

## GOD'S WILL and MAN'S WILL

### Horatius Bonar 1851

*“Cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand, O house of Israel.”—Jeremiah 18:6*

MUCH OF THE present controversy is concerning the *will* of God. On this point many questions have arisen. The chief one is that which touches on the connection between the will of God and the will of man. What is the relation between these? What is the order in which they stand to each other? Which is the first? There is no dispute as to the existence of these two separate wills. There is a will in God, and there is also a will in man. Both of these are in continual exercise: God willeth, and man willeth. Nothing in the universe takes place without the will of God. This is admitted. But it is asked: Is this will *first* in everything?

I answer, yes. Nothing that is good can exist which God did not will to be, and nothing that is evil can exist which God did not will to allow. The will of God goes before all other wills. It does not depend on them, but they depend on it. Its movements regulate them. The “I will” of Jehovah, is the spring and origin of all that is done throughout the universe, great and small, among things animate and inanimate. It was this “I will” that brought angels into being, and still sustains them. It was this “I will” that was the origin of salvation to a lost world. It was this “I will” that provided a Redeemer, and accomplished redemption. It was this “I will” that begins, and carries on, and ends salvation in each soul that is redeemed. It is this “I will” that opens the blind eye, and unstops the deaf ear. It was this “I will” that awakens the slumberer, and raises the dead. I do not mean that, merely generally speaking. God has declared His will concerning these things: but each individual conversion, nay, and each movement that forms part of it, originates in this supreme “I will”. When Jesus healed the leper, He said, “I will, be thou clean;” so when a soul is converted, there is the same distinct and special forthputting of the Divine will. “I will, be thou converted.” Everything that can be called good in man, or in the universe, originates in the “I will” of Jehovah.

I do not deny that in conversion man himself wills. In everything that he does, thinks, feels, he of necessity wills. In believing he wills; in repenting he wills; in turning from his evil ways he wills. All this is true. The opposite is both untrue and absurd. But while fully admitting this, there is another question behind it of great interest and moment. Are these movements of man's will towards good the effects of the forthputting of God's will? Is man willing, because he has made himself so, or because God has made him so? Does he become willing entirely by an act of his own will, or by chance, or by moral suasion, or because acted on by created causes and influences from without?

I answer unhesitatingly, he becomes willing, because another and a superior will, even that of God, has come into contact with his, altering its nature and its bent. This new bent is the result of a change produced upon it by Him who alone, of all beings, has the right, without control, to say, in regard to all events and changes, “I will.” The man's will has followed the movement of the Divine will. God has made him willing. God's will is *first* in the movement, not second. Even a holy and perfect will depends for guidance upon the will of God. Even when renewed it still *follows*, it does not *lead*. Much more an unholy will, for its bent must be first changed; and how can this be, if God is not to interpose His hand and power?

But is not this to make God the *author* of sin? No. It does not follow that because God's will originates what is *good* in man, that it must therefore originate what is *evil*. The existence of a holy, happy world, proves that God had created it with His own hand. The existence of an unholy, unhappy world, proves that God allowed it to fall into that state—but it proves nothing more. We are told that Jesus was delivered by “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” God's will was there. God permitted that deed of darkness to be done; nay, it was the result of His “determinate counsel.” But does that prove that God was the *author* of the sin of either Judas or Herod? Had it not been for the eternal “I will” of Jehovah, Christ would not have been delivered up; but does this prove that God compelled either Judas to betray, or Herod to mock, or Pilate to condemn, the Lord of Glory? Still further, it is added in another place, “Of a truth against Thy holy child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and people of Israel, were gathered together *for to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel determined*

*before to be done .”* Is it possible to pervert this passage so as to prove that it has no reference to predestination? Does it make God the author of the deed referred to? Must God be the author of sin, because it is said that Israel and the Gentiles “were gathered together to do what His counsel had determined”? Let our opponents attempt an explanation of such a passage, and tell us how it can be made to harmonize with their theory.

It may be argued that God works *by means* , in changing the will. “There is no need,” it will be said, “that there should be this special and direct forthputting of His will and strength. He has ordained the means, He has given His Word, He has proclaimed His Gospel, and by these means He effects the change. His will does not come directly into contact with ours. He leaves it to these instruments to effect the change.” Well, let us see what amount of truth there may be in this. I suppose no one will say that the Gospel can produce the alteration in the will *so long as the will rejects it* . No medicine, however excellent, can operate unless it be taken. The will of man then rejects the Gospel; it is set against the truth of God. How then is it made to receive it? Granting that in receiving it there is a change, yet the question is, how was it so far changed already as to be willing to receive it? The worst feature of the malady is the determination not to touch or taste the medicine; and how is this to be overcome? Oh! It will be said, this resistance is to be overcome with arguments. Arguments! Is not the Gospel itself the great argument? and it is rejected. What arguments can you expect to prevail with a man that refuses the Gospel? Admit that there are other arguments, yet the man is set against them all. There is not one argument that can be used which he does not hate. His will resists and rejects every persuasive and motive. How then is this resistance to be overcome—this opposition to be made to give way? How is the bent of the will to be so altered as to receive that which it rejected? Plainly by his will coming into contact with a superior one—a will that can remove the resistance—a will such as that which said: “Let there be light, and there was light.” The will itself must undergo a change before it can choose that which it rejected. And what can change it but the finger of God?

Were man's rejection of the Gospel simply occasioned by his misunderstanding it, then I can see how, upon its being made plain, resistance would cease. But I do not believe that such is the case; for what does it amount to but just that the sinner never rejects the *truth* , it is only error which he rejects, and were his mistake rectified, he would at once embrace the truth! The unrenewed man, then, so far from having enmity to the truth, has the very opposite! So little of depravity is there in his heart, and so little perversity in his will—such instinctive love of truth and abhorrence of error is there in him, that as soon as the truth is made plain to him, he embraces it! All his previous hesitation arose from the errors which had been mingled with the truth presented! One would think that this was anything but depravity. It might be ignorance, but it could not be called enmity to the truth, it is rather enmity to error. It would thus appear that the chief feature of the sinner's heart and will is not enmity to truth, but hatred to error and love of truth!

Man's heart is enmity to God—to God as revealed in the Gospel—to God as the God of grace. What truth can there be in the assertion that all the sinner's distrust of God and darkness of spirit arise from his not seeing God as the God of grace? I grant that oftentimes this is the case. I know that it is very frequently misapprehension of God's merciful character, as seen and pledged in the cross of Christ, that is the cause of darkness to the anxious soul, and that a simple sight of the exceeding riches of the grace of God would dispel these clouds; but that is very different from saying that such a sight, apart from the renewing energy of the Spirit upon the soul, would change man's enmity into confidence and love. For we know that the unrenewed will is set against the Gospel; it is enmity to God and His truth. The more closely and clearly truth is set before it, and pressed home upon it, its hatred swells and rises. The presentation of truth, however forcible and clear, even though that truth were the grace of God, will only exasperate the unconverted man. It is the Gospel that he hates; and the more clearly it is set before him he hates it the more. It is God that he hates; and the more closely God approaches him, the more vividly that God is set before him, the more does his enmity awaken and augment. Surely, then, that which stirs up enmity cannot of itself remove it. Of what avail, then, are the most energetic means *by themselves* ? The will itself must be directly operated upon by the Spirit of God: He who made it must remake it. Its making was the work of Omnipotence: its remaking must be the same. In no other way can its evil bent be rectified. God's will must come into contact with man's will, and then the work is done. Must not God's will then be first in every such movement? Man's will follows; it can not lead.

Is this a hard saying? So some in these days would have us to believe. Let us ask *wherein* consists its hardness. Is it hard that God's will should take the precedence of man's? Is it hard that God's will should be the leader and man's the follower in all things great and small? Is it hard that we should be obliged to trace the origin of every movement of man towards good to the will of a sovereign Jehovah?

If it be hard, it must be that it strips man of every fragment of what is good, or of the slightest tendency to good. And this we believe to be the secret origin of the complaint against the doctrine. It is a thorough leveller and emptier of man. It makes him not only nothing, but worse than nothing—a sinner all over—nothing but a sinner, with a heart full of enmity to God, set against Him as the God of righteousness, and still more set against Him as the God of grace, with a will so bent away from the will of God, and so rebellious against it, as not to have one remaining inclination to what is good and holy, and spiritual. This he cannot tolerate. Admit that a man is totally worthless and helpless, and where is the hard saying? Is it hard that God's blessed and holy will should go before our miserable and unholy wills, to lead them in the way? Is it hard that those who have nothing should be indebted to God for everything? Is it hard, seeing that every movement of my will is downwards, earthwards, that God's mighty will should come in and lift it omnipotently upwards, heavenwards?

If I admit that God's will regulates the great movements of the universe I must admit that it equally regulates the small. It *must* do this, for the great depend upon the small. The minutest movement of my will is regulated by the will of God. And in this I rejoice. Woe is me if it be not so. If I shrink from so unlimited control and guidance, it is plain that I dislike the idea of being wholly at the disposal of God. I am wishing to be in part at my own disposal. I am ambitious of regulating the lesser movements of my will, while I give up the greater to His control. And thus it comes out that I wish to be a god to myself. I do not like the thought of God having all the disposal of my destiny. If He gets His will, I am afraid that I shall not get mine. It comes out, moreover, that the God about whose love I was so fond of speaking, is a God to whom I cannot trust myself implicitly for eternity. Yet, this is the real truth. *Man's dislike at God's sovereignty arises from his suspicion of God's heart*. And yet the men in our day, who deny this absolute sovereignty, are the very men who profess to rejoice in the love of God who speak of that love as if there were nothing else in God but love. The more I understand of the character of God, as revealed in Scripture, the more shall I see that He *must be sovereign*, and the more shall I rejoice from my inmost heart that He is so.

It was God's sovereign will that fixed the time of my birth. It is the same will that has fixed the day of my death. And was not the day of my conversion fixed as certainly by the same will? Or will any but “the fool” say that God has fixed by His will the day of our birth and death, but leaves us to fix the day of our conversion by our own will; that is, leave us to decide whether we shall be converted or not, whether we shall believe or not? If the day of conversion be fixed, then it cannot be left to be determined by our own will. God determined, where and when, and how we should be born; and so He has determined where, and when, and how we shall be born again. If so, His will must go before ours in believing; and it is just because His will goes before ours that we become willing to believe. Were it not for this, we should never have believed at all. If man's will precedes God's will in everything relating to himself, then I do not see how any of God's plans can be carried into effect. Man would be left to manage the world in his own way. God must not fix the time of his conversion, for that would be an interference with man's responsibility. Nay, He must not fix that he shall be converted at all, for that must be left to himself and to his own will. He must not fix how many are to be converted, for that would be making His own invitation a mere mockery, and man's responsibility a pretence! He may turn a stray star into its course again by a direct forth-putting of power, and be unchallenged for interference with the laws of nature. But to stretch out His arm and arrest a human will in its devious course, so as to turn it back again to holiness, is an unwarrantable exercise of His power, and an encroachment upon man's liberty! What a world! where man gets all his own way, where God is not allowed to interfere, except in the way that *man* calls lawful! What a world! where everything turns upon man's will—where the whole current of events in the world or in the church is regulated, shaped, impelled by man's will alone. God's will is but a secondary thing. Its part is to watch events, and follow in the track of man's! Man wills, and God must say—Amen!

In all this opposition to the absolute will of God, we see the self-will of the last days manifesting itself. Man wanted to be a god at the first, and he continues the struggle to the last. He is resolved that his will shall

take the precedence of God's. In the last Antichrist, this self-will shall be summed up and exhibited. He is the king that is to do "according to his will." And in the freewill controversy of the day, we see the same spirit displayed. It is Antichrist that is speaking to us, and exhorting us to proud independence. Self-will is the essence of anti-christian religion. Self-will is the root of bitterness, that is springing up in the churches in these days. And it is not from above, it is from beneath. It is earthly, sensual, devilish.

*THUS SAITH THE LORD:*

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." — *Exodus 33:19*

"I, even I, am He, and there is no God with Me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of My hand." — *Deut. 32:39*

"Behold He breaketh down, and it cannot be built again; He shutteth up a man and there can be no opening." — *Job 12:14*

"He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?" — *Daniel 4:35*

"Who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to *His own purpose and grace*, given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." — *II Tim. 1:9*