

BOOK REVIEW

Dallas Willard. *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. 245 pp. Hdbk. US\$24.99.

Dallas Willard has become one of the most respected Christian thinkers of today. His blend of philosophy, theology, and social ethics has proven to be very popular for readers seeking to develop a Christian worldview. Willard's latest book, *Knowing Christ Today*, is just as important and challenging as his earlier books.

The purpose of this book is to confront the deep-seated conviction that Christianity is simply a set of beliefs, opinions, or commitments. Willard's assertion is that Christianity properly understood belongs rather in the area of knowledge and should be treated as such. Willard states his purpose in this way: "My hope here is to enable intellectually serious people, Christians or not, to understand the *indispensable role of knowledge in faith and life*" (7). Willard exposes the myth that the "experts" have proved Christianity and the Bible false and that all intelligent and educated people should dismiss it. He demonstrates that Christianity is not about a blind leap of faith that attempts to ignore scholarship but that it is composed of doctrines that can be known in an intellectually honest manner.

The idea that Christianity is about knowledge and not just beliefs may be surprising even to some Christians. Yet, as Willard explains, the Bible often speaks in terms of knowledge (e.g., 2 Cor 4:6). In order to make things clear, Willard takes the reader on a journey to understand the philosophical concept of knowledge. He defines knowledge in this way: "We have knowledge of something when we are representing it (thinking about it, speaking of it, treating it) as it actually is, on an appropriate basis

of thought and experience” (15). With this definition as a guide, Willard demonstrates that Christianity properly belongs in the area of knowledge.

One of the fascinating parts of this book is the historical investigation of how Christianity came to be separated from the area of knowledge. Willard traces out the cultural changes, especially trends within the educational system, that led to this misunderstanding. Interestingly, Willard suggests that Christians themselves encouraged this separation from knowledge.

There is much of value in *Knowing Christ Today*, but there is space here to focus on only a few highlights. Willard has an excellent chapter on how we can know that God exists. He presents the traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of God in a fresh way. There is a subtle difference in that Willard argues not for the existence of God but for our knowledge of the existence of God. In this day of “evangelistic” atheists who are very proactive in attacking belief in God, this chapter will provide a valuable resource for Christians.

Willard moves from knowing God to knowing Christ. While much of historical Jesus research focuses on a non-supernatural Jesus, Willard argues for knowledge of Jesus that includes miracles as well. In the tradition of C. S. Lewis, Willard shows that miracles are not intellectually absurd but that they are philosophically consistent in a worldview that includes a God that exists outside of the physical universe.

A helpful aspect of this book is that it is not just a philosophical treatise but also a practical resource for Christians. As Willard argues, one of the ways that we can know Christ is through the spiritual life. He presents a study of the spiritual disciplines that brings them from their current trendiness as a Christian fashion to their position in the core of the knowledge of Christ.

For the majority of the book, the reader will have a difficult time finding any criticisms. Willard is at the top of his game and it is obvious that he has thought through each concept and is very capable of explaining ideas in a clear and intelligent manner. Each word and phrase has been carefully chosen. The final section, however, could leave the reader somewhat bewildered.

Willard argues for something he calls Christian pluralism. First of all, Willard demonstrates that it is illogical to claim that all religions are the same or have equal truth. Each is exclusivist in its own way that must be respected. Willard rejects such a strong pluralism but does embrace what he calls a genuine Christian pluralism. He explains:

Christian pluralism thus concedes that people of “other” religions or no religion at all *may* be “right with God.” But from within the resources of its knowledge it insists that, if that is so in a given case, it will not be because the individuals concerned merely profess the beliefs and sustain the practices thought to be essential to recognized members of their particular religious culture—including Christians. It will not be because of their religion. Rather, it will be because their lives are centered on that same love that is expressed in the person and teachings of Jesus and his people at their best. It will be because God is love (181–82).

This section of the book proves to be a major weakness. It is not just that Willard argues for something contrary to traditional Christian teachings. Other respected theologians, including Clark Pinnock, have taught this wideness in God’s mercy. Rather, Willard’s teaching on Christian pluralism weakens the overall argument that has been the focus of his book. From the introduction on, Willard has shown that Christian doctrines belong to the area of knowledge rather than conjecture. When Willard concludes with a theory that focuses on what we do not know, that is, our lack of knowledge of who will receive eternal life, the momentum that Willard has been building is lost.

Despite these concerns, *Knowing Christ Today* is an excellent book. Willard is a brilliant philosopher and a talented author. He is able to present the most complex concepts in a way that is understandable and clear. This book is a valuable resource for Christians who are trying to understand their faith and its relationship to the world around them.

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