

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	89		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16		
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Thy Will Be Done

Lords Day 49

Question 124. Which is the third petition?

Answer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"; that is, grant that we and all men may renounce our own will, (a) and without murmuring obey thy will, which is only good; (b) that every one may attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, (c) as willingly and faithfully as the angels do in heaven. (d)

(a) Matt.16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Tit.2:11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Tit.2:12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; (b) Luke 22:42 Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. Eph.5:10 Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. Rom.12:2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (c) 1 Cor.7:24 Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God. (d) Ps.103:20 Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Ps.103:21 Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure.

Much of what passes for evangelicalism is often characterized by a cliché-ridden superficiality that, at its core, is pragmatic and sentimental. It is because of their desire to be perceived as “relevant” and “practical” that these modern day evangelicals display an open hostility to traditional orthodox Christianity; not only in doctrine, but as seen in David Thompson's case, as the outworking of doctrine into practice. All of which to say theology *does* affect how we live. Open-view theists like the late Clark Pinnock contend that Augustine, Anselm, Luther, and Calvin need to be discarded because they have lead the church astray by teaching that God is sovereign!¹ Most Christians acknowledge (quite apart from the influence of Augustine and Calvin) that the Bible *does* teach that God is sovereign. “Job says that God can do anything He wants to do, Isaiah says that God actually does everything He intends to do, and Paul says in Ephesians 1:11 that He ‘works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.’ We can only conclude that ‘the mind of the Spirit’ is totally uniform throughout the Bible on this issue (see I Corinthians 2:6-16). When Jesus wanted to emphasize that God’s control of the details is total, He chose illustrations drawn from trivially small facts in our common experience. He said that God numbers all the hairs of our heads (Matthew 10:30) and that not even a sparrow falls out of the sky without God’s being involved (Luke 12:6-7). Had the Lord lived in the twentieth century, He might have said, ‘God’s exhaustive sovereignty extends to both the position and the velocity of every subatomic particle from the last electron in your fingernail, to the least particle of cosmic dust on the farthest edge of the most distant galaxy; “I, the Lord, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). But you are worth more to Me than any number of

subatomic particles.’ The Bible goes out of its way to include in God’s control the decision-making functions of the human mind. In II Thessalonians 2:11 Paul says that God will send the wicked ‘a powerful delusion’ in order to prepare them for judgment. In I Samuel 16, God sends an evil spirit to torment the wicked Saul and bring him to the brink of insanity. In I Kings 22, God invites an evil spirit (or is it just a perfectly good angelic being who agrees to obey God?) to deceive King Ahab by lying to him through his prophets. The result of this deception is Ahab’s mortal wounding at Ramoth Gilead. The writer notes laconically that some unknown soldier let off a bowshot ‘at random,’ and the arrow found a chink in Ahab’s armor. The soldier was not even aiming straight, but Ahab bled to death that evening, as predicted. His last political act had been to take the time to persecute Micaiah, God’s prophet. The wicked, it seems, die the way they live. More positively, Paul tells us that as the believer grows in grace, God both induces the right decisions and causes them to be done, once they are induced (Philippians 2:13). Without this degree of control and interference, we would never manage to get sanctified.”²

I. THY WILL BE DONE

The next aspect of the Lord’s Prayer is a petition concerning God’s will. As Bishop Ryle observed long ago, “We here pray that God’s laws may be obeyed by men as perfectly, readily, and unceasingly, as they are by angels in heaven. We ask that those who now obey not His laws, may be taught to obey them, and that those who do obey them, may obey them better. Our truest happiness is perfect submission to God’s will, and it is the highest charity to pray that all mankind may know it, obey it, and submit to it.”³ The divine will Jesus has in mind is God’s *preceptive* will. God’s *decretive* will is what He purposed and ordained to occur from eternity past. It can neither be known in advance, unless God has revealed it in Scripture, or thwarted. God’s *perceptive* will, on the other hand, consists of His precepts, His commandments, all those things set forth in Scripture that are our responsibility to fulfill. It is to be our prayer, says Jesus, that what God has declared should happen, does happen.

A. The Decretive Will of God

In Latin, this is called VOLUNTAS DECRETI or VOLUNTAS ABSCONDITA, God’s secret will or the will of His sovereign decree. This is not subject to change. It cannot be known to God’s creatures and is an important aspect of God’s sovereignty.

B. The Preceptive Will of God

Known in the Latin as VOLUNTAS REVELATA, this is God’s revealed will as made known to us in Scripture. This is captured in the prayer of Augustine. NOBIS A DEO PRECAMUR OBEDIENTIAM – we pray that we may willingly obey God’s revealed will.⁴

How do we know the will of God in any given situation? Sadly a great many sincere Christians believe that their feelings or intuition are the way the Spirit of God directs the process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our heart (and feelings) are deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9) and subject to self-deception. God leads and directs us by His Spirit through His Word. “It is just like today, when we pray, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.’ The words are God’s, coming from our Lord Jesus himself, but the voices are our own. So also when we learn these words by heart and repeat them silently: it is the voice of our own hearts (we don’t have to pretend it’s God’s voice) but the words are God’s, right there in our hearts. And this word in our hearts shapes us, like a favorite piece of music that you sing to yourself to give you hope when you are tired, discouraged, or needy.

“It’s God’s word, but your own voice. That’s how it is even in your heart: with your own voice, the voice of your heart, you can remember, repeat, even sing the word of God. (Think of how many good hymns and spiritual songs are really just ways of singing words taken from the Bible.) That’s how it works, because the place to look for God’s word is not in your heart but in the gathering of God’s people for worship, prayer, preaching, and teaching.

“That is why the apostle says, ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs’ (Col. 3:16). And in a parallel passage, he says, ‘be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph. 5:18). From the parallel between these two passages we can see what being filled with the Spirit means: it means for the word of Christ to dwell richly among us. This happens when the people of God gather together as a congregation in the name of Christ, teaching and admonishing and singing God’s word to one another.

“In both passages, the verbs and pronouns are plural. To translate the Greek literally, you’d have to say something like ‘Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you guys,’ and ‘Be filled with the Spirit, you guys!’ In both cases, you find what you are looking for – the word and Spirit of Christ – in his church, the Body of Christ. And because it’s there in the church, the gathered Body, it’s in our hearts as well – as the apostle proceeds to say: ‘singing... with thankfulness in your hearts to God’ (Col. 3:16) and ‘singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart (Eph. 5:19). (Again, the ‘your’ in both passages is plural.) The alternative to the consumerist church is thus the truly Spirit-filled church, which means the church gathered to hear the word of Christ spoken and sung externally by human voices, so that hearts may be formed inwardly in joy and thanksgiving and the knowledge of God.

“So nothing has changed in this regard since biblical times. The Spirit has always spoken through external words. Biblical prophets, for instance, never talk about hearing God in their own hearts. That’s just not what they say about their own experience. They often tell us about their dreams and visions, but they know nothing of the practice we have been taught today where you try to quiet yourself and hear God’s voice in your heart.

“That’s not how the Spirit speaks, because that’s not *why* the Spirit speaks. He does not come to give people private instructions – that’s not what prophecy was ever for – but to join them to the community of God’s people. So the best place to hear him now is in a gathered congregation of the Body of Christ, where he is present to teach, comfort, warn, and guide all who believe. His speaking is not an inner experience but a shared event, just like the teaching and admonishing that happened when the New Testament church was filled with the Spirit.”⁵

CONCLUSION: Thomas Manton, one of my favorite Puritan writers, made this helpful observation, “It is the truest liberty to be subject to the will of God. Then, ‘when the Son of God shall make you free, you shall be free indeed,’ (John 8:36). How doth the Son of God make us free? Not *from* duty, but *for* duty. He that lieth under the dominion and power of any sin is a very slave. But then are we free indeed, when we are loosed, not from a due subjection to God, but from the power of the devil. It is not liberty to be free to do what we please, good or evil; but the more determined we are to good, the more freedom – for that is a liberty which comes nearest to the liberty of God, who is a most free agent and yet cannot sin. Such a liberty is in God, Christ, and the angels in heaven: Surely they do not live a slavish life that are ever praising and lauding of God. It will be the greatest pleasure in the issue to deny our own will and do the will of God. The more we are enlarged for this, the greater is our happiness. Then we have the happiness of the spirits of just men. None among men have greater happiness than glorified saints, yet none have less of their own will. Why should we account that a bondage which is part of our happiness? In heaven, glorified spirits there are not complaining of any burden, yet they have no will of their own, but they will and nill as God doth.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ C. Pinnock in *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century*, eds. C. Pinnock and R. Brow (IVP, 1994), p. 9. Elsewhere Pinnock declares that God is “sovereign over His sovereignty” and has decided not to be sovereign! Cf. his *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Baker, 2001), p. 92.

² Cf. R.K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What’s Wrong with Freewill Theism* (IVP, 1996), p. 195.

³ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels I* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 52.

⁴ Richard A. Muller makes this helpful distinction, “VOLUNTAS REVELATA DEI: *the revealed will of God*; viz., the will of God concerning human obedience and human salvation that is revealed in the law and the gospel, as distinguished from the VOLUNTAS ABSCONDITA, the hidden will of God, which is the ultimate divine purpose underlying the VOLUNTAS REVELATA, the unsearchable judgments, and ways of the infinite mind of God itself (Romans 11:33). The distinction is similar to that between the POTENTIA ORDINATE and POTENTIA ABSOLUTA and between THEOLOGIA ECTYPA and the THEOLOGIA ARCHETYPA insofar as all three distinctions arise out of a theological concern for the divine transcendence, and are virtually identical with the distinction between VOLUNTAS SIGNI and VOLUNTAS BENEPLACITI, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from the Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Baker, 1985), p. 333.

⁵ Philip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christians* (Brazos Press, 2010), p. 15. This is an outstanding book that I cannot recommend highly enough!

⁶ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton I* (rpt. Maranatha Publication, 1975), p. 131.