

The Call and the Will of God

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This article addresses some common themes about God's will and prompts inquiry for further discussion. It applies to these themes some insights about the Gospel from Luther's book, *The Bondage of the Will*, his *Commentary on Galatians*, his *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, and from the doctrine of vocation.

Case 1: Dan's first serious struggle with the question of God's will came during his first Call yet had nothing to do with his Lutheran school placement. Rather, his confusion came from being jilted in the name of God. He met Nancy, a member of the congregation, early in his Call. They dated and enjoyed each other's company. As the months passed, the compatibility seemed right and the relationship grew. Beginning to think of marriage, Dan cautiously and sincerely mentioned the idea to Nancy. To his relief, she didn't balk at the possibility. Dan deliberately brought up the topic from time to time and Nancy seemed steadily receptive, until one spring night when Nancy called and said they had to talk. As the conversation unfolded, Nancy emotionally yet firmly informed Dan that they could not marry. Praying about the matter, Nancy had concluded that it was God's will that she not marry Dan. Stunned yet respectful, Dan did not believe it was his place to challenge God's will. He agreed to break off the relationship. Three years later, he was still unmarried and still confused about what had happened.

Case 2: The third article of the Apostle's Creed raises questions about death and funerals. during an eighth grade religion lesson, students shared experiences of deaths in their families, relating how Jesus' death and resurrection sustained their trust in God's care and promises. Rachel raised her hand and, without waiting to be called on, quietly reported that when her grandpa died last year, someone at the funeral home approached her and her mom and told them in a sympathetic voice, "It was God's will that your grandpa died." Rachel then asked, "Did God really want my Grandpa to die?"

Case 3: Paul did not get the job even though he was qualified and had an excellent internship. The company flew him out to their headquarters for a battery of tests and interviews which he passed "with flying colors." All of his documentation was submitted ahead of schedule. He got great reviews from the company personnel office.

Though several entry-level positions were available, he got no offer. When the turndown phone call came, Paul was devastated since his hiring had looked like a sure thing. The only thought Paul could summon to console himself was that it just wasn't God's will and that God had another portion for him somewhere else.

Case 4: Kelly had a Call and she didn't know what to do. She was ready to graduate certified for both high school and middle school ministry. The placement office had sent her credentials to a school with an opening in its departmentalized seventh and eighth grades. The congregation's Call included the exact parish duties Kelly desired. With the pastor's and principal's support and encouragement, all the circumstances seemed right. The congregation was waiting, the days were passing, but Kelly couldn't give an answer. Was this the place God wanted her to be? Maybe she should wait for a Call to high school. Why didn't God give her a sign or some indication of what she should do?

What Do You Say?

Marriage, death, occupation, and professional church work, are all among the important events and decisions that compel the Christian to ponder God's will. What sorts of things do you say about God's will? Would you say to Dan, Rachel, Paul, and Kelly? What do you say as you face your own important life events and decisions? Whether you're a candidate for placement or a veteran church worker, understanding the "God's will" discussion is an essential part of doing our ministry.

Since the people we serve face these issues every day, part of our Call as a teaching minister of the Gospel is to speak Biblically and helpfully to others about God's will for them. Also, part of our competence in ministry includes applying biblical principles about God's will to our own lives. Few concepts are more vexing and perplexing to Christians and church workers: The subject pertains especially to the Call. Consider a few of the many questions the subject provokes:

- Does God have a particular planned outcome for my decisions? Does he have a preference?
- Since God is all-powerful, is it possible for me to violate God's will?
- To what extent does God intervene in human affairs and change the course of events? In what ways does he and does he not intervene?
- Does God have a plan for my life? If so, what sort of plan is it? Is it a "life map" or "program?"

- Has God pre-selected someone for me to marry? Chosen an occupation for me? Called me to work in the church? How would I know? On what basis would I know this?
- How should I deliberate my first or next Call in a God-pleasing way?

Fraught with many questions, the concept of God's will is also plagued by many conflicting answers. Christian bookstores display books from various authors, each offering diverse views and solutions to the mysteries and secrets (real and claimed) concerning the will of God. Exchange on the topic of God's will is adult Bible class or a college bull session offers as many answers as participants. These questions also contain important theological and philosophical ideas such as freedom and determinacy, the nature of revelation, and our source and norm for what we teach and what we say. We cannot unpack such large themes here (see the resources suggested at the end of the article). However, we can examine some of the confusion over the "God's will" discussion. Also, we can apply a few basic Lutheran insights about the Gospel to this discussion and to our understanding of the Call.

An instructive plan to start is Deut. 29:29, "The secret thing belongs to the Lord, our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may observe all the words of this torah." There are, then, secret councils that belong to the divine Majesty of God to which we have no access. This insight will keep us modest and humble in our discussion God's will. We won't presume to penetrate God's secret councils and omnipotent will, which are beyond our comprehension. Yet God has revealed some of himself to us in Christ and the Scriptures and we can locate our discussion of God's will in this revelation.

Back to Law and Gospel

The Lutheran heritage actually says little about God's will in the typical sense of God directing or orchestrating our choices and decisions. Though this lack may not sound helpful at first, such silence is a significant clue to examining our thinking about God's will and our deliberation of a Call. The Book of Concord addresses the subject of will in terms of sinful will and God's desire or will for our salvation. (See the index listings and cross-references under "Will, of God".) The systematic studies of Biblical doctrine do not include treatments about God planning events and decisions in our lives. Instead, they simply acknowledge God's constant presence and his general providence for our daily needs without trying to detect any special will. Consonant

with the real complexity of life, sin and faith. Luther's discussions of God's will are correspondingly practical and complete. Luther located our Christian freedom in his teaching about God's call or vocation. This rich and important concept notwithstanding, Luther's statement about I Cor. 9:19ff begins to set his teaching apart from the usual things we say and hear about God's will. He notes that the Apostle Paul,

Ate, drank, and lived with the Jews according to the law, even though it was not necessary for him. With the Gentiles, he ate, drank and lived without the law, as they did. For only two things are necessary: faith and love. Everything else you are free to do or leave undone. Therefore, you may do everything for the sake of one [situation or person], and for the sake of another refrain from everything, and in that way, treat all impartially.

Gustaf Windgren's book (1957), *Luther on Vocation*, explains: "Sovereignty of love before the law involves a creative factor whose expression it is impossible to foresee, since it can steadily open up fresh and unsuspected perspectives for life's activity. In this connection, we must recall Luther's frequent statements about the freedom of the Christian 'to do and to omit.' Through this freedom, faith and relation to God attain real significance for vocation, and vocation is shaped solely according to the needs of others."

Or, as St. Augustine, from who Luther took his cue, insightfully asserts, "Love God, and do as you please."

What do these assertions mean for us? "Do as you please" does not mean we have a license to sin or indulge the preferences of our own weak flesh — Augustine begins with the First Great Commandment (and also the Second by implication). Historically, Lutherans have not troubled themselves much about discerning God's will; also, whatever others may be saying about discerning this or that decision, the Bible takes God's providence for us as a given. In most bible stories, efforts to penetrate God's secret designs are discouraged (e.g., I Sam. 28; John 21:20-23). Apart from the Ten Commandments' moral implications about our decisions, the Bible does not address God's preference of this decision over that decision. Even so, this observation today seems counter-intuitive and needs further discussion.

An important slant the Lutheran tradition gives to the subject of God's will is the biblical interpretive principle of Law and Gospel. This principle teaches that all God reveals to us should be understood in

terms of Law — what we are to do, not to do, and how we are to be — and Gospel, what God has done and continues to do for us and for our salvation. Now consider that life’s events and decisions are areas of our activity: what we do and don’t do. To search for God’s will or preference for us about behavior in our domain of activity means to look for a Word of Law, that is, a commandment to rule what we are to do. This search drives us back to Scripture and the moral code of the Ten Commandments. Apart from these Commandments expressing God’s moral will be our lives and conduct, we draw a blank in finding prescriptions for particular personal decisions. (We will consider the Gospel and God’s will in a later section.)

“God Has a Plan For Your Life”

Where, then, does so much talk about God’s will and our decision making come from? Return to your Christian bookstore, examine the available books and, for the most part, you will find authors writing from a theological perspective that traces back to John Calvin. Calvin, the brilliant Swiss reformer of the church and contemporary of Martin Luther, wrote one of the most important books of the Reformation, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Despite much agreement, one significant point of difference for Luther and Calvin was the doctrine of predestination. Like many other

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thoughtful Christians, Calvin struggled with the puzzle of why some are saved but others are not. With trepidation, he concluded that people were predestined by God to their eternal state, either heaven or hell (a view that Lutherans label “double predestination”). Since Scripture says nothing about God predestining anyone to hell. Luther and his spiritual kin have consistently denied double predestination, insisting with St. Paul that “God would have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the Truth” (1 Tim. 2”4).

Later Calvinist theologians, (notably the Puritans in America) extrapolated double predestination to include a divine “plan” or “will” of all events in people’s lives, elaborating this perspective especially from God’s attributes of sovereignty and omnipotence. Lutherans, by contrast, did not move to such extra-biblical inferences. Luther acknowledges God’s sovereignty and his hand in all that happens but insists that we cannot comprehend this mystery. We can only sometimes detect God’s hand after the fact and then only roughly at

best. Thus, Lutherans have sustained a more modest position of silence about matters on which God's own Word is silent and have instead focused on the salvation that God has clearly willed for us from the cross. (Cf. 1Cor. 2:2 and see Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. XI, Election.)

Present popular thinking about God's will comes chiefly from one expression in particular, popularized by one of the most widely used tracts of all time, "The Four Spiritual Laws" distributed by Campus Crusade for Christ. The tract begins, "God has a plan for your life." This expression has shaped the views of countless Christians on the subject of God's will. Consider for a moment what this expression suggests. What comes to mind for most people is a "cosmic computer" image of God's will. God has keyed into history a plan or program for all the events of our lives, and our lives are the printers that are turning out the results. What this expression provokes for many Christians is an anxious search for a copy of the program or at least a print preview of what is supposed to come next.

The "God has a plan for your life" view also employs a small collection of oft-cited Bible verses such as Jer. 29:11 and Prov. 16:9. Jeremiah does prophesy God's assurance in saying, "'I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.'" The context of the chapter, however, clarifies that God's words are addressed to Judah in Babylon (29:1) and that the plan is to return Judah to their homeland after a period in exile (29:13). This plan is good news for Judah and for us because God's will is to bring forth the Messiah from the family of David in the tribe of Judah. The text is God's Word for us, but it is his Word for us because it is about his salvation for us in Christ, not because it refers to some life script or program. This realization about Jer. 29:11 is at first a bit alarming for some who have never checked its context and meaning. However, the text truly comforts us as we further realize we need no longer puzzle over undisclosed divine plans and instead can entrust our welfare and all life's events, good or evil, to God's revealed plan of salvation. (See Rom. 8:28-30.)

Similarly, Prov. 16:9, "A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps," is often used to infer some life script or plan as though the verse could be paraphrased. "We may lay our own plans in life, yet the sovereign God will have his way by intervening and re-directing our choices and life events according to his own perfect will."

But such a mechanical view of a Hebrew proverb would be quite foreign to a devout Israelite, who already knew how God directed his steps: with the Torah, the written book of Moses. The parallelism is the proverb is an antithetical contrast of the heart of sinful man and God's good direction (cf. Psalms 1 and 119). This assessment gives us a different sense of the proverb: "We sinful people may plot out our ways and intents on our own, but God gives better directions for enacting those ways in the words he has given to us through Moves" (and, we would add, Jesus).

The Popular Expressions

Though we should not be hypercritical about words (I Tim. 6:4), the language we use and don't use about God's will is important because language reflects our belief about God. Some of our expressions are harmless pieties (saying "God bless you" following a sneeze) and some echo biblical content ("See you next year, God willing" recalls James 4:15, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that"). But our language is often not Biblical and can be misleading. Consider these common examples:

- Make sure you're at peace about this decision. (Was Jesus at peace in Gethsemane?)
- Maybe the Lord is trying to tell you something. (How would you know? On what authority would you say so?)
- I hope God shows me an answer to my problem soon. (Does he have a specific answer in mind? How would you know?)
- Are you seeking God's will in this matter? (Does he have a particular preference about your decision?)
- Whenever God's closes a door, he opens a window. (This is from the Mother Superior in the "The Sound of Music".)
- I feel God is leading me in this direction. (Are our feelings a reliable guide to knowledge about God?)
- Don't worry - God has a plan for your life in this situation. (Is this what Scripture means by "plan"?)

All these expressions reflecting common beliefs about God and his will deserve our attention. Not that all popular views are bad, for some of the examples can, with effort, be aligned with Biblical content. But these expressions have a catch: that being right with God is up to us. They imply that God is a map maker, and it is up to us to be wise and holy enough to find and follow the map; or that he is a cryptographer, and it is up to us to be clever enough to decipher his codes. They imply

that, beyond the Ten Commandments, we should search of pre-selected decisions or preferences that God has about every detail of our lives (a notion questionable inferred from Matt. 10:29-30 where Jesus' concern is not about hairs or feathers but salvation). These expressions neglect that the secret things belong to God."

Though we tend to use such expressions, the Bible does not. For instance, Paul's carefully crafted language in Acts and his letters never say anything like, "I felt that he was leading me to seek his will for me there, so maybe God is telling you in Rome to be ready for me." Despite the absence of such language in the Bible, these expressions are present in the everyday life of the church, including our Call process. An application form used in placing church workers on a district Call list begins the essay portion with this instruction:

...our internal feelings are transient and often unreliable. Instead, God has given us his external and reliable Word.

Specify the type of position and area of ministry in which you feel God is leading you and in which you have a strong desire to serve.

How does one feel the leading of God? The expression could be taken in different ways, but does suggest that we search ourselves for some still, small but audible voice. The first problem with this idea is that Scripture nowhere instructs us to equate our feelings and emotions with God's will. Though we should remain cognizant of our emotional responses as important content in decision-making, we have no authority for trusting such impressions as divine. Rather, our internal feelings are transient and often unreliable. Instead, God has given us his external and reliable Word. The second problem with such language is that the expression "still, small voice" comes from the story of Elijah in I Kings 19 where God speaks to Elijah softly but clearly, telling the prophet in an audible voice to get back to Israel. Inner impressions and feelings are not God's will, and we are not to use them to second guess what we don't know God isn't telling us.

A prayer offered in corporate worship on behalf of a candidate considering a Call was worded this way:

Lord, please lead [candidate's name] to make the decision that is pleasing to you.

The article, "the," casts this petition into theological questions and the candidate (and us worshippers) into consternation. By saying "the

decision” rather than “a decision,” the prayer leader signals that the candidate can satisfy God’s expectations only by making one specific choice. This signal implies that any choice made other than “the decision will move the candidate out of what some have called “God’s perfect will.” If she makes the wrong decision, the candidate moves into a fearsome predicament with God by deciding contrary to God’s plan (usually called “sin”). By this reasoning, she not only risks God’s wrath but also misses the blessing God had in store for her had she made the right decision. What’s more, this was a Call to an important position of leadership, and she has probably convoluted God’s will for the Calling body. But such prayer language and its implications are distant from what Scripture actually says. God gives us his Word in Christ and the Scriptures and apart from some direct, specific revelation; God does not prescribe our life choices. (Paul’s decision in II Cor. 2:12-13 is a good case study.)

A memo circulated to announce a church worker’s consideration of a new vocation and location read:

[Church worker’s name] asks our prayers and counsel as he seeks to discern God’s will for his life and ministry and that of his family.

The language concern with this statement is semantic. If seeking to discern God’s will for one’s life means turning to God’s Word for study of “leading a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called” (Eph. 4:1), then well and good. But if it means (as it often does) resorting to inner impressions and other tactics for divining a secret will of God, this language misleads the Christian into unnecessary agonizing and uncertainty.

Many Christians at one time or another do agonize over making a life decision they fear may be outside God’s will. They may know God’s grace well enough to realize God will not abandon them in that decision or because of it. Yet they are still provoked to search for any hidden divine choice or preference for that specific decision such as deliberating a Call. At this point, they may employ two other tactics for detecting this phantom will of God.

Some would have us place a fleece before the Lord, a scheme from Gideon in the Book of Judges. God in a verbal revelation specifically promised Gideon an assured victory over Israel’s enemy, (Judges 6:11-24). But Gideon began testing God’s promise by asking for signs (6:34-40). Gideon asked God to keep dry a sheepskin exposed all night to the morning dew. God complied. The Gideon had the temerity to ask God

to again confirm his promise by reversing the sign the next night, wetting the fleece with the dew but keeping the ground dry. Some Christians have wrongly interpreted Gideon's lack of faith as an endorsement to search for God's will by seeking signs. Though God, in his infinite patience and to preserve Israel, tolerated Gideon's weakness and granted the signs, the context of Judges establishes that such sign seeking betrays a lack of trust in God. (Cf. Judg. 8:22ff; Matt. 12:38ff.)

Others would direct us to life's changing circumstances and events as indicators of God's will. This variation of sign seeking is the "Maybe God is trying to tell you something" approach.

A mild parody will illustrate:

Lord, I'm looking for a Godly spouse, and I think Susan may be the one. But your will, Lord, your will. So if that's your will, God, have me run into her tonight at the library. Or maybe tomorrow night. Actually any time in the next month will do. Lord, but the sooner the better. Excuse me now, Lord, but I've got to get to the library. Amen

The assumption in that since God is aware of all life's circumstances, he must be arranging them to send us all messages about his will. The assumption is mistaken in that it attempts to read the secret things of God with a connect-the-dots method. Life's circumstances are entangled with sin from the devil, the world and the sinful self, and the Scriptures say nothing about reading circumstances for God's will in some oracle-like fashion. The assumption also confuses the doctrine of predestination. Predestination refers to salvation for those elected to faith, not to life events and decision-making (See Rom 8:28ff and Eph. 1:3ff.).

For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free

Scripture does make important and clear Christocentric statements about God's will. The center and focus of all Scripture is Jesus. Jesus says, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39). At the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus explains that to rightly understand Scripture, we must realize that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:27, 44).

Luke continues:

This it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins

should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-47).

The will of God, as Paul says, is that all people would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth about Jesus (I Tim. 2:4). That's the plan. That's what the Bible means when it talks about God's plan.

For he [the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:9-10 RSV).

The word used here for plan is the Greek noun *oikonomia* from which we get the word, economy — ordering, managing, or administering a house or property. The word does not connote a plan in the sense of a script or agenda for every event, but rather a master plan for managing a larger purpose or goal. In this case, the “house and property” under management are “all things in heaven and earth,” and the goal is to unite them all in Christ whose purpose is “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations.” God's will is that the Law work repentance among us sinful people and that the Gospel brings us forgiveness and a saving faith in Christ. That work being done, one is then empowered by the Spirit to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Eph. 4:1).” Such is the life of freedom living under God's grace (Gal. 5:1).

The alternative understanding of God's will as trying to decode some unrevealed divine script would mean a life under the Law. This kind of life would mean always trying to live up to expectations that God never spells out. It would mean living in the shadow of “ought,” anxiously wondering what God would have us decide in any important situation. It would mean endless attempts to distinguish between those important situations where we believe God has some individual plan for our actions and those trivial matters that we manage ourselves (Marriage? A summer job? Lunch?). It would mean constant uncertainty about our relationship with God and, thus, uncertainty about our salvation.

By contrast, God's actual will for us is that we live under grace. The Law shows us our sin, drives us to God's promises, and serves as our guide for behavior, but it does not make us “at one” (effect atonement) with God. Christ alone intercedes for us. Thus, through him and with him, we are now all daughters and sons of God. This relationship is the reason Luther in his Treatise on Christian Liberty insists both that, “A

Christian is perfectly free lord to all, subject to none; and a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all.”

The Christian is absolutely free, forgiven by God’s grace and liberated in decisions and actions from any condemnation of the Law. Yet this freedom is no license for sin and serving the self (Gal. 5:13) since the Christian is also totally a servant, submitting all decisions and actions in the work of God’s kingdom to serve the needs of others’ temporal and eternal well-being. The apparent contradiction of free and slave is not an unsolvable paradox (like sinner/saint). It is harmonized under the purpose of God’s kingdom: that all might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. The Christian considering a call is free to return the Call to the Call body. In either event God’s providence continues to work in his quiet and hidden ways through our decisions and activities (Phil 2:12-13). God’s grace prevails, and his kingdom still comes for us. Our language, discussions, prayers, and letters of acceptance and decline are sometimes obscure in this freedom. We can better express ourselves about Calls and God’s will when we speak in terms of Christian hope, liberty, and responsibility. — **LEJ**

References

- Luther discusses the hidden and secret will of God in *The Bondage of the Will*, (1957, tr. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnson, Grand Rapids MI: Fleming H. Revell). For an introduction to this theme, see Paul Althaus, *“The freedom of the Gracious God,” the Theology of Martin Luther*, (1966, tr. Robt. Schultz, Philadelphia: Fortress Press).
- See Luther’s *The Freedom of a Christian* in John Dillenberger, (1962) Ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from his writings*. (New York: Ancho Books). In *Luther on Vocations*, Gustaf Wingren (1957, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press) provides a thorough treatment of Luther’s ideas about God’s will and Christian freedom. See especially, “The Concept of Freedom”, “Cooperation” and “Stundelein.”
- Althaus, 95. Note: Because his writings are many and varied, Luther scholars caution us to be careful about citing Luther’s quotations selectively. However, certain themes such as vocation, God’s will, and man’s will are well established in the Lutheran tradition.
- Althaus, 147.
- Many theologians and Bible teachers in the Reformed tradition are moving away from this mechanistic view of God’s will. See, for example Gary Freise (1999), *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press).
- A related theme to explore is the leading of the Holy Spirit. That theme is important but beyond the scope of this article. A place to begin is “The Holy Spirit and the Conversion of the Sinner” and “The Sanctified Life or New Obedience” in Robert Kolb (1993) *The Christian Faith: a Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House).

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