

SALVATION AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD: THE GREAT COMMISSION AS THE EXPRESSION OF THE DIVINE WILL

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

“...but he that believeth not shall be damned.”—Mark 16:16b

Embedded in Mark’s account of the Great Commission is the implied expectation that not everyone to whom the Gospel is offered will accept it, an expectation that history has borne out. The question at hand is why this is so. Is God’s salvific will not done or does God not want everyone to be saved?

There seem to be four options. First, *universalism*—despite present appearances eventually everyone will be saved, either in this life or the next. Second, *double predestination*—God does not desire nor has he ever desired the salvation of the reprobate. Third, God has *two wills—the revealed will and the hidden will*. The Scriptures, in passages such as the Great Commission texts, reveal God’s universal salvific will. But God also has a secret will in which, for reasons known only to him, he has decreed to pass by many. And fourth, God indeed has *two wills—an antecedent will and a consequent will*. God antecedently desires that all be saved, but he consequently wills that faith is a condition to salvation. Only those who believe will be saved.

The first two options understand God to have only one will while the last two alternatives perceive two wills in God. The fourth position, the antecedent/consequent wills view has been the majority position throughout church history. However, theologians from the Reformed perspective generally have rejected the antecedent/consequent wills posi-

¹ This article is a chapter taken from *The Mission of Today’s Church*, ed. by R. Stanton Norman, published by Broadman and Holman, to be released in 2007.

tion because it seems to give the ultimate decision about salvation to man rather than God. This, they contend, denigrates God's sovereignty and threatens the gracious nature of salvation while magnifying human choice. This chapter will examine the four options concerning God's salvific will and shall conclude that the antecedent/consequent wills position has the fewest theological difficulties and is more in keeping with the commands and instructions of the Great Commission. The Great Commission expresses the divine will. The Gospel is to be offered to all; those who believe will be saved.

II. THE FIRST TWO OPTIONS: GOD HAS ONE WILL

Those who emphasize the simplicity of God generally argue that there is only one will in God.² This approach generally requires that God's nature is understood with one divine attribute as the controlling motif by which all other attributes are interpreted. A theology which sees God's fundamental essence as love will be much different from a system based on the assumption of the primacy of the divine will. Whether based on divine love or divine volition, the single will approach has difficulty explaining the rationale behind all components of the Great Commission, namely, that all must hear the Gospel even though all do not believe.

A. OPTION ONE: GOD IS LOVE AND THIS LOVE IS EXPRESSED BY HIS WILL TO SAVE ALL

Obviously, affirming the universal salvific will of God poses no difficulties for the one who believes "God is love" (1 John 4:8) sums up the divine essence. However, this approach logically seems to require universalism or something close to it. This appears to be true regardless of one's position concerning the nature of the human response to the Gospel. In fact, because of how Reformed theologians understand grace to work on the human will, those who affirm God's genuine love and desire of salvation for all tend to embrace universalism even more readily than their Arminian counterparts.

Some significant Arminian theologians wonder aloud if their theological starting point does not necessitate an eventual arrival at universal-

² When theologians speak of the simplicity of God they are referring to his undivided essence. This means there is no division, tension, or conflict within God. God is never in a quandary or has conflicting desires.

ism. In his presidential address to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Al Truesdale examines the question as to whether the doctrine of everlasting punishment is compatible with an affirmation that love is “the defining center of God.”³ Truesdale begins with the claim that love is the “one element of who God is that governs all the rest.”⁴ He proceeds with a five-step argument which deduces that the doctrine of eternal damnation is not an option for the consistent Wesleyan and suggests annihilationism or post-mortem salvation as possible alternatives.⁵ He concludes by admonishing the reader with a quote from Barth, “On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of *every human being* [emphasis original], even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father.”⁶ It is noteworthy that Truesdale builds his argument on the premise that God’s singular will for the salvation of all is the manifestation of God’s simple, undivided essence, which is love.

There are plenty of Arminian theologians who, like Truesdale, affirm God’s universal love and salvific will but do not arrive at his conclusions. And universalism is not found only in Arminianism. Reformed theologians who argue that God’s essential nature of love compels a singular will for the salvation of all also often arrive at universalism. Thomas Talbott serves as a prime example. Where Truesdale attempts to make a positive argument based on the loving nature of God, Talbott takes the negative approach by presenting what he believes are the consequences of denying the premise that God singularly wills the salvation of all.

In a celebrated debate with John Piper that covers a series of articles, Talbott argues that belief in the universal love of God combined with a Reformed understanding of soteriology add up to universalism.⁷ He

³ Al Truesdale, “Holy Love vs. Eternal Hell: The Wesleyan Options,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Spring 2001): 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 103. Truesdale acknowledges that not all Arminians or Wesleyans would agree with his beginning premise.

⁵ Of course, universalism, annihilationism, and post-mortem salvation are not identical positions. However, proponents of each position share the common conviction that the doctrine of everlasting punishment is untenable.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 112. cf. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), 53.

⁷ Talbott’s articles are Thomas Talbott, “On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God: A Polemic,” *Reformed Journal* (Feb 1983):11-15; “God’s

denounces the traditional Reformed doctrine of predestination as “blasphemy” and a “manifestation of human depravity.”⁸

According to Talbott, Reformed theology, with its usual distinction between God’s decrees and God’s commands, produces some very unfortunate consequences for the character of God. God commands us to love our enemies but fails to love his enemies. This would mean that love is not an essential property of God. Reformed soteriology, argues Talbott, presents us with a God who is less loving than many humans and leaves us with the disturbing notion that we might love our children more than God does. Talbott confesses that he finds such a God difficult to love, much less worship. He states,

If there be a single loved one of mine whom God *could* [emphasis original] redeem but doesn’t—if it should turn out, for instance, that God fails to love my own little daughter—then I can think of no better response than a paraphrase of John Stuart Mill: ‘I will not worship such a God, and if such a God can send me to hell for not so worshiping him, then to hell I will go.’ Of course, this may mean simply that I am not one of the elect, or, if I am one of the elect, that God will someday transform my heart so that I can be just as calloused towards my loved ones as he is.⁹

Calloused or not, Talbott considers Calvinism to be sub-Christian. Of those who rejoice in their election, he states, “In this regard their attitude is quite different from that of the Apostle Paul; and in this regard, they illustrate nicely the selfishness built right into the very heart of Calvinistic theology.”¹⁰ In one telling exchange, Talbott challenges Piper by asking him how he would react to the knowledge that God had not elected one of his sons. Piper replies,

But I am not ignorant that God *may* [emphasis original] not have chosen my sons for his sons. And, though I think I would give my life for their salvation, if they should be lost to

Unconditional Mercy: A Reply to John Piper,” *Reformed Journal* (June 1983): 9-13; and “Vessels of Wrath and the Unpardonable Sin: More on Universalism,” *Reformed Journal* (Sep 1983): 10-15.

⁸ Talbott, “On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God: A Polemic,” 11-12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

me, I would not rail against the Almighty. He is God. I am but a man. The Potter has absolute rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and always will do right.¹¹

Though his commitment and candor is impressive, Piper seems to be conceding Talbott's central point that Reformed theology teaches God might not love our children as much as we do.

Talbott argues that since Reformed theology teaches God has the ability to bring salvation to all by a monergistic work of regeneration but has chosen not to do so, then Calvinism is guilty of a number of sins. First, Reformed theology commits blasphemy—because it attributes demonic qualities to God; second, selfishness—because it teaches us to care about our election more than the election of others; and third, rebellion—because it fails to obey the command to love our neighbors as ourselves.¹² Talbott concludes that Reformed theology can be rescued only by its adherents combining the traditional doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace with an affirmation of divine universal love. The result would be universalism and that suits Talbott fine.¹³

Though one is Arminian and the other Calvinist, Truesdale and Talbott make similar arguments. God's loving nature means he has only one desire toward humanity—the redemption of all. Their conclusions exclude understanding Jesus' warning in Mark 16:16, "he who does not believe will be condemned," as referring to eternal punishment.

¹¹ Piper, "How Does A Sovereign God Love? A Reply to Thomas Talbott," 13. Piper's replies can be found at John Piper, "How Does A Sovereign God Love? A Reply to Thomas Talbott," *Reformed Journal* 33:4 (April 1983):9-13; and "Universalism in Romans 9-11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbott," *Reformed Journal*, 33:7 (July 1983): 11-14.

¹² Talbott, "On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God: A Polemic."

¹³ A number of other Reformed universalists make the same argument. Karl Barth, Neal Punt, and Jan Bonda present respective versions of a Reformed universalism. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957); Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); and Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Clark Pinnock observes, "What Augustinians have to do to reach universalism is enlarge the scope of election to include the whole race, and then theologize in their usual way." Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 155.

B. OPTION TWO: GOD IS SOVEREIGN AND THIS IS EXPRESSED BY HIS WILL TO SAVE THE ELECT

Reformed theologians such as Louis Berkhof, Herman Hoeksema, and David Engelsma are called decretal theologians because they see the eternal decrees as the starting point for studying the works of God.¹⁴ Like Truesdale and Talbott, decretal theologians affirm a single will in God, but because they see God's sovereignty as the defining characteristic of God's being they arrive at very different conclusions from those surveyed in the previous section. Decretal theology teaches that God, in eternity, decreed the salvation of a select and definite number. Those chosen are the elect while those rejected are the reprobate. This approach to studying salvation produces the distinctives of Reformed theology: election and reprobation, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and faith as the evidence of salvation rather than the condition for it.

Some decretal theologians hold the choice to save some and damn others to be logically initial and primary. They see the decision to ordain all other events – the Fall, the Atonement, and so on – to be the means by which God accomplishes his first decree to elect and reprobate. This position is called supralapsarianism because it teaches that God decreed a double predestination “before the Fall.” It is worth pointing out that the original Reformers – Zwingli, Luther and Calvin – were all supralapsarian.

Most subsequent decretal theologians have not followed the Reformers down the supralapsarianism path but rather have opted for infralapsarianism. Like the label indicates, this position holds that God first decreed to allow the Fall and then from the fallen race elected those whom he would save. Infralapsarianism attempts to avoid some of the obvious ethical dilemmas inherent in supralapsarianism. In infralapsarianism, God does not damn the reprobate before they fall, but damns

¹⁴ See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949). Berkhof states, “Reformed theology stresses the sovereignty of God in virtue of which He has sovereignly determined from all eternity whatsoever will come to pass, and works His sovereign will in His entire creation, both natural and spiritual, according to his pre-determined plan. It is in full agreement with Paul when he says that God worketh all things after the counsel of His will, Eph. 1:11. For that reason it is but natural in passing from the discussion of the Being of God to that of the works of God, it should begin with a study of the divine decrees. This is the only proper method.” (p 100)

them because they are fallen. Nor in this scheme does God actively ordain the damnation of the reprobate. Rather, when God chooses a select number for salvation, he simply passes over the remainder of humanity. Infralapsarians do not believe the reprobate is ordained for hell; rather, they see the reprobate as omitted from heaven.

Infralapsarians hold to a single decree of election, while supralapsarians teach a double decree of election and reprobation. Theologians generally agree that supralapsarianism has fewer logical problems while infralapsarianism has fewer moral ones.¹⁵ But in the end, whether supralapsarian or infralapsarian, decretal theology teaches that God has only one salvific will and that this intent is to save only his chosen.

Decretal theology produces a distinctive set of corollaries. First, such a view of divine sovereignty requires a denial of God's universal love. Theologians like Hoeksema and Engelsma do not shrink from declaring God's "eternal hatred" for the reprobate. Engelsma declares,

It is not at all surprising that advocates of the free offer oppose the Reformed doctrine of reprobation, for reprobation is the exact, explicit denial that God loves all men, desires to save all men, and conditionally offers them salvation. Reprobation asserts that God eternally hates some men; has immutably decreed their damnation; and has determined to withhold from them Christ, grace, faith, and salvation.¹⁶

Second, decretal theology necessitates a reinterpretation of the biblical texts which seem to teach that God loves all humanity and desires the salvation of all. For example, Francis Turretin (1623-1687), a Reformed scholastic and one of the first clear proponents of infralapsarianism, insists that the love expressed in John 3:16 "cannot be universal towards each and everyone, but special towards a few." It refers "only [to] those chosen out of this world."¹⁷

¹⁵Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 131-32.

¹⁶David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994), 58.

¹⁷Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992) 1:405-08

A modern day decretal theologian, James White, takes a similar approach to the other universal texts.¹⁸ He understands the “all” in 1 Tim 2:4 to mean that God desires the salvation of “all sorts of men” or “from all classes of men.” Likewise, 2 Pet 3:9 means that God is not willing that any of us, i.e., the elect, should perish.

If God loves only the elect, desires salvation only for his chosen, and has provided atonement only for the objects of his love, then a third corollary is inevitable: there is no genuine universal offer of the Gospel. David Engelsma devotes an entire book to the thesis that though the Gospel is preached “promiscuously” to all, it is offered only to the elect. In fact, he does not care much for the word “offer” at all. Preaching does not offer the Gospel. Preaching operates as the instrument by which faith is activated in the elect. The reprobate may hear the Gospel, but its message is not for them. Engelsma contends that his position is not hyper-Calvinism, but consistent Calvinism.

Decretal theology has definite effects on how one understands and obeys the Great Commission and there are consequences to such a system on preaching and missions. First, decretal theology historically has had the effect of causing many Reformed pastors to restrict who are candidates to hear the Gospel. In the 17th century many Scottish theologians argued that the Gospel should be presented indiscriminately only to members of the visible church.¹⁹ Many English Baptists in the 18th century told the Good News only to men whose lives gave evidence of divine grace.²⁰ Following the hyper-Calvinism of Daniel Parker, many American Baptists in the 19th century rejected “duty-faith,” that is, the belief that unbelievers have a duty to repent and believe the Gospel.²¹ Decretal theology led these “hard-shell” or Primitive Baptists to oppose all methods of evangelism, missions, or outreach. Organized evangelistic efforts were seen as “humanly contrived devices” which presumed to

¹⁸ James White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), 127-42.

¹⁹ James Daane, *The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 22.

²⁰ Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: The Olive Tree, 1967), 131-43.

²¹ Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Ghosts,” *First Things* (May 1999): 18-24.

do God's work. Even today, the Gospel Standard (Baptist) Churches reject any responsibility to preach the Gospel to all.²²

Second, even though most decretal theologians of today have turned away from the restrictive postures of earlier hyper-Calvinists, they still do not see preaching as an appeal intended to persuade. For them, preaching is a proclamation or an announcement which activates faith in the elect. Preaching outwardly instructs all, but the inward call of the Spirit is given only to those God has chosen. Engelsma claims that several things in the typical evangelical sermon will be absent from a true Reformed message:

There are several things that will not be found in Reformed preaching to the unconverted. Reformed preaching will not approach the audience with the declaration: 'God loves all of you, and Christ died for all of you.' It will not say to every man: 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.'²³

Third, as James Daane points out in his examination of the effect of the doctrine of reprobation on preaching, decretal theology eviscerates the Gospel of its meaning.²⁴ For many hearers, perhaps most, the announcement is that God has decided to remain at war with them and he made this decision in eternity past. The Gospel is supposed to be good news, but according to the doctrine of reprobation, the message is certainly not new and is not necessarily good.

Ultimately, reprobation is an unpreachable teaching. Preaching is proclaiming the truth for the purpose of calling the hearers to respond. Daane points out that this cannot be done with the doctrine of reprobation; it is a message that has no response.²⁵ The teaching does not apply to the elect and, as for the reprobate, there is no response to the announcement that one is rejected. The doctrine of reprobation declares that there is no saving inward call for the non-elect. No call means no

²² The articles of faith of the Gospel Standard Churches can be found at <http://www.pristinegrace.org/media.php?id=313>. See specifically articles 24-26.

²³ Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel*, 88.

²⁴ Daane, *The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Walls and Dongell point out that in pastoral counseling the doctrine of reprobation is worse than useless. See Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I am not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 186-87.

response and it certainly means no preaching. Reprobation can be contemplated, taught, and discussed, but it cannot be preached.

To sum up this section: if God's will is singular, then either he desires the salvation of all or he does not. As we have seen, starting with the premise of a universal salvific will can launch one into the fantasy of universalism. Positing a denial of any type of universal salvific will can lead one into the slough of reprobation. For these reasons most theologians, Reformed and non-Reformed, have opted instead for a two-will approach.

III. THE THIRD AND FOURTH OPTIONS: GOD HAS TWO WILLS

Most theologians, Reformed or not, have recognized that, in John Piper's words, "God's intention is not simple but complex,"²⁶ or if God's will is simple, it is "fragmented."²⁷ If the sovereign God desires the salvation of all, provides a redemption sufficient for all, but all are not eventually saved yet God's will is ultimately done, then God's will displays a complexity that requires understanding it in stages or phases. Theologians have employed a number of categories to describe God's two wills: God's will of precept, command, or permission is often contrasted with his decretal, sovereign, or efficient will. Most positions are variations on one of two paradigms: either the hidden and the revealed wills approach (option three), or the antecedent and consequent wills view (option four). Generally, Reformed theologians opt for the revealed/hidden wills paradigm while non-Reformed theologians take the latter.

A. OPTION THREE: THE HIDDEN/REVEALED WILLS PARADIGM

In their discussions about divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the Reformers regularly appeal to the hidden/revealed wills position, though Luther embraces the concept much more readily than Calvin. For Luther, the two wills of God are functions of the two ways God relates to

²⁶ Piper, "How Does A Sovereign God Love? A Reply to Thomas Talbot." 11.

²⁷ Robert C. Koons, "Dual Agency: A Thomistic Account of Providence and Human Freedom," *Philosophia Christi* 4:1 (2002): 408-10.

his creation. On the one hand, as *deus revelatus*, God manifests himself to us in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, God as *deus absconditus* hides from creation and since nothing further can be known about the hidden God then nothing further should be said. The revealed will of God, i.e., Jesus Christ, proclaims the Good News that God graciously is for us. The hidden God, with his sovereign and secret will of election and reprobation, remains terrifyingly inaccessible.

Calvin is less than consistent in his use of the revealed/hidden wills paradigm. In theological works such as his reply to the Catholic controversialist Albert Pighius, Calvin denies a genuine universal offer of the Gospel. He states, "It is a puerile fiction by which Pighius interprets grace to mean that God invites all men to salvation despite their being lost in Adam. For Paul clearly distinguishes the foreknown from the others upon whom God did not please to look."²⁸ Calvin denounces the notion that God has two wills as "blasphemy."²⁹

However, Calvin's commentaries present a different story. In those works, he states that 1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9 and Ezek 18:23 plainly teach that God desires the salvation of all humanity.³⁰ There Calvin appeals to the hidden/revealed wills explanation to reconcile his interpretation of the universal texts with his doctrine of double predestination. On this issue at least, one might be forgiven for wondering if Calvin the theologian ever met Calvin the exegete.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1961), 72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-18. Calvin states, "For the distinction commonly made in the schools of a twofold will we by no means admit. The sophists of the Sorbonne talk of a regulative and an absolute will of God. This blasphemy is rightly abhorrent to pious ears but is plausible to Pighius and those like him."

³⁰ See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 246-49, and *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, Vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 419-20. Calvin states, "But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world."

Today, John Piper argues for the hidden/revealed wills paradigm.³¹ He departs from many of his Reformed colleagues when he accepts those texts such as 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; John 3:16; and Ezek 18:23 actually are expressing a desire on God's part for the salvation of all humanity. He recognizes that traditional Reformed exegesis of these verses convince only the already persuaded.

Piper argues that God genuinely wills the salvation of all, but this desire is trumped by the even greater desire to be glorified.³² In order for his grace to receive the fullest expression of glory, it is necessary that he also display his righteous wrath against sin. The full glory of his grace is properly perceived only when seen alongside his holy judgments. Some have been selected by God to be trophies of grace while others are chosen to be examples of his just damnation. Why God selects certain ones for salvation while consigning others to perdition is a mystery hidden in the secret counsels of God.

There are at least six serious problems with the hidden/revealed version of the two wills explanation. First, as Carson points out, too often theologians use the hidden will to negate the revealed will.³³ Luther certainly seems to do this. In his discussion of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem,³⁴ Luther's answer is to appeal to God's hidden will.

Here, God Incarnate says: 'I would, and thou wouldst not.' God Incarnate, I repeat, was sent for this purpose, to will, say, do, suffer, and offer to all men, all that is necessary for salvation; albeit He offends many who, being abandoned or hardened by God's secret will of Majesty, do not receive Him thus willing, speaking, doing and offering.³⁵

³¹ John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved," *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, eds. Schreiner and Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 107-124.

³² *Ibid.*, 123-24.

³³ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 214.

³⁴ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Matt. 23:37 (NKJ)

³⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (London: The Camelot Press, 1957), 189.

Luther points us to the revealed God in Christ but then promptly nullifies the Savior's message by appealing to the hidden God.³⁶

By definition a hidden will is unknown, so how can one speak about it? How can we use something unknown as a theological foundation? Who has the right to declare the revealed will is not God's ultimate will and base this assertion on something admittedly unknowable? Who dares to nullify God's Word? If the hidden will does exist, then could it be hidden because God does not want us to engage with it?

A second problem with the hidden/revealed wills paradigm is just as serious as the first. Christ manifests the revealed will of God, but the revealed will is not always done because it is supplanted by God's secret will which lies hidden in the Father. This leads to the disturbing conclusion that Jesus does not present God as he really is. In his discussion of the two wills in God, Luther makes this very clear:

Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us.³⁷

In the hidden/revealed wills scenario, Christ no longer reveals the Father.

The second problem leads naturally to a third one. Luther describes the secret will of God as "dreadful" and then urges his reader to look to Christ alone.³⁸ But as Barth points out, one cannot teach the hidden will of God and then tell people not to think about it.³⁹ Exhortations to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain only heighten suspicions and concerns. The difficulty the hidden/revealed wills paradigm presents to

³⁶ Calvin takes a similar tack. See *Commentaries on Ezekiel*, 246-49 and *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 419-20.

³⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 175.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 171. "He speaks of the published offer of God's mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty."

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 66.

pastoral ministry is well documented.⁴⁰ If our election resides in the hidden purpose, then what assurance does the revealed Christ offer us? Barth concludes that to look past Jesus is to look into the unknown.⁴¹

A fourth problem with the hidden/revealed wills solution is that it seems to make the preacher appear to be hypocritical. Engelsma highlights this problem when he scolds the Reformed pastor who preaches the revealed will while quietly adhering to a hidden will.

You can now preach to all men that God loves them with a redemptive love and that Christ died for them to save them from their sins, but at the same time you must whisper to yourself, 'But He will actually save only some of you and He will not save others of you according to His own sovereign will.' What you whisper to yourself makes the message of universal love, universal atonement, and a universal desire to save, which you proclaim loudly, a fraud.⁴²

If what we whisper to ourselves makes what we proclaim a fraud, then indeed we are guilty of dissimulation.

Worse yet, the hidden/revealed wills approach appears to make God out to be hypocritical, which is a fifth problem. God universally offers a salvation that he has no intention for all to receive. Reformed soteriology teaches that the Gospel is offered to all, but efficacious grace is given only to the elect.⁴³ The limits of salvation are set by the sovereign

⁴⁰ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985).

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 105.

⁴² Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel*, 41. While Engelsma mocks the Reformed pastor who preaches the universal love of God, Carson speaks sympathetically of the conflict within many. Carson states, "This approach, I contend, must surely come as a relief to young preachers in the Reformed tradition who hunger to preach the Gospel effectively but who do not know how far they can go in saying things such as 'God loves you' to unbelievers. From what I have already said, it is obvious that I have no hesitation in answering this question from young Reformed preachers affirmatively: *Of course* [emphasis original] I tell the unconverted that God loves them." D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 80.

⁴³ Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, "Introduction," *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 12. They state,

and secret choice of God. Numerous times—through the prophets, the Savior, and the apostles—God publicly reveals a desire for Israel’s salvation while secretly seeing to it they will not repent. Calvin, citing Augustine, states that since we do not know who is elect and who is reprobate we should desire the salvation of all.⁴⁴ Shank retorts, “But why? If this be not God’s desire, why should it be Calvin’s? Why does Calvin wish to be more gracious than God?”⁴⁵

Which brings us to a sixth and fundamental objection to the hidden/revealed wills paradigm: it fails to face the very problems it was intended to address. It avoids the very dilemma decretal theology creates. Peterson, in his defense of the Reformed position on God’s two wills states, “God does not save all sinners, for ultimately he does not intend to save all of them. The gift of faith is necessary for salvation, yet for reasons beyond our ken, the gift of faith has not been given to all.”⁴⁶ But then he concludes, “While God commands all to repent and takes no delight in the death of the sinner, all are not saved because it is not God’s intention to give his redeeming grace to all.”⁴⁷ I must be candid and confess that to me the last quote makes no sense.

Let us remember that there is no disagreement about human responsibility. Augustinians, Calvinists, Arminians, and all other orthodox Christians agree that the lost are lost because of their own sin. But that is not the question at hand. The question is not, “Why are the lost lost?” but “Why aren’t the lost saved?” The nasty, awful, “deep, dark, dirty, little secret” of Calvinism is that it teaches there is one and only one answer to the second question, and it is that God does not want them

“Our understanding of God’s saving grace is very different. We contend that Scripture does not teach that all people receive grace in equal measure, even though such a democratic notion is attractive today. What Scripture teaches is that God’s saving grace is set only upon some, namely, those whom, in his great love, he elected long ago to save, and that this grace is necessarily effective in turning them to belief.”

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3:23:14.

⁴⁵ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 166.

⁴⁶ Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, *Why I am not an Arminian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 130.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

saved.⁴⁸ Other theological systems may have similar problems⁴⁹ but Reformed theology has the distinction of making this difficulty the foundational cornerstone for its understanding of salvation.

B. OPTION FOUR: THE ANTECEDENT/CONSEQUENT WILLS PARADIGM

Throughout church history both the Eastern and Western Churches have taught that God desires the salvation of all, but he requires the response of faith on the part of the hearer.⁵⁰ This antecedent/consequent wills approach sees no conflict between the two wills of God. God antecedently wills all to be saved. But for those who refuse to repent and believe, he consequently wills that they should be condemned. In this way God is understood to be like a just judge who desires all to live but who reluctantly orders the execution of a murderer.⁵¹ The antecedent and consequent desires are different but they are not in conflict.

The antecedent/consequent wills position seems to be the clear teaching of Scripture. God antecedently “so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,” that consequently “whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Christ antecedently orders the Gospel preached “to every creature,” but he consequently decrees that “he that believeth not shall be damned.” The antecedent/consequent wills paradigm fits very nicely with the Great Commission.

⁴⁸ See Daane, *The Freedom of God*, 184. Both Dort and Westminster warn about preaching decretal theology publicly. Many thoughtful Calvinists concede that the moral and logical problems with the doctrine of reprobation are irresolvable. See Paul Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 76-77, 99-100; and Thomas Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?” *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 381-82. Both the point and the phrase come from Walls and Dongell, *Why I am not a Calvinist*, 186-87.

⁴⁹ See Jerry Walls, “Is Molinism as Bad as Calvinism?” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), 85-98.

⁵⁰ Thomas Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 112. Oden states that the Church arrived at this consensus concerning God’s two wills through a series of councils: Ephesus (431), Arles (475), Orange (529) and Quiersy (853). Jewett, a Calvinist, concedes that only the Reformed tradition reject the antecedent/consequent wills paradigm. See Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, 98.

⁵¹ John of Damascus seems to be the first to use the analogy of the just judge to explain the congruence of the two wills of God. See Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace*, 83, and Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, 98.

Oden lists four characteristics of the antecedent will of God.⁵² First, it is universal. Salvation is desired for all, provided for all, and offered to all. This unconditional omni-benevolent attitude is truly antecedent in that it is directed to all humanity prior to its acceptance or rejection. Second, the antecedent will is impartial. Christ died for the sins of the whole world. Universal love logically requires unlimited atonement. Third, God's will to save all is sincere. There is no hidden will; no secret decree of reprobation. And fourth, the antecedent will is an ordinate will. It is impossible for God's desire to remain impotent or unfulfilled. The antecedent will to save all is the basis of his actions to provide the means of grace to sinners through Christ.

God's consequent will possesses three components.⁵³ First, it is consistent with the qualities with which he has endowed his creatures. Humans are fallen, but they are still in the image of God, nonetheless. God's grace is not coercive and can be refused. When the hearer encounters the Gospel, he is graciously enabled by the Spirit to respond freely. The hearer's decision to accept or reject the Gospel is genuinely, terrifyingly his. Admittedly, why some reject the Gospel is a mystery. But in the antecedent/consequent paradigm, the mystery of iniquity resides in man rather than God.

The second aspect of God's consequent will follows from the first. If God wills that salvation is consequent to our choice, then this will is conditional. Third, the consequent will is just. God's granting of salvation to those who believe is perfectly consistent with his holy nature because of the propitiatory work of Christ (Rom 3:21-26). His damning of all who will not believe fully accords with his righteousness. God's antecedent will is perfectly gracious; his consequent will is perfectly just.

Generally, Reformed theologians find the antecedent/consequent wills approach unacceptable. They give a number of objections of which three figure most prominently. First, the antecedent/consequent wills paradigm seems to make God's decision contingent upon man's choice. They contend that this approach subtly puts man on God's throne. Berkouwer argues that a salvation that depends upon a decision from man makes God "powerless" and "waiting."⁵⁴ Robert Shank replies that

⁵² Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace*, 83-86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

⁵⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 229.

God may be waiting, but he is not powerless.⁵⁵ In fact, the imagery of God waiting is a rich theme found throughout the Bible (Isa 1:18-20, for example). The antecedent/consequent wills approach understands God to be the sovereign Initiator and gracious Completer of redemption. If man is to choose between heaven and hell, it is because the Lord of Creation has placed the choice before him.

The second objection to the antecedent/consequent wills approach is that it seems to smack of the notion of merit. If all hearers are equally enabled by grace to receive the Gospel, and one person accepts the Message while another person rejects it, then does not this mean that in some way the first person is more virtuous than the second?⁵⁶ This is a difficult objection, but two points should be kept in mind. First, this objection seems to see faith as some sort of work while the Bible consistently contrasts faith from works (Rom 3:21-4:8). Faith, by its very nature, is the opposite of works because it is an admission of a complete lack of merit or ability. The beggar incurs no merit when he opens his hands to receive a free gift.⁵⁷ Second, the mystery is not why some believe, but why all do not believe. This again points to the mystery of evil. There is no merit in accepting the Gospel but there is culpability in rejecting it.

A third objection made by Reformed theologians is that the antecedent/consequent wills paradigm gives “pride of place” to human freewill over God’s glory.⁵⁸ John Piper argues that the hidden/revealed view and

⁵⁵ Shank, *Elect in the Son*, 129.

⁵⁶ See Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 238-39; and Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 318.

⁵⁷ Geisler points out that faith can be viewed as a work only by an equivocation of the word “do.” “Faith is something we ‘do’ in the sense that it involves an act of our will prompted by God’s grace. However, faith is not something we ‘do’ in the sense of a meritorious work necessary for God to give us salvation. Rather, it is something we exercise to *receive* salvation because we could not *do* anything to obtain salvation [emphasis original].” See Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 198.

⁵⁸ Donald Westblade, “Divine Election in the Pauline Literature,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 69-70.

the antecedent/consequent view are basically the same except for one important difference.⁵⁹ Both views contend that God genuinely desires the salvation of all, both views hold that this desire is superceded by an even greater will, but the two views disagree on what that greater will is. Piper states that the hidden/revealed position sees the greater will to be a desire to glorify himself while the antecedent/consequent position understands the greater will to be to give the freedom of self-determination to humans. Piper concludes that the hidden/revealed paradigm does greater justice to the glory of God.

However, in their response to Piper, Walls and Dongell emphasize that proponents of the antecedent/consequent wills position do not affirm a graciously enabled human ability of self-determination for its own sake. Rather, the concern is to portray faithfully God's character. God holds the unbeliever accountable because they have not believed the gospel. Those condemned by God are justly condemned because receiving Christ was a choice genuinely available. Adhering to a doctrine of human self-determination is not an end in of itself. Upholding the integrity of God's character is. Rather than failing to magnify God's glory, the antecedent/consequent wills position glorifies God by maintaining that his dealings are just and consistent with his holy nature.⁶⁰ If the greatest way for humans to bring glory to God is to choose him freely, then the antecedent/consequent wills view best fulfills this goal.

Interestingly, Piper uses the just judge analogy to make his case for the hidden/revealed wills scenario.⁶¹ He gives the specific instance of when George Washington was faced with the difficult dilemma of having one of his favorite officers guilty of a capital crime. Despite his affection for the young man, Washington gave the order for his execution. Piper's illustration actually is an example of the antecedent/consequent wills paradigm, because according to the hidden/revealed wills model, Washington secretly wills the crime of the officer and inclines the young man's will to commit the deed.

⁵⁹ John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 123-24.

⁶⁰ Walls and Dongell, *Why I am not a Calvinist*, 8.

⁶¹ Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 128.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has considered the four options concerning God's salvific will: God has one will that all are saved, God has one will that certain ones are saved, God has two wills—one hidden and the other revealed, and God has two wills—an antecedent will for the salvation of all and a consequent will that faith is the condition to salvation. None of the four positions is without difficulties. However, the antecedent/consequent wills paradigm seems to have the fewest theological problems and be closest to the testimony of Scripture.

The Great Commission is the expression of the divine will. His desire is that the whole world hear the Good News so that those who receive the Gospel might be saved.