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THE WILL OF GOD

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The Shorter Westminster Catechism begins with the question: 'What is the chief end of man?' The answer is: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever'.

The same truth can be stated in other words even fuller in meaning: 'man's chief end is to be transformed by the Holy Spirit in the renewing of his mind, so that he may prove what is *the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*' (cf. Rom. 12:2).

It is a wonderful theme because it predicates that God *has* revealed Himself to man, and because of that fact He has made it possible for redeemed humanity to enjoy His fellowship in the present, and eternally in the life to come: 'That like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so *we also* might walk in newness of Life' (Rom. 6:4, 5). And its continuing dynamic is the sustaining ministry of the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of the Lord's parting words to His disciples: 'When the Spirit of truth is come He shall guide you into all the truth . . . for He shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you' (Jn. 16:13-16; read the whole passage). Whatever wider connotation 'The Truth' may have in this context, it is broad-based upon the revelation to man both of *the mind and the will of God*, as the 'Originating Cause' and 'Source' of all that Scripture means by 'THE TRUTH'. Hence the profound import of Christ's own statement to the believing Jews: 'If ye shall abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (Jn. 8:31, 32): Free, that is, as stated in the passage quoted above, by the transforming of the

whole personality so that we may by experience come to know, and therefore to obey, 'the good and acceptable and perfect will of God' so fully revealed in the Scripture of Truth.

We shall confine our present study to but three particular aspects of what is in reality a large theme. First the Will of God is

The Expression of the Character of God

That is, the divine Will partakes of the same infinite perfection as is inherent in the Godhead. It could not be otherwise or else the whole content of Divine Revelation as contained in Holy Scripture would be completely valueless and nullified. It follows that, every separate expression of God's Will must inevitably be viewed as part of the general manifestation of His divine character: It is possessed of the full perfection and authority of God.

It will be helpful if we single out, as it were, certain of the more prominent features of the divine character which are revealed to us in Holy Scripture, which together give to every distinctive and separate expression of the divine Will its full intrinsic moral and spiritual values, as being what the apostle states: '*Good and acceptable and perfect*'.

(1) The Will of God first of all is expressive of *His Divine Sovereignty*; which may be defined (as far as definition is possible of what is so profound and inscrutable) as God's holy, limitless, and purposeful activity at work within the Universe of His own creation, for the eternal blessing of *all* who willingly respond in obedience to that revelation. As to the *content* of the revelation all we need to say is that it is concerning HIMSELF as Creator of all things including man. And then it is concerning His purpose of grace exhibited in the whole scheme of Redemption for all mankind who, in exercise of their individual free will, accept that Redemption in its completeness. That of course only touches on the one aspect of God's Sovereignty as it is related to mankind, but it suffices for our immediate purpose.

In this context the following selection of Scripture references are relevant:

'Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself according to the good pleasure of His will' (Eph. 1:5).

'Having made known unto us *the mystery of His will*, according to His good pleasure *which He purposed in Himself* . . . to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth' (Eph. 1:9).

'In Christ we were made a heritage, *having been foreordained according to the purpose of Him*' who worketh all things after *the counsel of His will* . . . that we should be unto the praise of His glory' (Eph. 1:11, 12).

Such passages, and there are others, reveal the Will of God in active exercise as the expression of His divine Sovereignty. Yet the emphasis is not merely on the Sovereignty *per se*, as it were, but on the activity of that Sovereignty as viewed in the whole content and effectuality of *the Divine Purpose* in the scheme of man's Redemption. 'He Who wills, performing for reasons wholly His own, brings to perfection what He wills; for with Him to preordain is infallibly to accomplish'. To rebel against His will, therefore, is to set up our own puny wills in defiance to His Sovereign Will, and in consequence suffer the eternal punishment He has reserved for all who thus rebel against Him.

(2) The Will of God is also expressive of *His Divine Holiness*; that is, of a character so ineffably transcendent as to defy any adequate definition in human language. It is not the mere absence of all evil: It is the *Infinite Perfection* of Deity in *the absolute*, in Whose Presence evil is 'consumed' as by fire, and all mere human righteousnesses are seen as 'abominable rags'—to use Isaiah's phrase in ch. 4:6. In profound contrast, the prophet constantly refers to God as the '*Holy One of Israel*', in order to drive home the fact that the true origin of his message was to be found in the heart of the Thrice-Holy God, like unto Whom there is none other. Hence to flout His commands and appeals is to deny His holiness and the challenge it makes in our own lives: 'I am the LORD your God: . . . Ye shall be holy, *for I AM HOLY*' (Lev. 11:44). And again: 'Like as HE which called you is HOLY, be ye *yourselves holy* in all manner of living' (1 Pet. 1:15, 16).

(3) Furthermore, in the whole realm of the visible and invisible Creation, which the apostle alludes to in his Colossian Letter (ch. 1:15-17), the unceasing activity and objective of the Divine Will is ever 'according to' the *Divine Wisdom* in planning for the eternal blessing of mankind if only they would heed it. 'Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' questions Paul

in addressing the church in Corinth; and goes on to add; 'But our message is Christ the crucified . . . Christ Who is the power of God and the wisdom of God!*' In an equally remarkable passage the apostle declares that God has 'granted unto us complete insight and understanding of the open secret of His Will. . . .' (Eph. 1:9. See Moffatt's translation and R.V.). It was also the apostle's constant prayer that believers might be 'filled with the knowledge of His Will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord' (Col. 1:9, 10).

The divine wisdom, therefore, is the guarantee of the *Infinite Sufficiency of the divine grace* to meet, on the one hand, the holy requirements of the Sovereign Lord; and on the other hand to strengthen the limitations of our fallen and yet redeemed humanity, so that God and man shall be able to enjoy such mutual fellowship as no heart can conceive and no tongue can express.

(4) Finally, we are enabled by the Spirit and the Word to discover that the supreme motive which governs every expression of the Will of God is found in the *Divine Love*; the Love which deals with sinful mankind in grace and mercy, solely for the glory of God and man's everlasting felicity. Here is seen the guarantee of *Infinite Beneficence*, for the divine predestination and foreordination are ever 'according to the good pleasure of His will' (Eph. 1:4-6): 'God so loved that *He gave* His only begotten Son'. Hence the exhortation: 'Be ye therefore imitators of God . . . and walk in love, even as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us . . .' (Eph. 5:1, 2). Such Love is spontaneous in its origin; universal in its scope; long-suffering in its appeal; self-sacrificing in its character; prevailing in its urgency; everlasting in its consistency, because 'GOD IS LOVE'.

We shall next consider briefly what might be termed the *Ideal Response* of obedience to the Divine Will as

Exemplified in Christ Jesus

the Pattern Man, Who trod this earth in human form in order to 'taste the sufferings of death for everyman, that He might thereby

* 1 Cor. 1:19-25; vs. 30, 31; also ch. 2:1, 2. These passages deserve careful study in this same connection.

bring us to God'. His own statement to His disciples is full of meaning and appeal: 'I have *given* (lit. "been setting") *you an example*' (Jn. 13:15); which was not only true of that particular occasion, but in all the varied course of His life lived before their eyes. That being so it is our highest wisdom to study the distinctive features of His life on earth and apply the lessons to our own hearts.

To begin with, we are told of only three occasions on which Christ gave expression to His own will, which are only recorded in the Gospel of John. The first is in chap. 5:21, 'For as the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them, even so *the Son quickeneth whom He will*'. Again in ch. 17:24, in that matchless prayer of His; 'Father, *I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am*; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me'; and in chap. 21:22; 'Jesus saith . . . *if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me*'. In all other references Jesus is seen to subordinate His own will to that of the Father in a manner both sublime and utterly self-effacing. Yet in doing so He ever revealed to the fullest extent the perfections of His divine-human nature: truly God and truly Man. Furthermore, it is worthwhile noting the four specific references in which He Himself gives expression to His own voluntary submission to the Father's will: they illustrate the Messianic utterance in Psalm 40:6-8; 'I delight to do THY will, O my God; yea, Thy Law is within my heart' (Heb. 'in the midst of my bowels'). It is to this passage the writer of the Hebrews Epistle refers in chapter 10:8, 9.

In doing the Father's Will

(a) The Son found unfailing *sustenance* for His soul: 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to accomplish His work' (Jn. 4:34).

(b) He revealed the well-spring of His Divine *Wisdom*. Hence His every utterance possessed the authority of God: 'I can of myself do nothing; as I hear I judge; and my judgment is righteous, because I seek not mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me' (Jn. 5:30). That is, He *was* the very expression of

the Father's mind and will; self-interest or other influence could never mar it.

(c) The prevailing *motive* of His saving work; for in 'receiving' all whom the Father had given Him was because the Father had willed it. None would be lost (Jn. 6:37-40; the whole context must be read to get the fulness of thought it contains).

(d) He *endured the cross* and the full measure of its suffering because it was the Father's will. Note very precisely that, at no point in all His sufferings did He deflect for an instant from the complete and willing obedience to the Father (Mk. 14:36; Matt. 26:42; etc.). Here the self-abnegation of Jesus reaches the deepest depths—and can we not also add—the *highest heights*? 'Wherefore God . . . gave Him *the NAME* which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . .' (Phil. 2:5-11; the whole passage should be read).

(To be concluded in next issue)

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

PROF. F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (John 1:19-12:50)

(b) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA

(John 2: 1-4: 42)

V. *Jesus and the Samaritans* (4:1-42)

(Continued)

Ch. 4, v. 13—*Jesus answered and said unto her, every one that drinketh of this water shall thirst again*—The woman's last question had been incredulous; how could a chance passing Jew be greater than the patriarch Jacob? But Jesus takes up her question seriously. The water in Jacob's well was good water, undoubtedly, but it did not satisfy thirst indefinitely; those who drew water from that well and enjoyed its refreshing properties grew thirsty