

The Divine Conspiracy

reviewed by [Steven J. Van Der Weele](#) in the [July 14, 1999](#) issue

The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God.

By Dallas Willard, HarperSanFrancisco, 428 pp.

The most telling thing about the contemporary Christian is that he or she has no compelling sense that understanding of and conformity with the clear teaching of Christ is of any vital importance to his or her life," Dallas Willard states, summing up the concerns that have prompted his book. He sets forth a comprehensive account of how Christians must and can make biblical wisdom operative.

Many of those who read Willard's book will affirm his admonition that "we must develop a straightforward presentation, in word and life, of the reality of life now under God's rule, through reliance upon the word and person of Jesus." They are aware of the kingdoms and powers that compete for our loyalty, they try to resist idolizing the temporal, they know that following the gospel involves more than the removal of guilt and a guarantee of life hereafter. And they agree that we must build our houses upon a rock—the rock of hearing and doing (a prominent reference in the book).

Willard's extensive commentary on the Sermon on the Mount warns us of the many ways in which we can go wrong in trying to understand Jesus' teaching. The Beatitudes, he tells us, are only secondarily models for our own growth in grace. They were addressed to the religious establishment of Jesus' day and, therefore, to all who make judgments about people—informing them of the all-embracing intent of the kingdom. The Beatitudes remind us that "the sat upon, the spit upon, the ratted on" have had their lowly status transformed and have equal access to the benefits of the kingdom. The Beatitudes define a community of prayerful love.

Willard ably defines the hurdles we encounter as we pursue our vocations and practice the virtues. We must resist consumer Christianity, and must not place secular authority above divine wisdom. We must not distort the proper relationship between the life of the mind and worship, or become concerned with the peripherals rather than the essentials—especially dangerous in academic scholarship.

Willard reminds us of the relationship between what we believe and how we act. He writes well on suffering, presenting it as an arena for exercising our spiritual muscles. And he gives a prose equivalent of John Donne's "Death, be not proud"—deflating this swaggering bully, calling him a weakling assigned to tasks which ultimately carry out God's purposes and further humanity's shalom. He singles out anger as a particularly dangerous fault which shrivels the soul and makes us perceive God not as a God who can be loved and embraced, but one from whom we wish to flee.

So what, then, is the divine conspiracy? It is a reversal of conventional wisdom. It is expressed in the paradoxes of self-denial, of servanthood, of the success of apparent failure and the failure of apparent success. It is, to use one of Willard's opening metaphors, getting the plane to fly right-side-up instead of up-side-down, to align ourselves properly—horizontally and vertically. It is accepting the teachings and the ministry of Jesus and letting his majesty and grace define and motivate us to follow him in loving obedience.

Though Willard discusses the spiritual disciplines only in the last chapter or two, one realizes, in retrospect, that they encroach on every page. This book belongs in the tradition of the great devotional classics—by Thomas à Kempis, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Abraham Kuyper and others. Willard does have some difficulty in deciding how much energy one needs to devote to remedying society's ills and repairing its deficient institutions. But the comprehensiveness of his study, its accessibility, its fervor, its freshness of phrasing and its command of scripture should prompt Christians to give this book serious attention. And it's a book that will help seekers better understand why Jesus continues to elicit the loyalty and commitment of people the world over.