

THE WILL OF GOD

A.W. Pink (1886-1952)

IN TREATING of the will of God, some theologians have differentiated between His *decretive* will and His *permissive* will, insisting that there are certain things which God has positively fore-ordained, but other things which He merely suffers to exist or happen. But such a distinction is really no distinction at all, inasmuch as God only permits that which is according to His will. No such distinction would have been invented had these theologians discerned that God could have *decreed* the existence and activities of sin *without* Himself being the *Author* of sin. Personally, we much prefer to adopt the distinction made by the older Calvinists between God's secret and revealed will, or, to state it in another way, His disposing and His perceptive will.

God's revealed will is made known in His Word, but His secret will is His own hidden counsels. God's revealed will is the definer of our duty and standard of our responsibility. The primary and basic reason why I should follow a certain course or do a certain thing is because it is God's *will* that I should—His will being clearly defined for me in His Word. That I should not follow a certain course, that I must refrain from doing certain things, is because they are *contrary* to God's revealed will.

But suppose I *disobey* God's Word, then do I not *cross* His will? And if so, how can it still be true that God's will is *always* done and His counsel accomplished at all times? Such questions should make evident the necessity for the distinction here advocated. God's *revealed* will is frequently crossed, but His secret will is *never* thwarted. That it is legitimate for us to make such a distinction concerning God's will is clear from Scripture.

Take these two passages: "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification" (1Th 4:3); "For who hath resisted his will?" (Rom 9:19). Would any thoughtful reader declare that God's "will" has precisely the same meaning in both of these passages? We surely hope not. The first passage refers to God's *revealed* will, the latter to His *secret* will. The first passage concerns our duty, the latter declares that God's secret purpose is immutable and must come to pass notwithstanding the creature's insubordination. God's revealed will is never done perfectly or fully by any of us, but His secret will never fails of accomplishment even in the minutest particular. His secret will mainly concerns *future* events; His revealed will, our *present* duty. The one has to do with His irresistible purpose, the other with His manifested pleasure. The one is brought upon us and accomplished through us, the other is to be done by us.

The secret will of God is His eternal unchanging purpose concerning all things that He hath made, to be brought about by certain means to their appointed ends. Of this God expressly declares, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do *all* my pleasure" (Isa 46:10). This is the absolute, efficacious will of God, always effected, always fulfilled. The revealed will of God contains not His purpose and decree, but our duty—not what He will do according to His eternal counsel, but what we should do if we would please Him. And this is expressed in the precepts and promises of His Word. His secret will is whatever God has determined within Himself, whether to do Himself or to do by others, or to suffer to be done while it is in His own breast and is not made known by any event in providence, or by precept, or by prophecy. Such are the deep things of God, the thoughts of His heart, the counsels of His mind, which are impenetrable to all creatures. But when these are *made known* they become His revealed will. Such is almost the whole of the book

of Revelation, wherein God has made known to us “things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev 1:1)—“must” because He has eternally purposed that they should.

It has been objected by Arminian¹ theologians that the division of God’s will into secret and revealed is untenable, because it makes God to have two different wills, the one opposed to the other. But this is a mistake, due to their failure to see that the secret and revealed will of God respect entirely different objects. If God should require and forbid the same thing, or if He should decree [that] the same thing should and should not exist, then would His secret and revealed will be contradictory and purposeless. If those who object to the secret and revealed will of God being inconsistent would only make the same distinction in this case that they do in many other cases, the seeming inconsistency would at once disappear. How often do men draw a sharp distinction between what is desirable in *its own nature* and what is not desirable *all things considered*.

For example, the fond parent does not desire, *simply considered*, to punish his offending child, but, *all things considered*, he knows it is his bounden duty, and so corrects his child. And though he tells his child he *does not desire* to punish him, but that he is satisfied it is for the best, *all things considered*, to do so, then an intelligent child would see no inconsistency in what his father says and does.

Just so, the All-wise Creator may consistently decree to bring to pass things that He hates, forbids, and condemns. God chooses that some things shall exist which He thoroughly hates (in their intrinsic nature), and He also chooses that some things shall not yet exist which He perfectly loves (in their intrinsic nature). For example: He commanded that Pharaoh should let His people go because that was right *in the nature of things*. Yet, He had secretly declared that Pharaoh should *not* let his people go, not because it was right in Pharaoh to refuse, but because it was best, *all things considered*, that he *should not* let them go—i.e., best because it subserved God’s larger purpose.

Again: God commands us to be perfectly holy in this life (Matt.5:48), because this is right *in the nature of things*, but He has decreed that no man shall be perfectly holy in this life because it is best *all things considered* that none shall be perfectly holy (experimentally) before they leave this world. Holiness is one thing, the taking place of holiness is another; so, sin is one thing, the taking place of sin is another. When God requires holiness, His perceptive or revealed will respects the nature or moral excellence of holiness; but when He decrees that holiness shall not take place (fully and perfectly), His secret or decretive will respects only the event of it not taking place. So, again, when He forbids sin, His perceptive or revealed will respects only the nature or moral *evil* of sin; but when He decrees that sin *shall* take place, His secret will respects only its actual occurrence to serve His good purpose. Thus the secret and revealed will of God respect entirely different objects.

God’s will of decree is not His will in the same sense as His will of command is. Therefore, there is no difficulty in supposing that one may be contrary to the other. His will, in both senses, is His inclination. Everything that concerns His revealed will is perfectly agreeable to His nature—as when He commands love, obedience, and service from His creatures. But that which concerns His secret will has in view His ultimate end, that to which all things are now working. Thus He decreed the entrance of sin into His universe, though His own holy nature hates all sin with infinite abhorrence. And yet, because sin is one of the means by which His appointed end is

¹ **Arminian** – pertaining to the theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Dutch theologian, who rejected the Reformers’ understanding of predestination, teaching instead that God’s predestination of individuals was based on His foreknowledge of their accepting or rejecting Christ by their own free will.

to be reached, He suffered it to enter. God's *revealed* will is the measure of our responsibility and the determiner of our duty. With God's secret will we have nothing to do: that is *His* concern. But God, knowing that we should fail to perfectly do His revealed will, ordered His eternal counsels accordingly. And these eternal counsels—which make up His secret will, though unknown to us—are fulfilled in and through us, though unconsciously.

Whether the reader is prepared to accept the above distinction in the will of God or not, he must acknowledge that the commands of Scripture declare God's revealed will, and he must also allow that sometimes God *wills not to hinder* a breach of those commands, because He *does not* as a fact so hinder it. God wills to permit sin, as is evident, for He *does* permit it. Surely none will say that God Himself does what He does not *will* to do.

Finally, let it be said again that my responsibility with regard to the will of God is measured by what He *has* made known in His Word. There I learn that it is my duty to use the means of His providing, and to humbly pray that He may be pleased to bless them to me. To refuse so to do on the ground that I am ignorant of what may or may not be His secret counsels concerning me, is not only absurd, but the height of presumption. We repeat: the secret will of God is none of our business; it is His *revealed* will that measures our accountability. Again, there is no conflict whatever between the secret and the revealed will of God. This is made clear from the fact that His secret will is accomplished by my use of the means laid down in His [revealed will, the holy Scriptures].

For further study, get "*The Sovereignty of God*" by A.W. Pink, a clear and helpful setting-forth of the teaching of Scripture on this neglected theme—available worldwide for download from www.ChapelLibrary.org, and also in print in North America.

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