

# Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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## GOD'S WILL AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

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*"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:29*

The Bible is the revealed will of God. The Bible is inspired by God, inerrant and authoritative. It contains everything God has chosen to reveal to us. Through the Bible we know God's plans, purposes and moral will. Only the teachings of Scripture and valid implications drawn from Scriptures are the revealed will of God in a directive and authoritative sense. This article will explore important implications of this truth as they pertain to Christian decision making and Christian liberty. To do so I will explain four important categories: God's revealed will, God's providential will, Christian liberty, and God's offer to grant us wisdom.

Before proceeding, we must consider some important distinctions and define our terminology. First, if the Scripture contains the "things revealed," what are the "secret things" that belong only to God? "Secret things" consist of God's future providential will that is not predicted in Scripture, and forbidden occult knowledge of the spirit world that is forbidden in Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Seeking occult knowledge is a sin and God's providential will is not known until it is revealed as history unfolds.

Second, what about all those things that are not dictated by God's revealed will and do not fall into the category of forbidden or unknowable information? For example, should I repair my older car, or buy a new one? Unless one of the alternatives causes me to transgress God's revealed will (such as failing to provide for my own household<sup>2</sup>), then this decision falls into the category of Christian liberty. I am defining Christian liberty as the freedom to make one's

decisions about matters that are not revealed in Scripture without fear of sinning against God. Later I will argue that Christians who command others to follow certain actions in matters that rightly belong in the category of Christian liberty, sin in so doing. They make themselves authoritative spokespersons for God when the Bible grants them no such authority.

### THE REVEALED WILL OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

The most important message of God's revealed will is His plan of Messianic salvation. Messiah is spoken of from Genesis to Revelation. No matter how diligently one works to follow God's revealed moral law, such a person will be found in the most serious act of disobedience if he refuses to repent and believe the Gospel. The Bible says, "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard*" (Hebrews 2:3). Since works righteousness is the belief of all religions **except** Biblical Christianity, it is not surprising that many are willing to submit to the laws of God revealed in Scripture but not submit to the Gospel. Jesus Christ died for sins, once for all, and was raised from the dead. Unless we trust Him fully, realizing that we have sinned against God's law and deserve a future in hell, we shall be rightly judged for trusting man rather than God. However, if we believe that Christ paid the full penalty for our sins, and trust His finished work on our behalf, we shall be saved from eternal death

and given the gift of eternal life.

The most important purpose of God's revealed will in Scriptures is to lead us to salvation in Christ. Paul told Timothy: "[A]nd that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15). People are fond of calling the Bible the "owners manual" for life. One must be careful however in thinking like that. If one refuses to give up trusting self and refuses to put their trust fully in Christ, the "owner's manual" will do them no good. Messianic salvation must be the first issue we come to grips with, otherwise all the moral and wise decisions gleaned from Scripture will be of no eternal benefit.

Having believed the Gospel and submitted to Christ's Lordship, we can now appreciate the moral guidance revealed in the Bible. The Bible contains the revealed moral law of God. This law is summarized by the commands to love God and neighbor.<sup>3</sup> The Bible contains specific moral guidance in both the Old and New Testament. The prohibitions on stealing, murder, drunkenness, idolatry, adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, and many others are clearly revealed in Scripture. Therefore everyone who has embraced the Gospel also embraces the rest of God's revealed will. We cannot say, "I believe that Jesus died for my sins and I trust Him, but I retain the right to sin as I please when I please."<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that true Christians never sin. Christians acknowledge that God's moral law is binding, and confess that we need God's forgiveness for sins, and confess that we need God's grace to gain victory. Lawlessness is saying to Christ, "we will not have you rule over us."<sup>5</sup>

The Bible reveals to Christians God's will concerning our duties toward God and one another. The Bible says

that if we claim to love God but hate our brother, we lie (1John 4:20). The Bible covers a large range of issues about church life, family life, and our responsibilities toward civil authorities. These matters are revealed; God's will is known. We are to provide for our families (1Timothy 5:8), work (2Thessalonians 3:10-12), pay our taxes (Romans 13:6,7), and serve one another with the gifts God has given (Romans 12:9-13). We are called to confess the gospel (Matthew 10:32, Romans 10:9).

In civil law there is a principle that says, "ignorance of the law is no excuse." If it were, then people could avoid penalty for criminal behavior by keeping themselves ignorant of all laws. When the Bible refers to, "the things revealed [that] are for you," it thereby gives us the responsibility to search the Scriptures. Every Christian is to know God's Word as fully as he or she is capable of learning. This duty is sadly neglected in our day, which leads to many transgressions of God's revealed will. We are commanded to embrace sound doctrine (1Timothy 6:3, Titus 1:9; 2:1). Preachers are commanded to preach the word (2Timothy 4:2, 3). To gather under the guise of church, and to not preach God's Word, not proclaim the glad tidings of salvation through Messiah, and not fellowship around the apostles teaching (Acts 2:42), is sinning against God's revealed will. Remaining purposefully ignorant does not further God's work in the lives of His people.

There is one more category that is to be considered as part of "things revealed" that are for us. Besides the explicit teachings of Scripture, there are valid implications drawn from Scripture. Though there will always be disputes about what is a valid implication, nevertheless if such implications can be demonstrated, they are binding as God's revealed will. For example, the command to love one's neighbor has many implications. Jesus shared the parable of the Good Samaritan to show implications of the command to love.

#### GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL WILL

Providence is God's sovereign oversight

over all of history, including things He directly decrees and things He allows.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, God's providential will is everything that happens. This passage assures the Christian that God's providential will is always for our good: "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). The rest of Romans 8 makes it clear that Paul means "all things" in a comprehensive sense. After giving a list of anything one might consider to have not been included, but yet are, he says "*nor any other created thing*" (Romans 8:39) which makes it clear that he means "all things" **literally**. This neglected doctrine needs to be preached more in our churches. God's providential will includes everything that happens from creation onward.

This doctrine is demonstrated throughout Biblical history, but clearly revealed in a number of key incidents. For example, consider this passage: "*[T]his Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power*" (Acts 2:23, 24). Murder is against God's moral law, and those who put Christ to death are morally guilty for doing so. However, Christ's rejection, death and resurrection were fully in accord with God's eternal purposes. The rejection of Messiah was predicted in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Christ's atoning death is God's providential will and is the center piece of redemption history. Yet human sin was involved in the process.

Another famous example is that of Joseph. After many people, including his brothers, sinned in their treatment of him, Joseph said this: "*And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive*" (Genesis 50:20). It is inescapable that God allowed their evil action in order to bring about His sovereign and saving purposes. Yet in so acting, they are morally culpable. Fellow Christian,

God still does this. He may allow someone else's sin to have apparent deleterious affects on us. Yet **Romans 8:28** still applies. Even evil acts of other people are part of God's providential will.

God's providential will is mostly secret until it unfolds in history, at which time it becomes revealed. I will share a couple of exceptions to that shortly. First I want to address those who have theological problems with what I am teaching. I have friends who will not be convinced by what I am teaching no matter how carefully I explain it or how many Scriptures are brought to bear on it. They claim that "providence" is actually "fatalism" in disguise. They claim that if we believe that God's providential will is being done moment by moment, then we will not pray, not preach the gospel, and find an excuse for our own sin. These objections are nothing new, Paul anticipated them when he wrote Romans. Paul said, "*You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?'*" (Romans 9:19, 20). Paul was not misunderstood; he suggests that his critics are impudent and insolent.

These objections have also been answered throughout church history by some of the church's finest theologians. The most comprehensive rebuttal is found in Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*. Martin Luther dealt with it in his most important writing, *The Bondage of the Will*. A wise, loving, personal God who is the God of all history is not to be equated with the blind forces of fate that terrorize the pagans. Frankly, I think that those who equate providence with fate in order to discredit the doctrine are not trying very hard to understand the Bible. Many are likely blinded by their own prejudice, but only God knows the motives. Some are so opposed to any notion of God's comprehensive sovereignty that they deny His foreknowledge, thus creating an "open" future unknown to God. The Bible teaches no such thing.<sup>8</sup>

There is a practical problem when

God's providential will is not seen as a valid category for understanding God's work in human history. What happens is that rather than watching God's providential will being displayed as history unfolds, many try to find subjective revelations to make known now what is secret because of being yet future. The idea is that there is a future that is envisioned by God, but will only be actualized if we make the right decisions. Thus many other matters that do not fall into the category of God's moral law or revealed will are considered nevertheless necessary to be known for God's will to be done.<sup>9</sup> I will show that believing like this impinges upon Christian liberty.

Let me give some examples to make this more concrete. Let us suppose that a person believes that for God's "perfect" will to be done, he must make certain right decisions that are not of the sort for which Bible gives moral guidance. Let us take marriage as an example. Suppose that a young man is considering marriage. Before him are two Christian young ladies who are both valid candidates for a godly, Christian marriage. Thinking that it must be God's will to marry one rather than the other, the young man seeks a revelation of God's will by prayer and going to meetings to seek personal prophesy about the matter. The subjectively revealed answer comes back, "marry Jane but not Ann." So he marries Jane. But later in life many things go wrong. The couple has a child with congenital problems. Jane's health goes bad and she is not able to care for her family as she wishes. Now the person has reason to doubt he made the right decision. I have talked to people who feel that way. They say, "If only I had made a different choice, none of this would have happened, it must not have been God's will." When Jesus considered marriage, He said "whom God has joined together." He did not make any qualifications. We know that God joined them together because after the fact it is revealed as God's providential will. There was no moral law transgressed, so there is no reason for second guessing.

I will discuss this more thoroughly in the next section about Christian liberty. But for now we need to understand that God's providential will is comprehensive. If someone transgresses God's revealed moral law, though it is a sin, God nevertheless allowed it. If a person has transgressed God's moral law, then he or she needs to see that the only answer is the shed blood of Christ and the grace of God to give victory. We must simultaneously accept as God's providential will that He allowed us to fail, accept full responsibility for our failure, and see that even our failure as something God will ultimately use in accordance with Romans 8:28. If someone makes a decision on a matter that is not dictated by the teachings of Scripture or valid implications from those teachings, whatever they decide is not a sin. Also, whatever they decide, after the fact of the decision, is now revealed as God's providential will.

The only time the future providential will of God becomes known before the fact is when the Scripture predicts future history.<sup>10</sup> For example, that an antichrist will arise is known now. What we do not know is who he will be and when exactly he will appear in history. That will be revealed when it happens.

### CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Christian liberty is the freedom to make decisions about matters that are not revealed in Scriptures without fear of sinning against God. This liberty is accentuated by the knowledge that whatever we choose within those parameters is pleasing to God. I hope to show that the concepts of God's revealed will, and God's secret will that is only revealed providentially as history unfolds, serve to give Christians greater liberty, not less liberty as some erroneously assume.

God granted human liberty in His act of creating humans in His image. In Genesis, before the Fall, Adam was given the freedom to name the animals, however he saw fit. Consider what God told Adam: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from

*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die*" (Genesis 2:16,17). Therefore in the original creation, God gave the categories of liberty "you may freely eat" and moral guidance "you shall not eat." Clearly Adam had the freedom to eat at will, at his discretion, from whatever trees seemed pleasing to him at the time. The forbidden tree was God's revealed moral law and rightfully restricted Adam's freedom. He was told that seeking autonomous freedom would lead to bondage and death.

In Christ, the "last Adam,"<sup>11</sup> we have significant freedom, even in this life, though marred by the Fall. The redeemed will have perfect freedom in the life to come. In this world there are many sinful desires and potentially sinful choices. However, we have God's Word to guide us in those matters. We also have myriads of choices that God allows us to make at our own discretion and for our own enjoyment of His creation. Paul wrote: "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). That everything is not dictated by moral law leaves us with freedom to enjoy human diversity. One can choose to fill his yard with flowers and another with green grass, and another with both.

This freedom extends to more consequential matters. In these problems often arise. Many Christians think that there is one "perfect" will of God which includes every important aspect of life. Discovering that "perfect will" and making right choices to actualize that will, they believe, are the keys to successful Christian living.<sup>12</sup> I am suggesting that this thinking is wrong and unbiblical. I will share a Biblical example to illustrate.

*I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek*

*a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. (1Corinthians 7:26-28)*

Given the situation for Christians in the Roman Empire in his day, Paul thought that those who were single would be better off staying that way as Paul had. However, he says that those who do marry do not thereby sin. Elsewhere in Paul's writing and throughout Scripture marriage is commended as a good and honorable thing, one that illustrates Christ and the church.

Sin is that which is outside of God's will. So Paul said that marriage was not outside of God's will. Paul merely offered his advice, but would not curtail Christian liberty. On the contrary, Paul taught that forbidding marriage was a doctrine of demons (1Timothy 4:1). As mentioned earlier, those who do marry are joined together by God. So marriage or singleness is a legitimate choice for Christians. No Christian who is single can claim that God is more pleased with them for being single; no married Christian can claim superior status on the basis of being married. However, once we decide to marry, God's will is revealed: that we be faithful to our spouse "until death do we part"!

How do we find out God's will in matters of Christian liberty? By making an informed choice and living out all the ramifications of that choice to God's glory by His grace. God's providential will is known after we make the choice, it is whatever we chose. If that choice does not transgress anything revealed in Scripture, then it cannot be a sinful choice unless we make it with evil motives. Examples of choices that the New Testament expressly says are within the realm of Christian liberty are things like marriage, food, circumcision, and holy days to be observed. Some choose a more rigorous and restricted approach to life (see **Romans 14**), and others less restrictive. What we are **not** free to do is judge others on matters that rightfully fall into the category of liberty. These are matters God has not

dictated in Scripture.

### FREEDOM WITHIN BOUNDARIES

The Bible commands us to work (2Thessalonians 3:10) but does not tell us at which job. The Bible tells us to fellowship (**Hebrews 10:25**), but does not tell us which church to attend. The Bible tells us to pray (**Romans 12:12**), but does not tell us for how long and where. The Bible tells us to do acts of kindness to widows and orphans (**James 1:27**), but does not tell us where and when. Even when doing what the Bible commands us to do we still have Christian liberty.

For example, Paul was committed to preaching the Gospel. But where and how often were many times dictated by circumstances. Consider this: "For we wanted to come to you? I, Paul, more than once? and yet Satan thwarted us" (1Thessalonians 2:18). Paul was not able to execute his decision, because of Satan. Thus God's providential will became known. Paul nevertheless preached the Gospel elsewhere. What is revealed is that the Gospel is to be preached. Where and under what circumstances is not revealed in Scripture, but becomes apparent as we make our choices and history unfolds.

God providentially works through civil authorities to reveal His will through events in history. This happens in all levels of civil authority, from nations to states, to cities, to families, to church government. Sometimes this causes things to happen that we would not have chosen on our own. For example, in 1992, the elders of the church for whom I was assistant pastor at the time decided that they wanted to send me to seminary. I had no desire to go to seminary and would not have thought of it on my own. A dear friend of mine who was one of the elders sat me down and said, "we want you to go to seminary, we think it will help you fulfill your ministry, and if you chose not to I am not sure what we will do." That is how I found out God's will, it unfolded by the events of history through those who had civil authority over me. I spoke to my father about my concerns saying, "Dad, I am 41 years old, and with work-

ing full time I will likely be 47 before I graduate." Dad said, "You will be 47 six years from now if you do not go to seminary, so what is the difference?" I love farmer wisdom. So I went, and it turned out to be for the furtherance of my ministry and the Gospel in many ways.

Paul was in prison when he wrote to the Philippians: "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (**Philippians 1:12**). Paul was in prison because civil authorities put him there. Thus God's providential will was revealed. There is no assurance that by learning to follow some secret "inner voice of God" we will be more pleasing to God and be more "in the center of His will." This idea hinders true Christian liberty and leads to many sorrows.

Many think that God will feed them information about all their decisions and give them the "Midas touch." This concept is false. God does not tell us which stocks are going up, which car will never break down, which house will go up in value, and other turn by turn directions that will lead us to bliss and success in this life. In God's wisdom He has granted us freedom to make these decisions freely, and without recrimination for the results. It is not a sin to make decisions within the realm of Christian liberty that we regret later. As earthly parents, we will judiciously allow our children to do the same. It is a central part of our human freedom and dignity to make decisions and watch the consequences play out in life. It sounds good to have the "Midas touch" but if it existed it would be ruinous as it was in the fable.

I am a fisherman by hobby. Suppose I had the ability to gain information from God about exactly where the fish will bite, what lure they will hit, the exact lake, exact time, and exact location of the biggest lunger. The first time I used that ability would be great fun, less the second, less the third, and eventually no fun at all. Why? Because I would soon be just going through the motions of reeling in fish with no fun of the chase. It would be as exciting as turning on the tap and knowing drink-

ing water will come out. The excitement comes from having to learn, to plan, and setting out on an adventure that often ends in disappointment. But that one time you hook up with the “fish of a lifetime” it is so very exciting and satisfying. Likewise, the unknown about God’s future providential will is necessary for the enjoyment of human freedom.

Many who are on a quest to make the unknown future known now through personal revelations are chasing the “Midas touch.” I know because I used to believe that way. One still hears mostly mythological stories of people who have gained secret information from God about the future so as to insure unbelievable results. They claim to live in a “cannot lose” dream world where success follows where ever they go. God does not offer such secret information, but rather offers liberty. This liberty includes the freedom to choose courses of action that do not work the way we hoped, like Paul’s choice to attempt to visit the Thessalonians. Welcome to the real world. We never actually “fail” when we exercise Christian liberty, we just learn and discover more about God’s mysterious providence.

Let me make one more illustration of this concept. As a pastor, I hate getting calls from people telling me that they are leaving our particular fellowship. It used to make me so upset that it took days to get over. I would ask, “How did I fail, or what are those people thinking of, or how are we going to keep the ministry going?, etc.” After contemplating the things I am writing in this article, I decided that my response was in-appropriate. That we should join other Christians in fellowship, prayer, Bible teaching and outreach with the Gospel is commanded by Scripture. The Bible does not reveal which local fellowship to attend; so this matter falls into the category of Christian liberty. So as a pastor, I have no right to question the legitimate decisions of people exercising their liberty. I can only question these decisions if they are leaving fellowship all together, or leaving a Bible preaching church to go to one that

does not preach the Bible, because in such cases they walking away from what God has revealed to be His will for all Christians. Now when people leave the church, I can send them with a blessing and thank God for deploying his people on the scene of church history as He sees fit. This is much more liberating.

### GOD’S WISDOM

God gives wisdom to those who ask: “*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind*” (James 1:5, 6). Many understand this passage as meaning that God will give personal revelations about any decision we are contemplating. This is a misunderstanding. The context is about enduring suffering and tribulation under various trials: “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*” (James 1:2-4).

The wisdom of which James speaks is the wisdom needed in the midst of severe trials. Lenski comments on James 1:5, 6: “The great need of the believer is wisdom to understand all God’s purposes in placing us amid these continuous trials.”<sup>13</sup> If God allows a trial to test our faith and has a beneficent purpose in the trial, then we should ask God for wisdom that we may learn and grow in our trials.

There are other types of wisdom such as revealed in the Proverbs. The teachings of the Scriptures give us godly wisdom so that we can exercise our liberty wisely. Having wisdom does not mean that God has laid out a “cannot fail” road map that covers every decision in life. It means that we go about our decision making with motives that have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. For example, the Bible does not tell us what financial investments to make, but it does warn us against greed. Consider what Paul told Timothy: “*But those who*

*want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction*” (1Timothy 6:9). The word “want” is a strong word for the human will. Those who make it their determined purpose to get rich are the subject of Paul’s warning. The underlying wrong motivation leads to a lack of wisdom. People who are so motivated by greed often make foolish decisions trying to “get rich quickly.” The book of Proverbs warns against this.

So wisdom is not God dictating moment by moment decisions by personal revelation. Wisdom is the application of Biblically informed knowledge to life situations. Wisdom often has less to do with making decision A versus decision B, but more to do with the type of attitude we have in making all decisions. For example, James writes further about wisdom:

*Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy (James 3:13-17).*

At issue is not the relative “success” of one’s decisions in obtaining the desired outcome, but the motivations of the heart. A person with “bitter jealousy” is not wise in the Biblical sense whatever decisions he or she makes. On the other hand, the wise person who has the character qualities listed in James 3:17 is still free to make various decisions that are permissible within the realm of Christian liberty. Here again, wisdom is not defined in the Bible as having God dictate moment by moment decisions

