

## The Will of God

The notion of will can be seen from three perspectives: (1) an organ or faculty as a part of the heart or the soul; (2) the action of willing, desiring, or wishing (verb); and (3) the result of willing or desiring, what is desired, the will or resolution itself (noun). In the Bible God's will is closely related to the notions of His good pleasure and His purpose, and it issues in a plan, or economy.<sup>1</sup> God's will is a hidden mystery, which is intimated in the Old Testament and developed fully in the New Testament. In the Old Testament God's will is related to His people, the land, the city of Jerusalem, Mount Zion, and the temple. It is also related to the sacrifices and offerings, which prefigure the death of Christ as the fulfillment of the offerings, which was also prophesied in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the will of God is centered on the human living of Jesus, His redemptive death, and His life-imparting resurrection to regenerate the believers as sons of God, to sanctify and transform them as members of the Body of Christ, and to indwell them as the hope of glory for His glorious expression for eternity. The will of God has two aspects: His absolute will, indicating His unchanging determination, especially as a result of a counsel in the Godhead; and His circumstantial will, especially related to historical circumstances of a particular time, such as His judgment on the nations including Babylon (Jer. 51:11, 29; Isa. 14:26; cf. Rev. 17:17).<sup>2</sup> God's absolute will is particularly focused on Christ and the church as the Body of Christ.

### God's Will in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the notion of God's will is not developed as fully as in the New Testament. "The fact that no single Hebrew word or phrase for the divine will predominates may mean that Israel's reflection on the matter was not as focused as...[later] discussions" (Fretheim 915). A variety of words in Hebrew contain the notion of will. The notion of will may be included in the organs of the heart and the soul; for example, "the intentions of His heart stand from generation to generation" (Psa. 33:11) and "the anger of Jehovah will not turn back / Until He has executed and until He has accomplished / The purposes of His heart (Jer. 23:20; 30:24). Notions of will may also be included in verbs and nouns indicating pleasure, desire, delight (embodied in the will) or purpose, plan, intent, counsel (issuing from the will).

### Good Pleasure and Will

Two main Hebrew roots (*h-ph-ts* and *r-ts-h*) indicate God's will from the perspective of what pleases Him, with the notions of will and good pleasure often merging. In a general sense, Jehovah does whatever He pleases (*haphets*) (Psa. 115:3; 135:6), and He will accomplish all His desire (*hephets*) (Isa. 46:10). The psalmist delights (*haphets*) in doing Jehovah's will (*ratsou*) and requests that He teach him to do His will (Psa. 40:8; 143:10; cf. Ezra 10:11). His hosts of ministering angels do His will (Psa. 103:21).

More specifically, Jehovah's delight is focused on His people and on Christ, typified and prophesied in the Old Testament. It often goes along with His choosing (*bahar*). Jehovah chose Israel (Deut. 14:2), Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:13; Zech. 3:2), and Mount Zion (Psa. 78:68; 132:13). He was pleased (*ya'al*) to make Israel a people for Himself (1 Sam. 12:22). Jerusalem is called "My delight is in her" (*Hephzibah*, Isa. 62:4), and David requested that He do good in His good pleasure (*ratsou*) unto Zion (Psa. 51:18). Jehovah also chose David (1 Kings 8:16), and He took delight in David (2 Sam. 22:20) and in Solomon (1 Kings 10:9; 2 Chron. 9:8), the ones who prepared and built the temple and who are types of Christ.

Burnt offerings and sacrifices are acceptable (*ratsah*) upon His altar (Isa. 56:7; Lev. 1:3-4). However, the ritualistic offering of these sacrifices He does not delight (*haphets*) in (Psa. 51:16-17; Jer. 6:20), but rather He delights in lovingkindness (Hosea 6:6; Micah 7:18), justice, and righteousness on earth (Jer. 9:24). The proper expression of these attributes and virtues from His people is more crucial than their offerings. In order to bring this about, He prepared ears (a body) for Christ, who delights in and came to do His will (*ratsou*) as the fulfillment of the offerings (Psa. 40:6-8; Heb. 10:5-9). Jehovah was pleased (*haphets*) to crush and afflict Him in the carrying out of His sacrificial redemption, but the pleasure (*hephets*) of Jehovah prospers in His hand (Isa. 53:10).

### Counsel, Purpose or Intention, and Will

There are a few roots that indicate counsel and purpose, or intention. Sometimes they are used to indicate God's unchanging purpose; e.g., "the counsel [*'etsah*] of Jehovah

stands forever; / The intentions [*mahshebot*] of His heart stand from generation to generation” (Psa. 33:11; Prov. 19:21). God’s purpose is hidden—and at most just hinted at—in the Old Testament. The psalmist ponders concerning what man is and what Jehovah thinks (*hashab*) about human beings (Psa. 144:3). Mostly these words of purpose and intention indicate God’s circumstantial purpose or will, especially in preserving His people out from whom He would come as a man. In the Old Testament the specific vocabulary for God’s will and its content is not so explicit. There are indicators pointing to Christ’s coming and His process of death and resurrection to fulfill God’s eternal desire, will, and purpose with His people, which prepare us for the New Testament revelation of God’s will.

### God’s Will in the New Testament

The New Testament uses two distinct word roots, θελ- and βουλ- (sometimes used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew words for *desire* and *purpose*), specifically to indicate God’s will, with separate words to indicate desire and purpose. From the root θελ- comes the verb (ἐ)θέλω “will, wish, desire” and nouns θέλημα “will” (the ending -μα indicates the result of willing or wishing, the thing wished for) and θέλησις (perhaps indicating a process of the ongoing working out of His will, which occurs in Hebrews 2:4). The noun θέλημα in the New Testament refers to “what is willed, and the whole emphasis falls on the content of volition” (Schrenk, “θέλω” 62). It sometimes reinforces the action of willing or desiring indicated by the verb θέλω (e.g., Matt. 26:42; James 1:18).

From the root βουλ- (related to the English words *will* and *volition*) comes the verb βούλομαι “intend, deliberate, take counsel” and nouns βουλή “counsel” and βούλημα “will, desire, intention” (also with the ending -μα indicating the result of the verb of intending or deliberating, the thing deliberated).<sup>3</sup> While there are distinct words for *will*, *good pleasure*, and *purpose*, as well as *counsel* and *economy*, these notions are still interrelated.

*Will*, *good pleasure*, *purpose*, *counsel*, and *economy* are a matter of particular focus in Ephesians 1 where the noun θέλημα occurs as a genitive modifier in three phrases: *the good pleasure of His will*, *the counsel of His will*, and *the mystery of His will*; and these phrases are associated with the two additional related notions: *purpose* and *economy*.

### The Good Pleasure of His Will— to Predestinate Many Sons

God chose us to be holy and predestinated us unto sonship according to the good pleasure of His will (vv. 4-5). God’s good pleasure (εὐδοκία)—what seems (-δοκία from δοκέω “to think, seem”) good, fine, well (εὖ-) to Him or what pleases Him and makes Him happy—is

contained or embodied in God’s will (θέλημα). The two are closely related. God is a purposeful Being with a definite will, but in this will He is full of feeling. Both God’s will and God’s good pleasure can be considered God’s heart’s desire; what God wants is what pleases Him. God makes a decision according to what He desires, which is what pleases Him and makes Him happy. In Ephesians 1:5 this is to predestinate, or mark us out beforehand, unto sonship (υἰοθεσία), which places us in the process of becoming full-grown sons of God with the rights and responsibilities to corporately express the invisible God in the Body of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

### The Counsel of His Will and His Purpose

We were designated as an inheritance, having been predestinated according to the purpose of God who works, or operates, all things according to the counsel (βουλή) of His will (Eph. 1:11). Being designated as (or caused to be) an inheritance can have the notions of both our inheriting God (v. 14) and God inheriting us (v. 18). This implies maturation in life among us as His sons that qualifies us to inherit and makes us worthy to be inherited. We have been predestinated, or marked out beforehand, to be mature sons (v. 5) according to God’s purpose (πρόθεσις). His purpose is His eternal purpose to have many sons (3:11), whom He predestinated to be conformed to the image of His first-born Son to corporately express Him as His Body (Rom. 8:29). This purpose is of God who operates (ἐνεργῶν) all things according to the counsel (βουλή) of His will (Eph. 1:11). “For this will God held a council in His Divine Trinity to make a counsel” (Lee, *Organic Union* 37). This counsel was a deliberation among the three of the Godhead concerning the content and carrying out of God’s will. This deliberation resulted in the creation of mankind in the image and according to the likeness of the Divine Trinity (Gen. 1:26). In the operations among the three of the Trinity, the Father sends the Son by the Spirit to carry out His judicial redemption, and the Spirit comes as the reality of the Son with the Father to carry out God’s organic salvation by indwelling the believers.

The counsel or will of God can be seen in the use of the words βουλή, βούλημα, and βούλομαι elsewhere in the New Testament. In a general sense, God’s counsel is unchangeable, especially as it relates to God’s promises to the forefathers (Heb. 6:17). David served his own generation by the counsel of God (Acts 13:36). The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the counsel of God for themselves since they had not been baptized by John the Baptist (Luke 7:30). Paul declared to the elders in Ephesus the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Paul also asked who withstands God’s will (βούλημα), likening the divine will exercised in His selection to that of a potter who has the authority over the clay to make some vessels unto honor and others unto dishonor (Rom. 9:19).

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However, perhaps the most striking matter related to the counsel of God is the Lord Jesus' being delivered up to be crucified according to the counsel and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

This counsel must have been determined in a council held by the Divine Trinity before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8), indicating that the Lord's crucifixion was not an accident in human history but a purposeful fulfillment of the divine counsel determined by the Triune God. (Recovery Version, Acts 2:23, note 1)<sup>5</sup>

**I**n the Lord's death we can see the operation of the Divine Trinity with the use of the verb βούλομαι, perhaps implying a predetermined counsel. The Lord Jesus said, "Father, if You are willing [εἰ βούλει], remove this cup from Me yet; not My will [θέλημα], but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Here we see a "contrast...between the resolute, predetermined and immutable counsel of God and the natural inclination of the human will of Jesus" (Holleran 89, quoted in Plymale 62). "In Lk. 22:42 Jesus with His εἰ βούλει appeals to the divine will, design and counsel, and makes Himself dependent on it at the very moment when the humanly anxious request for help and deliverance presses for utterance" (Schrenk, "βούλομαι" 633). This is an example of the human will submitting to the divine counsel, which had already been determined (ὀρίζω, Luke 22:22). He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

### *The Mystery of His Will—His Purpose and Economy*

God makes known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself, unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). God's will is a mystery (μυστήριον) that He desires to make known.<sup>6</sup> According to His good pleasure, He purposed (προ-τίθημι "set down beforehand") in Himself to have a household arrangement, or economy (οἰκονομία). This economy itself is also a mystery according to Ephesians 3:9, which also speaks of enlightening "all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things." This mystery "is His hidden purpose, which is to dispense Himself into His chosen people. Hence, there is the economy of the mystery of God" (Recovery Version, note 2). God's economy is to head up all things in Christ through the dispensing of Himself in Christ as life into the believers. Christ accomplishes this dispensing by making His home in the believers' hearts through faith (v. 17).

### *God's Will in His Economy*

The other uses of verbs and nouns indicate God's will, as seen in the various aspects of the outworking of His

economy from His creation to the redemption and salvation of the believers, including their regeneration, indwelling, sanctification, transformation, and glorification.

After His selection and predestination according to His will (Eph. 1:4-5), all things were created according to God's will (θέλημα) so that He might accomplish and fulfill His purpose (Rev. 4:11). God wills (θέλω), or desires, that all men be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), not intending (βούλομαι) that any perish but that all advance to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). However, according to God's selection in His economy

He has mercy on whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills...God, wishing [θέλων] to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, endured with much long-suffering vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He had before prepared unto glory. (Rom. 9:18, 22-23)

**T**he Lord prayed that the Father's will (θέλημα) be done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10). Whoever does the will of the Father who is in the heavens is the Lord's real relative—His brother, sister, and mother (12:50). It is not the will of our Father who is in the heavens that one of these little ones (i.e., His followers, the sheep) perish (18:14), and He said, "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all which He has given Me I should lose nothing but should raise it up in the last day" (John 6:39). The Lord said that His food was to "do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work" (4:34). He did not seek His own will but the will of Him who sent Him (5:30; 6:38). It was the Father's will that Jesus take the cup of suffering the death of the cross to accomplish redemption (Luke 22:42; cf. Matt. 26:42). He came to do God's will (Heb. 10:7) by offering His body as the unique sacrifice for sin, replacing the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament (v. 10). He gave Himself for our sins that He might rescue us out of the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:4). Our begetting is the will of God (John 1:13; cf. James 1:18). The will of the Father is that everyone who beholds the Son and believes into Him should have eternal life, and the Son will raise him up in the last day (John 6:40). The Son gives life to whom He wills (θέλω) (5:21), and He desires that the disciples be with Him where He is, "in the divine glory of the Father's expression" (Recovery Version, 17:24, note 1).<sup>7</sup>

Paul also prayed that the believers may be filled with the full knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9), and Epaphras prayed that they may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God (4:12). The will of God in Colossians centers on Christ as the centrality and universality of everything in God's economy (1:15-27) and on the Body of Christ (2:19;

3:15). God willed (θέλω) to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory (1:27).

Paul also states that the will of God is our sanctification: that we abstain from fornication (1 Thes. 4:3) and that in everything we give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us (5:18). We should also not be fashioned according to this age but be transformed by the renewing of the mind that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

Based on the presenting of our bodies and the renewing of our minds, we will see, discern, and prove by testing that the will of God is to obtain a Body for Christ to be His fullness and expression.

In this chapter the will of God is that we whom God has chosen, called, redeemed, justified, sanctified, and conformed unto glorification in the preceding eleven chapters may be members one of another to have the living of the Body of Christ (vv. 3-5). The Body of Christ is the peak of God's divine revelation. The living of the Body is the issue and goal of the presenting of our bodies, the renewing of our mind, and all the life practices in the foregoing chapters. (Recovery Version, notes 5 and 6)

The living of the Body life does not only reflect the circumstantial will of God in a believer's life but is the outworking of the absolute will of God, that which is "good and well pleasing and perfect."

In His creation God has placed each one of the members in the body even as He willed (1 Cor. 12:18—which can also apply to the members of His mystical Body in the new creation) and gives to each a body even as He willed (15:38—including us with our glorified bodies).

## Conclusion

God has an absolute, unchanging will that expresses His heart's desire, or good pleasure, which was worked out through the counsel of the Divine Trinity and issues in His eternal purpose and economy. His circumstantial will is directed to particular moments in the unfolding of history. His will can be seen in the actions of willing and in the explicit use of the noun *will* in the New Testament. God's will is a hidden mystery centered on Christ and His processes of death for redemption and resurrection for indwelling, and on the church as the Body of Christ and the processes that produce sons of God and members of the Body of Christ—regeneration, sanctification, transformation, and glorification—for His expression for eternity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>God's will is related to the faculty of the will, God's good pleasure is related to the faculty of the emotion, and God's purpose, or intention, is related to the faculty of the mind.

<sup>2</sup>See Fretheim on the distinction between absolute and circumstantial will (915). The absolute, unchanging will of God is the main focus of this article.

<sup>3</sup>The organ or faculty of the will is not indicated directly in the New Testament in relation to God, but the faculty is tied to the verbs of willing and the nouns indicating what is willed.

<sup>4</sup>"Sonship or Adoption as Sons?" in *Affirmation & Critique*, V.4 (2000): 39-40, deals with the significance of the word υιοθεσία.

<sup>5</sup>This divine counsel was actually fulfilled by the Pharisees, who "took counsel against Him as to how they might destroy Him" in cooperation with the Romans (Matt. 12:14).

<sup>6</sup>"The Mystery of God" in *Affirmation & Critique*, XV.2 (2010): 63-71, deals with the significance of the word *mystery*, particularly the mystery of God, which is Christ, and the mystery of Christ, which is the church as His Body. Christ and the church are also the main notions associated with God's will.

<sup>7</sup>In addition, there are a number of times when θέλω is used to indicate the circumstantial will of Jesus in His earthly ministry. He was willing to cleanse the leper (Matt. 8:3), He was not willing to let the crowd go away hungry (15:32), He desired to gather the children of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her brood (23:37), but He was not willing to drink the stupefying drink of wine mingled with gall (27:34). He desired that the fire (the impulse of the spiritual life) would be cast to the earth (Luke 12:49).

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