

DISTINGUISHING GOD’S WILL AND HIS PRECEPTS

A Brief Study of Calvin’s Biblical-theological Teaching

D. Scott Meadows (Nov 2019)

John Calvin wrote that “God’s will is . . . the cause of all things, [which makes] his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate [i.e., the non-elect] to obedience” (*Institutes* I, xviii, 2, “How does God’s impulse come to pass in men?”).¹

To refute his opponents, Calvin wrote, “It is easy to dispose of their first objection, that if nothing happens apart from God’s will, there are in him two contrary wills, because by his secret plan he decrees what he has openly forbidden by his law” (*Institutes* I, xviii, 3, “God’s will is a unity”). This complex argument may easily be misunderstood. The enemies of Calvin’s teaching about Providence believed that many things happen that actually are not God’s will. Calvin strongly objects to that notion. His opponents considered God’s law to be one aspect of God’s will, and, granting for sake of argument Calvin’s notion of God’s decree to be His will, they reasoned, “there are in him two contrary wills” (His law [commandments, precepts] and His decree), “because by his secret plan he decrees what he has openly forbidden by his law.” Now Calvin granted, along with his opponents, that if God’s law were thought of as His will, this would inescapably lead to the absurd conclusion of “two contrary wills” in God. Both Calvin and his opponents rejected this as a preposterous idea. Calvin’s ensuing argument was to deny that God’s law is His “will,” a term that should only be used formally of His decree.²

Calvin argues a little later, “God’s will is not at war with itself, nor does it change, nor does it pretend not to will what he wills. But even though his will is one and simple in him, it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in divers ways it wills and does not will something to take place.” Here Calvin strongly identified God’s “will” with His decree and nothing else. His commandments only appear to be His will to us because of our limited ability to understand God and His ways. To make things unmistakably clear, Calvin wrote, “when we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity.” This remark implicitly states Calvin’s deep conviction that God actually does will to happen what He forbids to be done by His law revealed to men. Not God’s law to men, but Providence (i.e., what actually happens according to His decree) is truly and literally the revelation of God’s will. This refutes the first objection of “two contrary wills” in God. It is only a figurative use of language to call

¹ Calvin, J. (2011). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (J. T. McNeill, Ed., F. L. Battles, Trans.) (Vol. 1, p. 233). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

² See the helpful discussion of proper (formal) and improper (figurative) language by Charles J. Rennie in Chapter One, “Analogy and the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility,” of *Confessing the Impassible God: The Biblical, Classical, & Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility* (RBAP, Palmdale, CA, 2015).

God's commandments His "will." We cannot correctly and formally speak of God's precepts as His will. God's precepts are not God Himself. His precepts are revelatory in creation to teach us about God. On the other hand, God eternally willing is God, that is, God being Himself.

In this section of *Institutes*, a few other remarks are highly relevant to the subject of our attention. They confirm that we are not misunderstanding Calvin's meaning. Opponents of Calvin's doctrine of God's decree, will, and Providence raised another objection. According to Calvin, they remonstrated, "If God not only uses the work of the ungodly, but also governs their plans and intentions, he is the author of all wickednesses; and therefore men are undeservedly damned if they carry out what God has decreed because they obey His will." Again, it is clear that Calvin was actually asserting what they oppose, namely, that "God not only uses the work of the ungodly, but also governs their plans and intentions." Calvin did not agree, however, that this makes God "the author of all wickedness." Calvin explains why God remains without any blame, despite the sinning of His creatures under His perfect control, throughout this section of *Institutes* (Book I, Section xviii; your careful study of it in its entirety is highly recommended). Calvin would agree with his opponents that his doctrine would indeed be wrong if the conclusion they stated actually followed, namely, that "men are undeservedly damned if they carry out what God has decreed because they obey his will." Calvin's refutation of this is subtle. Men are not condemned for carrying out God's will; they are condemned for violating His law, and, in this way, failing in their moral duty, even while they are unwittingly obeying His secret will in the eternal decree. Again, the mistake of Calvin's opponents stems from confusing God's will with His commandments. To quote Calvin, the problem in their reasoning is that "[God's] will is wrongly confused with his precept: innumerable examples clearly show how utterly different these two are." Calvin proceeds to give some examples from Scripture for proof of the point.

I deeply appreciate Calvin's careful teaching here. God's precepts are not His will. To speak of God's "decretive will" (formally) alongside His "preceptive will" (figuratively) as if they were His will in the same sense is a grave mistake. When we think of God's commandments as His will, literally, then pernicious theological consequences are bound to follow. Some imagine God willing opposite things within Himself and call it a mystery, but this is unscriptural, irrational, and less sound than Calvin and his opponents! A failure to appreciate the distinction between God's will and His precepts, explained so well by Calvin, has led to great confusion, even among many identifying as Calvinists. Ω