

Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy:  
Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God.*

New York: HarperCollins, 1997

Reviewed by Godfrey J. Ellis

Many fascinating Christian books are currently available, and it is difficult to know which ones merit attention. Occasionally, one book comes along that is truly important, not only because of what it says to Latter-day Saints, but also because of what it says for Latter-day Saints. It is as if the author is an “agent on the inside”—making points that no LDS author could as credibly make. Such a book is Dallas Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy*. Although this book has been on the shelf for almost ten years now, it has retained its value to Latter-day Saints and deserves wider notice than it has received so far.

In its foreword, Richard Foster calls the work a “masterpiece and a wonder,” and compares it to Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling (ix). While these are superlatives run amok, it is true that *The Divine Conspiracy* is a jewel. Latter-day Saints should warmly welcome its viewpoints on popular culture, scholarship, and spirituality. The titles alone of its ten chapters should catch the eye of every Latter-day Saint; for example, “Entering the Eternal Kind of Life Now,” “What Jesus Knew: Our God-Bathed World,” “Who Is Really Well Off?—The Beatitudes,” “On Being a Disciple, or Student, of Jesus,” “A Curriculum for Christlikeness,” and “The Restoration of All Things.” Its sparkling doctrinal points are strikingly underscored, not just by what is being said but also by who is saying it. Although Latter-day Saints will probably disagree with some terms, concepts, and conclusions in *The Divine Conspiracy*, those logical differences are overshadowed by the value of the author’s positive and passionate convictions.

An example of Willard’s convictions is seen in his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount. He claims that Christian scholars seem baffled by the text and laments, “We are scattered, wandering, and have no clear and comprehensive message for life because our most important text is an enigma” (132). Then he discovers, to his astonishment, that the teachings represent “one [unified] discourse—purposively organized” (132, 133) and

not just random sayings that “unknown ‘editors’ had thrown together as one might throw marbles into a sack” (132). His enthusiasm about his new discovery virtually jumps off the page as he hopes “to gain a fresh hearing for Jesus” (xiii). But, in fact, LDS scholars have already seen this harmony, and much more. For example, John Welch has masterfully unfolded the unity of the discourse(s), especially in a temple context.<sup>1</sup>

*The Divine Conspiracy* conveys a great share of excitement with an abundance of catchy, turn-of-phrase sparkle. One jolt concerns the so-called Christian left. Many Latter-day Saints are vulnerably unaware that a Christian left exists. Willard shows that a growing percentage of “mainstream” Christians hold decidedly liberal political and social perspectives. The simple dichotomy of Christian right versus secular left disappeared years ago. Willard then describes, criticizes, and dismantles the Christian left, arguing that the emphasis on political and social action has resulted in a total loss of understanding of Christ. By downplaying worship in favor of social activism, they destroy any sense in which God and Jesus are persons, “alive and accessible” (53). On their present course, Willard fears, the Christian left may soon break away from Christ entirely. While I fear that short-visioned Latter-day Saints might say, “Let ’em go!” the loss of any believers in Jesus Christ diminishes us all at a time when people of faith are under attack as never before. No man is an island, as John Donne noted long ago, and Christians need strength and unity in the face of the secular forces currently ravaging our society. Christianity cannot afford to lose the Christian left.

Willard also takes on the Christian far right, rejecting their extreme view that salvation comes simply by declaring that Jesus is Lord—in other words, through grace alone. Sounding decidedly outside the mainstream, Willard claims that believing in faith without any effort or behavior change is tantamount to believing that one has been “let off the divine hook” (42). The focus on the distant afterlife, over the immediate here-and-now, is an effective dismissal of the very object of their professed faith. Willard calls this situation “consumer Christianity” (342) and claims that those believers have an almost total lack of understanding of what a new birth in Christ really means. They may have “faith in faith but will have little faith in God” (91). They “self-identify as Christians while having hardly a whiff of Christlikeness about them” (42). The end result is that those on the far right, who “profess Christian commitment, consistently show little or no behavioral and psychological difference from those who do not” (43).

Instead of a Christian left or a Christian right, Willard proposes Christian discipleship. A sizeable portion of Willard’s audience, of course, sees salvation as an irrevocable gift of pure grace utterly independent of

merit or works. Sensitive to such readers, Willard avoids the word *works*, as he subtly pushes for a moderation of the “just-believe-and-you’re-saved” position. A “magical moment of mental assent” (43) is not enough to produce disciples, and discipleship is mandatory for the life change that results in salvation. In contrast, Willard tells his readers that they must work out their own salvation in a *joint project* with God. As did C. S. Lewis, Willard communicates powerful insights to LDS readers. Neal A. Maxwell once said of Lewis, “While it is not doctrine for which I look to Lewis, I find his *depiction* of discipleship especially articulate and helpful.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Willard’s most powerful points comes as he discusses the attainment of true discipleship based on a pure change of heart. Once that happens, simple discipleship flows out of our new identity. Willard drives his point home with a piercing analogy. Was it difficult for Christ to forgive from the cross? No. “What would have been hard for him,” Willard suggests, “would have been to curse his enemies and spew forth vileness and evil upon everyone” (183). That was not in his nature. Willard underscores his point by charging readers actually to become “as [Christ] was, permeated with love” (183).

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will want to read Dallas Willard for the same reasons they have wanted to read C. S. Lewis—because it is so warmly validating to hear a non-LDS voice preach LDS doctrine and because new, outside insights often spotlight old, inside truths. This book preaches correct doctrines to mainstream Christians in a way that would be impossible for an LDS author to do. In teaching great principles to all Christians, including Latter-day Saints, this book can bring readers closer to Christ. No higher recommendation than that can be given.

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1. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990); and John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999).

2. Neal A. Maxwell, “C. S. Lewis: Insights on Discipleship,” in C. S. Lewis: *The Man and His Message*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 9.