

Prof. Daniel M. Deutschlander
New Ulm Pastoral Conference
November 6, 2001

The Will of God and the Will of Man: What Do They Have to Do with One Another?

How many times are you asked the question in one way or another: *Pastor, how can I know whether God wants me to change my job/move to another city/buy that house/sell this one?* How many times has someone told you with infallible certainty: *Pastor, I have prayed about it, and I know that this is the will of God for me.* How many times have you been informed with like infallibility after you have explained a doctrine or practice on the basis of the Word of God: *Pastor, I just don't believe that God would want us to say bad things about people "living-together,"/homosexual life style/the pope/the scouts/abortionists; after all, isn't the important thing that we just love one another?* Finally, how many times do you listen patiently or maybe not so patiently as someone declares concerning an auto accident, a broken marriage, a train wreck, or just about anything else conceivable: *Well, it must have been the will of God; otherwise it couldn't have happened.*

Because we hear things like this with regularity, because the religious airwaves confirm people, including our members, in the notion that such questions and declarations are altogether legitimate, we run the risk of falling into the same thought patterns or of giving up on explaining the will of God and the will of man and what they have to do with one another. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the Word of God to see what he has to say about his own will and our will and how they relate to one another since the Fall.

In order to get a better grip on the nature of the problem and the context within which we must consider a solution we need to review however briefly some basics about the nature of man as God created him and how the Fall changed man. God created man *in his own image and likeness*. The image of God in Adam and Eve was the greatest of God's gifts to them. Since God is spirit, the image of God was chiefly a spiritual gift. To be sure, it affected their entire being, body and soul. But for our purposes it is enough to concentrate on the image of God in what we might call "the organs of the soul," i.e., the emotions, the will, and the capacity to reason.

Since Adam and Eve were like God and in his image, their emotions, will, and reason were in perfect harmony with God. The emotions were naturally drawn to God and his will. The will was perfectly free and able to love God, to choose obedience to God's Word and will, and to refuse sin and evil. Reason was able to ponder the goodness of God, weigh his commands and plan a course of action that it knew would delight the Creator. Both Adam and Eve would be expected to use their reasoning abilities as they carried out the assignment of tending the Garden God had given to them. As God's Word instructed their reason, their will would choose to follow and their emotions would delight in God, his Word and in their own blessed opportunity to obey. Thus with emotions, will and reason in perfect harmony, Adam and Eve could love God perfectly, completely, freely. They were to act, not as robots on some pre-programmed automatic pilot, and not like animals from mere instinct, but as dear children of a kind and loving Father.

Most blessed indeed the reasoning powers, the will and the emotions that were created in perfect harmony with God! Since they were in perfect harmony with God, the intellect, will, and emotions of Adam and Eve were also in perfect harmony with self; there was no reason for personal

Angst, feelings of self doubt, depression, confusion. Likewise, with the organs of the soul in perfect harmony with God, there was no reason for strife between Adam and Eve. Each wanted to serve God through loving service to one another. Each would use emotions in a God-pleasing desire for the other, will in the choice to love the other, reason in a search for ways of serving the other. What a bright and happy prospect for them to be in such a condition. If they had continued in the full possession of the image and likeness of God, they would have passed on to their children this same perfect harmony of reason, will, and emotion.

The most important component of the image of God however, its very heart and core, was holiness and righteousness. Their holiness was a total separation from sin. Their righteousness was a state of being right with God, with nothing in them for God to forgive. Holiness and righteousness were attributes that were inside of Adam and Eve. But they were also attributes that they could consciously put into practice, so that all of their future thoughts, words and deeds would also be holy and righteous. They were holy and righteous in their nature. They had the ability to become holy and righteous in their lives by a conscious practice of obedience to God and his Word. Thus when Adam and Eve are called "very good" as part of God's creation, there is a definite moral element to that goodness. They were good, very good, not by instinct but by creation and then by a constant and conscious choice of good over evil and with delight in the good. Indeed it was this condition of holiness and righteousness that made the reason, will and emotions of Adam and Eve so God like. It was this holiness and righteousness that made their bodies and souls immortal. Only sin brings death to the relationship and fellowship with God. They had no sin, and thus no need to fear death, the separation of their bodies from their souls and their separation from God.

In sum, by virtue of their creation in the image of the righteous and holy God, Adam and Eve were righteous and holy. That is the heart and core of God's image in them. There was no flaw or fault which might predispose them to sin in their souls. There was no flaw or fault in them which might doom them to death in either body or soul. The image of God carried with it the capacity to remain sinless and to live forever.

Could there have been any greater way for God to show his love for Adam and Eve than this, that he gave them his own image and likeness? Could there have been a more sublime way of reflecting his own glory, which was the ultimate purpose of the whole creation, than this, that Adam and Eve were like God? They were free to live forever. They were free to serve as his regents on earth. They were free to enjoy a blessed and eternal fellowship with the one who thus loved them and showed his love with the gift of his own image and likeness from the moment of their creation. Adam could reflect that image of God in his rule over creation and in his headship over his own family. Eve could reflect her bearing of that image by willingly accepting her role as the helper suitable for him. And both of them together could conform their emotions, their wills, and their reason to God's law with respect to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And thus they could retain that perfect holiness and righteousness, the essential element of the image of God. One could expect that they would also grow in their love and appreciation and understanding of God with the passing of time, as they exercised their emotions, will, and reason in their fellowship and communication with their Creator.

Tragically that expectation was not realized. The Fall changed everything in man's condition and in his relationship to God. The heart and core of God's image was lost, lost completely. Holiness and righteousness are not relative terms. They are absolute attributes. One cannot be a little bit holy or partially righteous. One is either holy or a sinner, either righteous or unrighteous.

Tragically, once Adam and Eve had lost the attribute of holiness and righteousness, they could not pass it on to their children. Since they had become sinful, it is the attribute of sinfulness and of spiritual death that they pass on to all of their naturally born descendents. David spoke plainly when he confessed, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Jesus sums the matter up with crystal and devastating clarity when he declares, “Flesh gives birth to flesh” (John 3:6).

St. Paul explains fully what that means when he tells us in Romans 5 that Adam brought sin into the world and as a result death and the wrath of God has come down to all from Adam. For God remains holy and righteous. He cannot be indifferent to the sin and certainly not to the rebellion which has robbed him of the honor due to him as Creator. St. Paul declares that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men” (verse 12). And, “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (verse 18). What that death includes he spells out in Ephesians 2:1-3:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

All of these passages make it clear that we are not born morally neutral. We do not come into the world as blank pages on which good and bad experiences will be written, which experiences will make us good or bad. No, we come into the world already as children of wrath. From conception our nature is poisoned against God and hostile to him. By nature we are inclined to evil, before we have done good or evil, before we have experienced good or evil. The primary evil is the unbelief, which by definition is the absence of trust in God and his Word. It is always accompanied by active rebellion against God, by the desire to do one’s own will instead of the will of God. From that flows all the “cravings of our sinful nature,” whether we satisfy all those cravings or not. At the root of our nature is the desire to be God and to have all of creation serve the self. A child does not have to be taught that; it wants to be God by nature. It has to be taught to control that desire, and by nature will control its self-centeredness only to the extent that it is forced to control it. The most basic self-control it learns with great difficulty. And once learned, self control is practiced only because it serves the individual’s own best interest. Thus the outward behavior may moderate and improve, but the basic desire to be God and to be served has changed not at all. St. Paul is speaking about himself and all of us in our fallen nature when he declares, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18). This condition in which we are conceived and born is called *original sin*. Original sin is a deep-seated, thoroughgoing tendency to evil; it is an inherited accidental attribute which causes all of the naturally born descendents of Adam and Eve to be by nature spiritually dead, enemies of God, deserving of eternal separation from him in hell.

Thus we reject as contrary to the clear Word of God all forms of *Arminianism*. Arminianism (named after the sixteenth and early seventeenth century Dutch theologian Jacob Hermanas, popularly referred to as Arminius) is the false teaching that people are born either

spiritually neutral or basically good. It denies the doctrine of original sin and settles for what is referred to in theology as the *opinio legis* – literally, the opinion of the law. The *opinio legis* is really itself the result of original sin. It is the result and proof of spiritual blindness. It is the notion or opinion that people have by nature, the notion that we are all basically good (or at the very least, I am basically good!), and that it is only corrupt or evil influences and surroundings that make people bad. Improve their physical and psychological environment, and people will become good and ever better. The *opinio legis*, to the extent that it considers God, holds that this innate goodness in human nature is sufficient for man at least in part to earn God's favor and to deserve heaven. The chief proponents of Arminianism are Methodists and Baptists and their daughter religions, e.g., Salvation Army, Pentecostal and Holiness church bodies.

We likewise reject all forms of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Pelagianism (named after the fifth century British monk, Pelagius) in its crudest form is the false teaching that even without God's help we can perform good works that are good and meritorious in the eyes of God. Thus it denies any real or lasting or important significance to the Fall and original sin. Pelagianism was condemned in the ancient church most effectively in the writings of St. Augustine. So-called semi-Pelagianism, however, has never ceased to infect the church. In point of fact it too has its roots in the *opinio legis*, in the blind zeal of fallen man to think himself worthy in God's eyes, and perhaps even more importantly, in his own eyes. Those guilty of the error of semi-Pelagianism do not deny the doctrine of original sin entirely. Rather they minimize its depth and the extent of its consequences. Semi-Pelagianism has its church home in Roman Catholicism and in Eastern Orthodox churches. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that even though we are born in sin, it is possible for us to do by nature works that are pleasing to God. Thus even unbelievers, non-Christians, if they do the best they can according to their conscience (*Facere quod in se est*), can be saved. As for Christians, it teaches that Baptism removes original sin in such a way that the Christian with the "initial grace" provided in Baptism can cooperate with his works in his own salvation. For Roman Catholics therefore original sin is but a blemish. It may be described as the "tinder" for sinful acts; it may even be called the tendency toward sinful desires (concupiscence); but Roman Catholicism does not see the inclination or the desire to sin as damnable in itself. When all is said and done, the practical difference between Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism is slight indeed.

The *opinio legis* is deeply rooted in us all. As already noted, it is part of our inherited spiritual blindness, part of original sin itself. Thus it is not surprising that the church always has to fight against it. Nor is it surprising that we ourselves find Arminianism and Pelagianism flattering and appealing to our sinful nature. Nevertheless they both fly in the face of all that the Bible teaches us concerning our nature since the Fall of Adam and Eve. In our inherited spiritual blindness we want to hang on to an imagined self worth, even in the face of the whole of God's Word testifying to the contrary. Yes, we want to cling to such notions even when the voice of conscience, however weakly, protests to the contrary. St. Paul explains the stubborn clinging to error contrary to the Word of God when he declares, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7), and, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Still in spite of the total destruction of the holiness and righteousness which were the heart and core of the image of God in Adam and Eve, the outward shell or traces of God's image are still to be found in our nature. We are still human, endowed with a soul that has a reasoning

ability, a will, and emotions. If the heart and core of God's image, his holiness and righteousness are totally lost as a result of original sin, what about this shell of humanity? What affect has the Fall and original sin had on the human intellect, will, and emotions?

This shell of God's image, our humanity, our ability to reason, our will and our emotions have been thoroughly corrupted by the Fall, though not entirely destroyed by it. Their corruption is so deep and so thorough that they are by nature incapable of any spiritual good, that is, good in the eyes of God. St. Paul certainly makes that abundantly clear in Romans 5 and Ephesians 2. But are we not capable of doing good deeds? Do we not see even in atheists and other rank unbelievers many good works? They may serve their neighbor, help the poor, even become great in the eyes of the world for their service to their nation and their fellow man. And does not even God bless such outward works, also those of unbelievers?

To be sure, since the Fall human beings are by nature capable of doing many outwardly good things. And in a certain outward sense God prospers such outward goodness. We see that in all of recorded history; nations that follow natural law tend to prosper so long as and to the extent that they are well ordered. Likewise individuals who may care nothing for the Word of God, but who nonetheless lead an outwardly decent life often prosper or are held in high regard by their fellow citizens. But the good that they do is only good outwardly. It is not good spiritually, that is, good in the eyes of God, even if God for reasons of his own grants such works external blessing. For by nature all are spiritually dead. They cannot and do not have the only motive that would make their works truly God pleasing, the motive of loving and grateful service in obedience to God's Word. They may have any number of motives for doing outwardly good works. People might do good in the hope of reward, even reward from God, whose favor they hope to earn by their own efforts. But that is not a God pleasing motive. They may do good in the hope of human rewards or fame or gratitude from men. They may do good motivated by the good feeling they have when they do good or by a noble love of humanity. But, and that is the point, they cannot do good as the result of a childlike relationship with God. For such a relationship was lost and replaced by original sin at the time of the Fall.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession sums up well what our fallen nature is capable of and what it is incapable of. It declares:

We are not denying freedom to the human will. The human will has freedom to choose among the works and things which reason by itself can grasp. To some extent it can achieve civil righteousness or the righteousness of works. It can talk about God and express its worship of him in outward works. It can obey rulers and parents. Externally, it can choose to keep the hands from murder, adultery, or theft. Since human nature still has reason and judgment about the things that the senses can grasp, it also retains a choice in these things, as well as the liberty and ability to achieve civil righteousness (AAC, XVIII, 4).

Then shortly thereafter:

Although we concede to free will the liberty and ability to do the outward works of the law, we do not ascribe to it the spiritual capacity for true fear of God, true faith in God, true knowledge and trust that God considers, hears, and forgives

us. These are the real works of the first table, which the human heart cannot perform without the Holy Spirit (AAC, XVIII,7).

The Formula of Concord likewise distinguishes well between the natural ability of fallen humanity on the one hand, and the inability to please God by that ability on the other hand:

For works which belong to the maintenance of outward discipline and which unbelievers and the unconverted are also able and required to perform, are indeed praiseworthy in the sight of the world, and even God will reward them with temporal blessings in this world, but since they do not flow from true faith, they are sinful (that is, spattered with sins in the sight of God), and God regards them as sin and as impure because of our corrupted nature and because the person is not reconciled with God. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit [Matthew 7:18], ... The person must first be pleasing to God – and that alone for Christ’s sake – before that person’s works are pleasing (FC, SD, IV, 80).

Thus good outwardly and good in the eyes of humanity and good by human standards is not the same as good in the eyes of God. That is God’s own verdict in his Word. His Word declares that

The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:2-3).

God speaks plainly of the total spiritual corruption of our reason, will, and emotions when he speaks to Noah after the Flood about the natural human condition and declares of all men that, “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21).

Therefore when we speak of original sin, we are speaking of that total destruction of the image of God in man at its heart and core, that is, the total destruction of the innate holiness and righteousness given to Adam and Eve at their creation. That holiness and righteousness has been replaced by sinfulness. But we are not speaking of the destruction of humanity or of a human nature. Even though original sin also has thoroughly corrupted those traces of God’s image that are left in man’s humanity, in the “organs” of the soul, i.e., reason or the ability to reason, the will, and the emotions, these “organs” are still able to function. God has left fallen humanity with a freedom in those things that are subject to reason. Were it not for that remaining freedom in those things subject to reason, the human race would have perished long ago; it would have lacked the ability to think and thus to devise ways and means for its survival. Just as God in his mercy clothed fallen Adam and Eve in the skins of animals after their Fall to protect them from physical harm in a hostile world, as well as to hide their shame, so he clothes the human soul with the capacity to reason and a freedom to act in those things subject to reason.

Thus even though sinful and bereft of innate holiness and righteousness, the shell of God’s image remains. And that shell is no small blessing. We are still human, still have reason, will and emotions, so that outwardly people are capable of producing works that are good in the eyes of humanity. Outwardly one can choose to steal or not to steal, to lie or not to lie, to commit

adultery or to lead an outwardly chaste and decent life. With the remaining shell we can create works of art and beauty, useful medicines and machines, and the like.

It is important that we keep the above doctrinal framework clearly in mind as we turn our attention to the real subject matter of this paper. For the problem of the will of man after the Fall is an especially fertile field for error in Reformed thought and, I fear, in the thinking of many of our people as well. Free will in spiritual things, e.g., coming to faith, obeying the First Table of the Law or any part of the Second Table out of a God-pleasing love for God, is impossible for the unregenerate. For they are, as we have already noted, by nature dead in trespasses and sins. But the unregenerate have a free will in those things subject to reason, e.g., whether to go here or there, to eat this or that, to marry or not to marry, whom to marry, what work to do or not do, what outward obedience to give externally to the Second Table of the law and/or to natural law. Outwardly and externally they are free even to listen to the Word of God or to participate in the public worship of the church. In spiritual things, however, in the heart and core of the First Commandment, their will is enslaved but not in such a way that they are blameless when they reject the gospel. When they use their will to refuse the gospel, they must bear responsibility and blame for that (Matthew 23:37, Acts 7:51).

But what about the will of the regenerate, of Christians, after they have come to faith? That will is renewed. They have a new will, a will that struggles against the old will (Romans 7) as long as they are in this life. That renewed will strives to submit to the will of God. And that's where the problems arise for many. What is the will of God for them in their daily lives? Does the will of God eliminate in the regenerate the freedom to make choices in those things subject to reason? Does God express his will in their prayers, in their decisions, in their choices, in their feelings? We cannot say it too emphatically: **WE CAN SAY NOTHING WITH CERTAINTY ABOUT THE WILL OF GOD APART FROM THE REVEALED WORD OF GOD!** If we want to know the will of God, let us marry the Scriptures! There God gives us, not a code book of rules or a canon law that eliminates freedom and choice, but principles to guide us in the making of decisions and choices, which choices, motivated by the gospel, will be pleasing to God, whether we choose this or that.

To put it another way, Christians too have a free will in those things that are subject to reason, even though the way in which they exercise that free will differs considerably from the way in which the unbelievers exercise their free will. For starters we may note that many of the decisions that Christians make are choices between good and good. They are not all choices between good and bad. And those choices are real. God has not foreordained them, even though he knows how and what we will decide. He does not expect us to climb up into heaven and find out what God knows in the secret of his essence. He does not expect us to guess at his hidden will. He offers us choices and is pleased to accept them and to take them into account as he carries out his promise to make all things work together for our good (Romans 8:28).

Consider a few examples. Paul chose to remain unmarried and he decided to forego his right to live from his work as an apostle (1 Cor. 9). He instructed the Corinthians to join in the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. But he did not tell them how much each should give or decide for them the mechanism of the collection. Rather he gave them a broad principle which he left them to apply as best they could (1 Cor. 16). In the same chapter he speaks of decisions that he has yet to make about his future travel plans.

To sum up the matter, St. Paul reminds us that God has renewed us and brought us to faith so that we could live lives filled with good works. He declares that these are works which God *prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph. 2:10). What are those works? They are the works prescribed in his Word, works that accord with the law and are done out of love and gratitude to God for the gift of salvation. Those works however are so many and varied that we cannot do them all; we constantly make choices between them. Should I spend an hour today in my devotions or a half hour? Should I make evangelism calls today or discipline calls? Should I visit members or non-members? Should I spend more time studying or less? More time with my family or less? More time relaxing or less? Should I buy this car or that? This house or that? This suit or that? Should I remain in this call or take that call to a new field of service? All of these things are subject to reason. All of these choices may very well be between good and good, assuming we are making use of our reason as best we know how to the glory of God. We do not torment ourselves over which choice God wants us to make. We apply the principles of Romans 12 as best we can. We offer our choices and actions to God as fitting thank offerings, trust his grace to pardon what is amiss and to receive with pleasure for the sake of Christ what remains (Psalm 147:11). Indeed the Apostle assumes we are making choices between good and good when he bids us do all to the glory of God, no matter what we are doing, whether eating or drinking (1 Cor. 10:31). On the Last Day those choices and the actions that followed receive the praise of the Lord when they flowed from a desire to serve him out of faith and gratitude; there is not a word of praise for having guessed right what he had in mind (Matthew 25:14-40).

But don't we pray for his guidance when we have to make choices? Of course we do. But we do not pray for him to make the choice for us. We do not ask him to reveal to our innermost being his hidden will. Nor do we expect him to blow in our ear. We ask for his guidance and for his blessing on OUR decision, that it may be made and the work done to his glory and for the benefit of our neighbor. And then we listen to his Word for the principles which guide us in our decision. Then we make our decisions and choices. That's the essence of what Luther is saying as well in his explanation to the Third Petition.

We should not be so arrogant as to claim that our choices are the same thing as the will of God because that's what we decided. For again, we can say nothing with certainty about the will of God apart from the Word of God. Our decision may be according to the will of God, if it is not contrary to his revealed Word or with a motivation contrary to his revealed Word. But that is not the same thing as saying it is the will of God; the reverse might also have been according to his will – again a matter of a choice between good and good. Should I spend an extra hour working on the sermon, or should I make that extra call? Either would be a good thing to do; neither is a sin. Either might well be according to the will of God. To insist that the one I decided to do must be the will of God is to make the other a sin. It is to turn each day into a torment of guessing at God's will or arrogantly congratulating myself that I am so cleverly tuned into the mind of the Incomprehensible. We need to remember this principle as individuals and as a church body too. Too many people run off at the mouth about synodical resolutions that must be the will of God or they would not have passed. If the subject of the resolution was a matter not decided by the Word of God, then the decision may have been wise or unwise, good or not so good. But the same could be said, had the decision gone the other way. Again, if it is a matter not decided by God's Word, it may have been according to the will of God and not contrary to it. But to equate such a decision with the will of God is an arrogant claim to mastery over the hidden mind of God, something which only a *Schwärmer* unabashedly lays claim to.

But doesn't God rule over all things so that his will is done? Here we need to remember that many truths of the Scriptures are like great marble pillars that stand next to one another but can never be meshed with one another in a way that will altogether satisfy our fallen reason. Such for example are the truths of God's Word concerning the age-old question: Why are some saved and not others? The Bible clearly teaches that those who are saved have only God to thank for it, and that those who are lost have themselves to blame for it. Any attempt to mesh these two great truths will do violence to both of them. They must be allowed to stand side by side as the Scriptures teach them. God is not interested in any advice from us on how to reconcile them.

The matter of the will of God and God's providence on the one hand, and human freedom in those things subject to reason on the other hand is another case of two great pillars of truth that must be allowed to stand beside each other. On the one hand God rules over all things. On the other hand man has freedom in those things subject to reason. God remains God and man remains man. God retains ultimate control, but man is not just a mere puppet without responsibility for his choices and actions. We understand the mystery in part when we distinguish between those things that are necessary in history and those things that are contingent. God himself tells us things that are necessary. It is necessary that the church endure until the end of time. It is necessary that the elect hear the gospel – and God rules over all of history to see to it that they will both hear it and die in saving faith. But most things in history are contingent, that is, as far as we know they could have happened differently than they did. They are the result of human choices for which man is responsible. The church will never perish; but there is no promise that it will always be here in this place. That is contingent. We by our own choices could destroy the church in this place. How clearly that point is made by the Old Testament prophets over and over again and then summarized with scathing accuracy in 2 Kings 17, 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, and Daniel 9.

To be sure, God can and sometimes does intervene to limit what man does. For example, he saves the church again and again from the evil devices of the devil and wicked men who would destroy her. He may intervene in our lives and in history at times and in ways that we will never know until we get to heaven. But ordinarily he does not altogether prevent people from making choices and carrying out their own will. The bullet of the murderer leaves the gun in accord with the laws of physics and may reach its target and do its dread damage. God does not morally cooperate in the evil deed or morally consent to it. (The reader may recall that this is the distinction between God's material and his moral cooperation in evil.) The drunk driver acted with his free will when he got drunk and is responsible for the damage he does when he gets behind the wheel. It was not God's good and gracious will that he should inflict unspeakable misery on those he struck with his car.

That in no way contradicts the promises of God in Romans 8. God who knows all things and sees the end of things from their beginning has promised it: All things are governed by his might in such a way that they serve the best interest of the elect. That he does such a thing is a tribute to his wisdom and providence. How he does it without damage either to man's freedom or his own omnipotence is a profound mystery. Consider the greatest example of all. Judas betrayed Jesus. It was not the will of the Savior of all that Judas commit this monstrous crime. Over and over again Jesus tried to call Judas back from his crime. Even in the Garden Jesus' words to Judas are a call to repentance. But Judas exercised his free will. God did not prevent it. Judas acted contrary to the will of God. God did not stop him. Nevertheless God turned the wickedness of Judas, and every other human will involved in our Lord's Passion, to our eternal and

inestimable good. He did that without removing responsibility from men. He did it without damage to his own holiness and omnipotence.

In our own fragile and stumbling way we daily acknowledge this distinction between the contingent and the necessary, between that which is the will of God revealed in his Word and that which is according to the will of God, but could have been otherwise. We give thanks at the table for what we are about to receive. We call God the giver of the food and ourselves his grateful children who receive this specific meal alone by his bounty and grace. We give thanks to God for our spouse and our house, our friends and our possessions. But in none of those proper and thankful prayers do we imagine that God picked the Sauerbraten over the tacos or Miss Semi Perfect A over Miss Semi Perfect B for our spouse. No, those were all choices that we made. To have chosen otherwise or opposite may well have been just as good (except in the choice of tacos over Sauerbraten!), or in any case not wrong and a sin. They were contingent, not necessary. They were choices according to the will of God, not identical with the will of God. In either choice or course of action God's providence would have worked all to our good.

Then why should we pray? If all the contingent choices that we make can be used by God for our good and for our best, why ask his guidance, why think or plan at all? Because God invites us to pray and promises that he will hear. Because prayer does make a difference. Because he wants us to plan and commit our plans in prayer to his providence and blessing. Again, we have two great marble pillars that stand next to one another. God does not ask us to reconcile them, or to deny one in favor of the other. His providence over our contingent choices stands and so do his promises concerning prayer. His omnipotent rule over all history stands and so does his grant of humanity to fallen mankind, a grant, that is, of freedom to make choices in those things that are subject to reason.

Hopefully the above sets a solid Scriptural foundation on the basis of which we may judge correctly when we examine especially Reformed teachings concerning the will of God and the will of man since the Fall. For those teachings are not without influence on our people and perhaps even on us.

Reformed teaching can be divided into two main streams. The particularly perverse fact of the matter is that both streams, though they should be mutually exclusive, are found running together in the minds of many.

Calvinism

Classical Calvinism has fallen on hard times in English speaking Protestantism. The only genuine Calvinists left in this country are some in Dutch Reformed churches and a smattering of old style Presbyterians. Down but not out of the religious picture, a recent book has gained some popularity as a modern defense of classical Calvinism. It is entitled, The Pleasures of God, by John Piper (Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2000).

Piper defends the proposition that all that God does he does with pleasure for the glory of his sovereign will. That includes the damnation of those chosen for damnation. He declares that there is no contradiction in God's Word that he desires the salvation of all and that he takes pleasure in the damnation of the damned. For God's will cannot be contradicted or resisted by man; if God really willed that all be saved, then all would be saved. That some are not saved is because above and beyond the desire to save all is the desire that his sovereignty be expressed and recognized and then praised by all. Thus God, in the Calvinist mind, has two wills which

only appear to be mutually exclusive. One will is revealed in his Word. The other will is secret. He says, for example, that (p. 330) "... the new covenant promise is that God will not let his purposes for a holy people shipwreck on the weakness of human will. Instead he promises *to do what needs to be done to make us what we ought to be*" (emphasis added). He disposes of the problem of apparently contradictory wills in God by declaring that it all depends on the ultimate goal of God's absolute sovereignty: (p. 333) "What does God will more than saving all? ... The answer given by Calvinists is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Romans 9:22-23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation (1 Corinthians 1:29)." He speaks (pp. 325-327) of God's delight in the death of the sons of Eli (1 Samuel 2:22-25) and in the judgment and destruction of Israel.

In his consideration of these and similar passages he fails altogether to distinguish between the antecedent and consequent will of God. All of the passages in the Bible which speak of God's saving activity find that activity rooted and grounded in God's own grace and mercy. But the passages which speak of his judgment and his wrath, yes of his desire to exercise that judgment and wrath, lay the blame not on the eternal will of God, but on the perversity of man. Consider exactly those passages referred to earlier that place all the blame for Israel's destruction on their stubborn and persistent rejection of God's Word. Consider as well Jesus' plaintive lament over Jerusalem; what he willed is absolutely clear, that is, the salvation of Jerusalem. What happened was the result, not of some secret will in God, but of the blatant rejection of his will by man (Matthew 23:37). Consider as well the address of St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:51-53). Where is the secret in all of this? There is no secret at all; the Scriptures state plainly the reason for the judgment of God. That's what we mean by the consequent will of God; God acts in consequence of man's (at least in the cited instances) exercise of his freedom to reject the gospel.

The irresistibility of God's sovereign will in Piper's Calvinism, however, is not limited to the matter of what we customarily refer to as Calvinist double predestination. The sovereign will of God extends to every act of man in history. While most of our people may be ignorant of or indifferent to double predestination, the notion that God's will must always be done, that whatever happens only happens because it's God's will, is a very common one. Piper cites the favorite passages of Calvinist determinism, passages like the following in Proverbs 16:

Vs. 1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue.

Vs. 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.

Vs. 33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Add to these passages like:

Proverbs 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

Jeremiah 10:23 I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.

We do not have time here to consider all of the passages that Piper considers in defense of his proposition that God's sovereign will is irresistible and must be carried out in all things great and small. But Piper's use of all of them has this in common: He effectively, if not expressly, denies any real humanity to man. For if man has no free will at all, then even the shell of God's image has been annihilated, man is left altogether a puppet, and even his praise of God is inevitable and compelled. The passages cited speak not of a destruction of human freedom, but of God's ultimate control as he accomplishes his purposes for our good and his glory. Again, it is a matter of finding the narrow Lutheran middle road between two false alternatives; the one is to make man sovereign (of which more later), and the other to deny man's humanity and thus his responsibility for choices that he makes in those things subject to reason.

So What?

What danger is there for our people when they unwittingly absorb Calvinist errors. The first and greatest danger in Calvinism is that, if carried out to its logical conclusion, it drives either to despair or to self-righteousness. For if both salvation and damnation have been decreed in eternity what hope is there for me, when I ponder my sins, when I consider the pain of my existence. I must be one who is damned. There is nothing for it but despair. I cast about looking for some evidence that I have come down on the right side of God's eternal decree, and my conscience declares with the Scriptures that my righteousness is as filthy rags. If conscience and the law do their proper work, that is all that is left to me – despair. On the other hand, what if I can look at my life and see it as well ordered, prosperous, truly blessed. Is that not a clear indication that I have been predestined to eternal life, that I enjoy the favor of the Sovereign Lord? Yes, and if I labor to bring about a truly Christian society, one fit for the saints, is that not also a clear indication that I am one of the blessed? The inherent rationalism of Calvinism makes it all the easier for one to pursue the fundamental error of Calvinism to its logical conclusion.

It is no accident that Calvinist societies in Holland, in Geneva, and to some extent in pre-Restoration England and in the Puritan colonies were rigorously upright on the outside. Why? They had something vital to prove, namely that they were indeed the elect. How else can it be proven except by an examination of one's works?

The whole focus of salvation shifts from God to man in the Calvinist scenario, even though that is the opposite of the Calvinist's stated intent. He has to prove his elect state or perish in despair. The only way to prove it is by his own works. Thus while loudly proclaiming that salvation is entirely the work of God, it is not on the work of God that the Calvinist typically fixes his gaze. It is on his own works. Thus: despair or self-righteousness. To seek surety in Christ the book of life, as the Formula of Concord urges in Article XI, sounds foreign indeed in the Calvinist's ear.

What of the rest of it? What of this notion that not just salvation and damnation but everything else as well has been predetermined by the will of God? That everything that happens must be his will or else it wouldn't have happened? Such a perverse notion does the same thing in daily life that double election does in the realm of salvation. It turns the gaze away from Christ and his Word. Faith is knowledge, assent, and confidence. But faith for the determinist is mindless. Everything has been decreed, and what will be, that will be. No point in examining the Scriptures carefully. No point in applying the Bible as I make decisions and plan. It's all been decreed already, and whatever we do is the will of God therefore; otherwise we wouldn't have

done it and it couldn't have happened. No longer is it necessary to live by faith; we already live by sight. For now we know the will of God without the Word, and without the hunger that wants, as the old Collect put it, "to hear, learn and inwardly digest" the Word.

Do we mean that all Calvinists think in the way just described? Of course not. Do we wish to suggest that such an extreme infects all of our members? Certainly not. But permit me to suggest that such thinking is not at all uncommon. Perhaps just a couple of examples may serve to make the point. Recently (Dec., 2000) a student wrote the following lines in a student publication at MLC.

Why are you here anyway? ... Well, I can tell you right now, that no matter the case, God called you here in some way or the other. ... The Lord calls you to where you are suppose (sic) to be.

"What if I don't want to be here?" If you feel as though you do not want to be a minister of the gospel through teaching or pastoral duties, then by all means, go wear (sic) the Lord is calling you in another field. ... "How am I supposed to know that I'm not supposed to be a teacher/pastor? How do I know that I'm making the right decision?" A good one-word answer for that is pray. Dear Christian friend, if you pray about it, you (sic) decision can't be wrong. In Proverbs 16:9 we read, "in his heart, a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." Your decision can't be wrong, because you are going where your savior calls you.

The above is an appalling mish-mash of all that is wrong with Calvinism with a good dose of all that is wrong with Arminianism thrown in for good measure! What are you "supposed to do"? Guess and torment yourself that you may have guessed wrong and thus thwarted or threatened some cosmic plan for your life? When in doubt, pray. Prayer will give you the answer. Prayer as a means of grace is a common characteristic of Arminianism. But it isn't Scriptural. In point of fact, if prayer is a substitute for the means of grace, what need then do we have of the means of grace?

I can't tell you how many students I have had over the years who have tormented themselves trying to climb into the hidden will of God? I can't tell you how much grief they have inflicted on themselves trying to guess God's cosmic, foreordained plan for their vocational future, for marriage, for just about anything else that you might think of. One young man wrestled with the problem of which young lady he should marry. He wanted to know how to find out which one God had picked for him. Another decided that there was no point in thinking about the future of the school or of the synod or of his own course of study, because whatever God had decided is how it would all come out anyway.

How sad! The simple truth of the Scriptures is beautiful and comforting. Under the cross I am consoled that even and already in eternity God thought of me, God knew me. And now in time God has so ruled over history that I should hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the gospel and by its power come to trust in him as my Savior. When tempest tossed and tormented by doubt, I can look to him and listen to his Word. I can call to mind his promises and gifts in the sacraments as seals and pledges of the promises in his Word. I can as a redeemed child of God

offer up to him MY decisions and choices and courses of action out of love and gratitude. And in the midst of all life's changes and turmoil, I can trust that he works all to his glory and my good! I sometimes tell students who are wrestling with "vocational indecision" that for God it is like Christmas every day. Though he knows all things, he still waits to see how you will respond to the choices he has given you to make, how you will decide to serve him in response to the gospel. Then he may say, "Ah, see how this one loves me! He gives back to me what I gave to him; he has chosen to serve me and his neighbor as a _____!" And the choice is not between bad and good. The choice is between good and good; you make the decision on the basis of gifts that God gave you and interests that God gave you. So generous is God that you no doubt can make a choice between many "goods." Then in whatever choice you make, do it all to the glory of God.

Arminianism

If Calvinism is bad and its inroads on our people are dangerous, then Arminianism is worse and its inroads more pervasive and perverse. Arminianism in its origins is a reaction against Calvinism. While Calvinism virtually denies any freedom to man, even in those things subject to reason, Arminianism goes to exactly the opposite extreme and attributes freedom to man even and especially in spiritual things. The Arminians were appalled at the notion that God willed and was responsible for the damnation of those not elected to salvation. Thus where the Calvinist denies universal justification, the Arminian teaches that salvation is possible or available for all. But he denies original sin and makes salvation a cooperative effort between God and man. Like Calvinism, Arminianism is essentially rationalistic. The Calvinist in his brand of rationalism decides that if God is sovereign and has elected some to salvation, then it follows that he must will the damnation of those not elected. The Arminian goes in the opposite direction. He reasons that if God is not to be held responsible for the damnation of the damned, then man must play a role in his own salvation; he must choose between heaven and hell. The key for the Arminian is the will of man. It must be free to choose God, to make a decision for Christ. But if man's will is free to make a decision for Christ, then he must not be "dead in trespasses and sins." At the very least we must come into the world neutral – but probably basically good.

Most of American Protestantism is awash in Arminianism to one degree or another. Indeed one may say that though the roots of Arminianism are in Holland, its trunk and branches are utterly American. Arminianism exalts the individual, the subjective, the emotional, the anti-intellectual and anti-clerical streak that is so much a part of American culture: Don't follow your head! Follow your heart! Don't think too much and don't read anything very deep; just *feel the Spirit!* Away with any kind of authority! Tocqville noted that about Americans and American religion and commented on it extensively in his famous book *Democracy in America* in the 1830s. The addiction to entertainment and the superficial, the mind as an ad hoc committee addressed to the moment, those are hallmarks of American culture. Arminianism in its Methodist and Baptist forms is ideally suited to that kind of mentality. We and our people are by no means immune to it.

Tune in to the local religious radio station. Catch some evening something on Trinity Broadcasting Network on cable. The best of Arminianism will be evident in some who have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and even exalt the work of Christ as Savior of the world.

But even these best always end up with an emotional appeal that is no better than the sum of theology in the Middle Ages: *Facere quod in te est!* Now do your part; invite Jesus into your heart; turn your life over to him and make him King Jesus!

What becomes of faith in this best case Arminian scenario? Faith is MY decision, MY choice, MY part in salvation. But what if I don't really *feel* the Spirit? What if I'm not sure that I *really* believe? Yes, what if I find that I am still plagued with the same old temptations and plagued even worse than before? Then read the Bible some more! Pray and pray and pray for the Spirit! When you feel it, then you've got it!

Oh, how dreadful! Once again we have a recipe either for despair or self-righteousness, a recipe even more likely to get cooked in the Arminian heart than the Calvinist recipe in the Calvinist heart. For notice how everything turns back to man. Faith is man's work. Its assurance is in man's feelings. It should be prayed for, even when the one praying thinks himself an unbeliever! Objective justification is turned on its head, and so is faith. Loudly proclaiming that Christ died for the sins of the world, the best of Arminians nevertheless makes Christ's death merely that which made salvation possible. "It is finished!" must change into "It is possible, if only you make your decision for Christ!" Faith does not merely receive the accomplished fact of redemption. In the Arminian equation faith establishes the fact of redemption – it isn't true until and unless I choose to believe it. What then should the Arminian do in doubt and despair? Look to himself and struggle to conjure up the feeling. What should he do when he feels all is right with God and the world? He need look no further; what he believes to be true is true because he believes it.

And that's Arminianism at its best! At its best is not how we will most often encounter it. The denial of original sin and the exaltation of the fallen will is a vipers brood. Once faith is the cause of truth rather than the result of truth, anything can pass as faith. And these days just about anything does. "Pastor, how can I go to hell? I don't believe in hell!" "Well, Pastor, that's all fine for you; but I just don't believe that God would judge somebody just because they _____." "But isn't the most important thing that we just believe?" – note that faith in these kinds of statements has no source, no content, no goal; it is the mindless musing and sentiment of the moment. The closest it will ever come to content is: Jesus loves me; this I know and this is all I want to know! We need constantly to remember and emphasize the truth that faith is knowledge, assent, and confidence. Faith without knowledge is not faith; it is superstition!

So with Arminianism justification is turned upside down, faith is reduced to sentiment, and original sin is blatantly denied. Want more? The very subjectivism of faith drives inexorably to a host of "Spirit-led ministries" that exalt the role of the Holy Spirit at the expense of Christ. Search the Scriptures for a theology of the Holy Spirit and what will you find? You will find that the work of the Holy Spirit and his greatest joy is to lead us to Christ, to exalt the work of Christ, to bring Christ to us. A work of the Holy Spirit independent of or neglecting Christ is the work of a very different spirit, one not from above but from below. Nevertheless Oral Roberts is "led by the Spirit" to ask for millions to build a hospital. And no one blushes! I chanced upon TBN for five minutes a few weeks ago to hear one of their leading program hosts declare: "I got up this morning, and instantly felt led by the Spirit to pray for ..., and this is the message he gave me for you today!" No reference to the Bible. No mention of Jesus.

So prayer becomes THE means of grace for many Arminians. It is the key that unlocks the hidden mind of God. It becomes the way in which God speaks through his Spirit to the decisions and tasks of the day. "Just leave yourself open to his speaking" is the common mantra

of these latter-day *Rottengeister*, these *Schwärmer*, who have, to borrow Luther's expression, "swallowed the Holy Ghost, tail feathers and all." What need is there then for searching the Scriptures, not to mention marrying them? What need for careful study of a sacred text? What need for that matter for a trained clergy who can help us do that on the basis of the original texts? It is enough "to have the Spirit, to be in the Spirit!"

Do you catch what really happens to the will of man in Arminian thought and practice? For all intents and purposes the will of God and the will of man become one and the same thing! While Calvinism wallows in a determinism that denies any real humanity to man, Arminianism is intoxicated with such an exaltation of man's freedom and goodness that God's will is always and immediately accessible; just *Be open to it! Just pray for it!*

Is it any wonder that Arminianism leads to theological relativism? Oliver Cromwell at the end of his life could not understand why everything had ended so badly; after all, the Spirit of God was speaking and working through him, or so he imagined. He could not understand why the Spirit of God didn't say the same thing to everyone else that he thought the Spirit of God was saying to him. Nevertheless that did not turn him from his conviction that the individual has direct access to God, even apart from the Word of God. And so he died in despair, floundering in a sea of contradictory and mutually exclusive truths, all supposedly revealed by the Spirit. If Arminianism fit in well in Cromwell's England, it fits better still with a post-Enlightenment and so called post-Modern educational systems, awash in existential relativism, and with a culture that exalts naval gazing as the best means for finding the truth of the moment, and all that within the framework of a secular society addicted to entertainment.

Is it any wonder that Arminian sects not only multiply but prosper? Just look at their churches, whether on a television set or in the Crystal Cathedral! People beat down the doors to get into these places. They are successful. They are growing. The best of them are fundamentalist, which means they have pared down their doctrinal requirements to no more than five or six. The worst of them are barely Christian at all, have no doctrines, just spirit. Their success should in no way surprise us. Legalism and *Schwärmerei*, whether that of the Pharisees, the Pope, or the sectarians have always been and always will be popular. Our country and culture more than most offer Arminianism fertile soil indeed!

So what?

It may well be obvious to you that Arminian attitudes are in the air we breathe. Arminianism pervades just about every religious or quasi-religious expression among people on the street or in the religious programming on the radio and on television. Nor have we escaped that air. I refer you back to the citation earlier from a recent student publication at MLC.

You may have caught a whiff of Arminianism in a recent WELS video. One of our congregations has sponsored a pre-school program open to the neighborhood. No doubt the effort is a good one in and of itself. But when the woman promoting it discussed its evolution, what did she say? Something like this: "We had planned it for our members and expected it to be small. ... But sometimes the Holy Spirit speaks to us and leads us in an altogether different direction. We have to follow where his speaking leads us!" Why couldn't she just have said: "We decided to invite the neighbors. God blessed our efforts beyond our fondest expectations, so that now ..." Why this speaking of the Holy Spirit apart from his Word?

I had a student in my office who was failing every course. We had stretched his program to five years in the hope that he could make it that way. We got him a tutor for every subject. Still he was failing. Finally I asked him, “Why are you still here?” His answer: “I’m still praying and waiting for the Lord to tell me what I should do!”

How many of our problems in counseling and in church discipline have Arminian tendencies as their base? People want easy answers to life’s great problems. They come for advice too late and leave too early when they hear about repentance and endurance. Some want a cheap forgiveness for an unscriptural divorce or life style. Some want an easy conscience about a relative who died in obvious unbelief. To put it another way, some want what the Arminians have, the free and easy assurance that whatever they believe is true because they believe it, and whatever they decide to do must be the will of God, or they would have chosen and acted otherwise. Besides all that, who are you to judge! The important thing is that we just believe and love one another. Consequences for sin in this life? Hell in the next? We want none of that. Ours is a God of love, who would never send anyone to hell.

So what’s the cure for the disease? It’s not a new program. It’s not more pandering to popular tastes. It’s not the sharing of your own better and more enlightened feelings in the pulpit, in the vain hope that people will prefer your illumination to their own. What then is the cure? May it not be tedious to say it: It’s the truth of the Scriptures! People will not be cured of their *opinio legis*-Arminian addictions or their Calvinist determinism by anything other than the diligent proclamation of the law and the gospel. We have got to get through our own heads first and then into our hearts as well that nothing is more sublime or beautiful than what God has to say in his Word. Nothing surpasses the beauty of John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 5:19 ff., Romans 3-8 et al. Those who want another message from God trade gold for tinsel and foolishly imagine that there is no difference.

We will no doubt never win a complete victory any more than the apostles did, as witness all the problems that St. Paul had in Galatia and in Corinth. But the assurance and promise of the Scriptures that the Word of God is never proclaimed in vain but also has its effect and its results should spur us on to do everything we can to hold the beautiful mind of God before our people as fully and as clearly as we can. Drive out the *Schwärmer* that lurks within us all in your own private devotions. Read enough of the Bible for yourself each day to see how what you are reading is unique – there is no other text quite like the one you are reading at that moment, and you haven’t read it until you grasp that. Bask in the bright light of God’s grace in that unique text. He ruled over all of history so that those words would be recorded and preserved, just so that you could feast on them. Catch the warmth of the Father’s heart, the mind-boggling ardor of the Son’s love, the intensity of the Spirit’s zeal for your salvation.

Then when it’s time to study the text for Sunday’s sermon, you will automatically be looking for the same things. Preaching will become less tiresome, with applications that are dragged kicking and screaming into the text, or applications that are so generic that you didn’t really need a text for them – they are the same ones you used last week and will use again next week.

The point is simply this: If we come more and more to see the beauty of the Scriptures through the devastating message of the law and the life-giving message of the gospel, we will share that in the pulpit. If we can just get our people to see that the sludge that emerges from their own minds or feelings is not worth bothering with at all compared to the unique splendor of God’s Word, then we are on the way with the antidote to the disease.

Yes, and we should not be too shy either to directly attack the disease also from the pulpit. We need to warn people against the error on the streets so appealing to the *opinio legis* also at work in them. We need to vaccinate regularly against the virus that wants to infect them with the notion that their own feelings are just as good as what's in the Bible. And, again, the only way to do that is by faithful preaching and teaching which reflects your own on going marriage to and love affair with the Word of God. The devil has won most of the battle if he convinces you that you do not have time for private study of the Word of God and that you are too busy for thorough text study in sermon preparation. For if you do not appreciate the beauty of his Word enough to use it for yourself, how will you honestly introduce your flock to its beauty.

So there it is, a cliché to some, tired and tedious to others, but to us still the only truth worth bothering with: *Your Word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path* (Psalms 119:105), especially and pre-eminently because it brings me to the at once most horrible and most joyful confession: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst* (1 Timothy 1:15).