the will of God as revealed to us through the Bible."

"So, if we don't have the Bible to tell us, we won't know for certain that we know and are doing God's will? Is that what you are suggesting?" I asked. "Do you see any danger in that?"

"Not really," Jo replied.

"For me, Jo, this is where the escapist theology and its subtle and powerful danger comes in," I pointed out. "You remember that the bottom line of escapist (Fall – Redemption) theology is the person's decision and determination to make something or someone else responsible for his perceived victim status – even if he doesn't realize he is doing it."

"Yes, I remember," Jo said. "How could I forget? You've pointed it out often enough. But right now, I don't see any danger in a point of view that holds that the Bible is the final and authoritative source for knowing God's will."

“I appreciate that,” I responded. “However, let’s think about it. Suppose you wrecked your car and someone was seriously injured. And let’s suppose that you, to protect yourself, decided to deny all responsibility for the accident – even though you really knew that you had caused it. Your anxiety about protecting yourself was so great that you allowed yourself to forget anything about the accident that would point to the fact that you were responsible, and that the consequences were rightfully yours. Therefore, in any discussion of the accident, you steadfastly denied any responsibility until you were outraged by the – you thought – unjust charges against you. Do you see any danger to you in that position?”

Jo took only a moment before responding. “Actually, I don’t. It appears to me that I have everything to gain and nothing to lose by having taken that position. What could the danger possibly be?”

“For one thing, whether you realize it or not at the time, you could lose any sense of your worth and value as a human being.” I was a little sharp in my response to Jo. “Do you know anyone to whom that has happened?”

Jo thought for a long moment. “Yes, I guess so. That’s what you want me to say, isn’t it?”

Obviously, he didn’t see it, or didn’t agree with it, or didn’t want to see it.

“That’s OK, Jo. We don’t see eye to eye, and we don’t have to. We are talking about what we each believe, and we do agree that neither of us has to change the other’s point of view. Let’s go on to another subject.”

“I’m not satisfied,” Jo said, “but I guess that’s the best thing to do.” He considered what to say next. “I want to look at some scriptures to see how they illustrate escapist vs. Grace Theology – and how that ties to whether or not the Bible establishes God’s will for us.”

“All right, Jo,” I said. “Pick your scripture. Any scripture will serve the purpose.”

Jo thought for a long time. Finally, he said, “Let’s take one of the Ten Commandments. Everyone knows that they disclose God’s will.”

“All right, Jo,” I responded. “However, let’s keep clearly in mind that our issue isn’t whether or not something is the will of God, but whether or not the Bible establishes unequivocally that it is the will of God. What Commandment do you want to use?”

“I’d like to see what you do with the ninth Commandment, ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.’ (Exodus 20:16),” Jo said.

“All right, Jo,” I replied. “But, let’s keep clearly in mind that we are not trying to

establish whether or not the Commandment is God's will. I simply concede that. We are dealing with the issue of whether or not the Bible establishes it as God's will – and why that may be important.

“Let's look at some of the issues that arise when we start thinking about exactly what it means not to bear false witness against one's neighbor, and what may be the deterrents to doing so. What is your thought, Jo?”

Jo responded quickly. “Why it means not to say anything not true about your neighbor. Isn't that pretty obvious?”

“Sure it is, Jo,” I said, “but I'm not sure it is always that clear cut. For instance, your neighbor approached you the other day and told you that you had hurt him deeply when you told that untrue thing about him. And he added, ‘And you've broken God's Law, and God is really angry with you.’”

“As I see it, if you believe that not to bear false witness is God's will because the Bible says so, you are in trouble.”

“How so?” Jo asked.

“Think about it,” I said. “If you tend at all to be anxious, you face a dilemma. You ask yourself, ‘Did I really do that? I didn't intend to. I wouldn't do that to someone else. God can't hold me responsible for something I didn't intend to do. If God does, I am in big trouble. God may be so angry with me that I am in danger of hell fire.’”

“Jo, I expect I may have exaggerated – but I think not by much. Escapist theology invites me to be – and become – that anxious about my own soul's well being. To be in that position is miserable and obsessive. The obsessiveness and anxiety tend to possess one's life until one sees no way out.

“Maybe it never has worked that way for you, Jo. If it has, you know exactly what I mean. And that is an example of the pervasive damage escapist theology can cause.”

I can see that, and I think I understand,” Jo said. “But what's the alternative?”

“Jo,” I answered. “You have asked an important question, deserving of as thoughtful an answer as I can give you.”

“I remind myself that I am God's creation, loved unconditionally. And that I have been gifted by God so that I am able to figure things out. Independently of the Bible – even though the Bible clearly points to it – I let it soak into my belief system that it is evident to me that it is God's will that I not bear false witness against anyone – not ever. Why? Because of the potential for damage to another – whom God also loves unconditionally.

“Now what happens? Now I know experientially that it is God’s will that I not bear false witness – ever. Not a requirement imposed upon me. Not something I have to do whether I want to or not. Not a source of fear and anxiety. But rather a source of comfort and security that I, with deep appreciation, accept as yet another gift of a loving God.

“I am at peace, no matter what happens. My best resources are available to me to work out any solutions needed.”

Jo’s response came after much thought. “Of course that makes sense to me, and I think I am clear about what you mean.”

“I’m glad for that, Jo,” I responded. “Now, there is one other thing I want to put before you for your consideration even though what we have been discussing is the very essence of what I mean about Grace Theology. God gives me the answers, but I must work them out and make them my own before they really bring me the security I seek.

“I want us to look at what I call a paradigm shift, and the role it plays in all this.”

“Paradigm shift?” Jo seemed genuinely puzzled. “I don’t know what you mean by paradigm shift.”

“Paradigm, Jo, means, among other things, a point of view,” I responded. “Paradigm shift, then, is a shift in point of view. Some people – many people, I think – find it extremely hard to do.”

“Why?” Jo questioned. “If the change looks like a good thing, why is it hard to do?”

“Let me try to answer you with a story, Jo,” I said. “Suppose that, when I was a little boy, I learned to love watching baseball games. However, because I didn’t have any money, I had to watch them through a knot hole in the outfield fence. Even though, when I was able to read, I devoured everything about baseball on which I could get my hands, I always saw the game through the knot hole. That was my paradigm – my point of view – the position from which I knew about and experienced baseball games.

“When I became an adult, I loved baseball as much as ever and liked sitting in the bleachers somewhere watching the game from that position. However, when it came right down to it, I continued to prefer to watch the game through the knot hole in the outfield fence. Why? Because that was the original position – point of view – from which I had developed my love for baseball.

“I had no explanation for it, but when the time of choice came, I would go back to that familiar place – at the knot hole in the outfield fence. It was then that I felt most satisfied with watching the game.

“Given what I had learned and experienced, I told myself that what I was doing didn't make a lot of sense. So I decided to change my vantage point for watching the game to see if, somehow, I could discover if it were really desirable to make the paradigm shift.

“To implement and test my decision, I got the said-to-be best seat in the stadium – about ten rows back and just to the left of home plate. I could see everything.

“That day, my whole sense of that wonderful game of baseball shifted. Like a serendipity experience, everything about the game was different – and so much better than I had ever experienced. The full arc of that home run ball. The intricate beauty of the close play at home plate that turned out to be the deciding play of the game. The skilled choreography of the players moving to their most advantageous positions on the playing field. All of it. Seen from a wholly different point of view – infinitely more satisfactory.”

“Wow!” Jo exclaimed! “What a picture. But why would anybody hesitate about making such a paradigm shift?”

“I believe for one reason, Jo,” I pointed out. “It seems that it is extremely difficult to free one's self from early, firmly established points of view – no matter how attractive another point of view may seem to be. In fact, it appears that our tendency is to try to make other points of view fit within the long-established one. And, as it turns out, that is impossible. That is especially true of escapist (Fall-Redemption) theology and Grace Theology. Until I make the shift, I won't ever really understand Grace Theology.

“Escapist (Fall-Redemption) theology is so universally established among us, and re-enforced by Church, society, and personal life, that people seem virtually unable to make the paradigm shift that is essential. Until we do – just like with the baseball game – the full significance of Grace Theology escapes us.”

Jo pondered for some time. Then said, “I'm not through with this conversation, but I've flat run out of time.”

“That's my situation, too, Jo,” I replied. “However, I want to touch two more things.”

“I don't think I've developed my point of view about the Bible and God's will very well, so I want to summarize what I have been trying to say. The other thing is that, while we have been talking, I've had a serendipitous experience that I want to share with you – a story that you might find interesting.

“So, let's look at the Bible and God's will from an escapist theology point of view. Without question and with no uncertainty – like it or not – the Bible discloses and establishes the will of God. Like it or not. Makes sense or not. If the Bible says so, it is

the will of God. Never mind that any perception is from a point of view and an interpretation of the person and that it could be incorrect – with all the attendant uneasiness, fear, upset, unhappiness, and feelings of insecurity.

“And then there is the Bible and God’s will from a Grace Theology point of view. True, the Bible, I believe, is the richest source available for discovering God’s will, but it does not establish it.

“What does? Believe it or not, the result of my searching and my openness to discover; my faith that tells me I have found God’s will for me; the fact that what I believe makes sense to me; it works, it brings meaning and deep satisfaction to my life. It fulfills me.

“I know that I have found the will of God for me. No, I do not know it, any more than I know it when my views are escapist. But I believe it with my life, even as I stay open to further disclosure of God’s will for me. Then, I can’t begin to measure the richness of life that I experience.”