

## *The Twofold Will of God*

As I closed the previous chapter, I said that since God in Scripture speaks as if he is a man, we find in God what we can only call a twofold will. Let me explain by making three points:

1. There are two aspects to the one will of God
2. These two aspects of God's will are completely consistent; they make one will
3. These two aspects of God's will, though completely consistent, do not always seem to be so

### *1. There are two aspects to the one will of God*

When we read in Scripture of the will of God, to what does it refer? To one of two things. On the one hand, there is God's absolute decree; on the other, there is God's good pleasure, his desire, that which pleases him.

Some passages speak of God's absolute decree, his inscrutable will which is certain to be fulfilled (Ps. 33:11; Isa. 14:24-27; Dan. 4:24,34-35; Rom. 9:18-19; Eph. 1:11; Rev. 4:11 *etc.*) Other passages speak of the will of God's pleasure or desire, which might not be fulfilled (Ps. 5:4; 40:6; 51:6; 132:13-14; Prov. 16:7; Eccl. 5:4; Hos. 10:10; John 8:29; Rom. 8:8; 1 Cor. 7:32; 10:5; 2 Thess. 1:11; Heb. 11:5-6 *etc.*)<sup>1</sup> For instance, the following must refer to

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<sup>1</sup> But what of Job 23:13? 'Whatever [God's] soul desires, that he does'. Although he used the word 'desire', Job was clearly speaking of God's decree. God 'is unique, and who can make him change? And whatever his soul desires, that he does. For he performs what is appointed for me' (Job 23:13-14). It is the same as Ps. 115:3. Gill, in his comments on Job, having already spoken of God's purposes, counsels and unchangeable will, did refer to what God 'desires earnestly and vehemently'. Gill, however, immediately explained his meaning, by referring to God's counsel, the good pleasure of his will, the doing of what he pleases,

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God's pleasure, that which would please him, that which he has commanded, not his absolute decree, that which he has purposed: Matthew 6:10 (God's absolute will is certain to be done); Matthew 7:21; 12:50; 1 John 2:17 (God's absolute will is fulfilled in all men); Ephesians 5:17; Colossians 1:9 (no man can know or understand God's secret decree); 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Matthew 5:48 (God has commanded his people to be perfect in daily life; he has not decreed it); John 7:17; Ephesians 6:6; 1 Peter 4:2 (a man must want to please God, not merely carry out the inevitable); and so on.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of Calvinists agree with this twofold distinction in the will of God, even though they might use different terms. Perhaps the most common way of describing the distinction is to speak of God's *secret* will and his *revealed* will; that is, God's decree, purpose, determining counsel, on the one hand, and his declared revelation as found in the Bible, on the other. 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us' (Deut. 29:29). The secret things are those things which, unknown to us, God has decreed; the revealed things are those things which he has been pleased to tell us about, including those things which he has commanded us to do. Indeed, some Calvinists describe this twofold aspect as God's will of *purpose* and his will of *precept*.<sup>3</sup> Speaking for myself, I prefer the terms *secret* and *revealed*.

Ella will have none of it. Indeed, he showed nothing but contempt for the very idea, and caricatured it in terms of a 'soap opera' in the Godhead. He dismissed my claim of 'a difference

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illustrating the point by creation, providence and redemption (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.2 p761). God 'does whatever he pleases' (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, a considerable overlap between the two aspects of God's will, and it is not always easy to say into which category a particular passage fits; sometimes it fits both. God's will is too vast for the logic of our puny minds! I will return to this. Nevertheless, in addition to the absolute will of God's decree – which is always fulfilled – the Scriptures do speak of God's will of desire – which is not always fulfilled.

<sup>3</sup> R.B.Kuiper argued for *three* aspects to the will of God: 'His secret or decretive will, his revealed or preceptive will, and what may be termed the will of his desire' (Kuiper p181). To my mind the third is contained in the second.

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between the revealed and secret wills of God [and] also between God's desires in Christ and his decrees as the Father'. Indeed, he cited with approval the reviewer who called my words 'blasphemous'.<sup>4</sup> Leaving aside the caricature, I wonder what Ella makes of Deuteronomy 29:29? But there are other questions. Ella claimed he 'first came across this view'<sup>5</sup> when reading through an article' written by me.<sup>6</sup> If he was saying he had never met the twofold distinction in the will of God before 1994, I can only say I am very surprised indeed. From his published works, I know Ella is a voracious reader, so I find it staggering to think he did not come across it before. I certainly didn't invent the idea!

To remove all misunderstanding, let me remind him – and you, reader – of what I actually said – which Ella quoted, and which he found so offensive:

There are two aspects to the will of God [I wrote]. First, there is his absolute purpose and eternal decree. This is always fulfilled (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 46:10 *etc.*) Secondly, there is God's revealed will, his commands, invitations, the expression of his benevolence. Jesus said that he often desired that which God, clearly, had not decreed. God is perfectly consistent in this even though it is incomprehensible to us.<sup>7</sup>

I stand by my words.

Now let me remind Ella – and you reader – of the weight of material there is which demonstrates how acknowledged Calvinists have clearly set out two aspects to God's will. I have deliberately and ruthlessly limited these examples; the number I could draw on is legion:

Flavel:

As to the will of God, it falls under a twofold consideration of his secret and revealed will. This distinction is found in that Scripture...

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<sup>4</sup> Ella: *The Free Offer* pp20-21. Please remember, reader, that what I say about the paradox between God's decrees and desires applies equally to the Father and the Son.

<sup>5</sup> 'This view' was a caricature of what I actually said.

<sup>6</sup> Ella: *The Free Offer* p20.

<sup>7</sup> Ella: *The Free Offer* p20, quoted from my 'Preaching'.

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Deut. 29:29. The first is the rule of his own actions; the latter of ours.<sup>8</sup>

Owen:

The secret will of God is his eternal, unchangeable purpose concerning all things which he has made, to be brought by certain means to their appointed ends: of this, [he] himself affirms, that ‘his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure’ (Isa. 46:10). This [will] some call the absolute, efficacious will of God, the will of his good pleasure, always fulfilled; and indeed this is the only proper, eternal, constant, immutable will of God, whose order can neither be broken nor its law transgressed, so long as with him there is neither change nor shadow of turning.

On the other hand, said Owen, ‘the revealed will of God does not contain his purpose and decree, but our duty; not what *he* will do according to his good pleasure, but what *we* should do if we will please him; and this, consisting in his word, his precepts and promises, belongs unto us and our children, that we may do the will of God... This is the rule of our obedience’.<sup>9</sup>

Again: ‘The will of God is usually distinguished into his *will intending* and his *will commanding*... [The first is] his purpose, what he will do... [and the second is] his approbation of what we do, with his command thereof’.<sup>10</sup>

Commenting on Matthew 6:10, ‘Your will be done’, Manton said:

God’s will... signifies two things; either his decree concerning future events, or else that which God has revealed concerning our duty; [in other words, either] his intended [will], or [his] commanded will. The first is spoken of, ‘Who has resisted his will?’ (Rom. 9:19); that is, his decree and his purpose; and the second, his revealed pleasure concerning our duty is spoken of, ‘This is the will of God, even your sanctification’ (1 Thess. 4:3). [This second will is] the will not of his purpose, but it is his law, his revealed pleasure. Now it is not meant here [Matt. 6:10] of God’s decree or secret will. Why [not]? [Because] God’s secret will... is not known, therefore how can it be done upon earth? To that [will] all are subject [including] reprobates, devils... Again, we may, without sin, will that which God wills not by his

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<sup>8</sup> Flavel: *Mystery* p185. See same volume pp185-190.

<sup>9</sup> Owen: *Display in Works* Vol.10 p45, emphasis his.

<sup>10</sup> Owen: *Death in Works* Vol.10 p344, emphasis his.

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secret will, as [for example] the life of a sick parent, which God [actually] purposes to take away. Indeed, a man may fulfil this secret will and yet perish for ever, as Judas... Therefore [God's] secret will is not here meant, but the will of God revealed. Therefore let me here distinguish again: The will of God is revealed in two ways, in his word and in his works: the one to be done by us, the other to be done upon us.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Sibbes: 'The secret will of God can be no rule, because it is secret. That which is a rule must be manifest and open. Therefore the revealed will of God, that every one may see, that is our rule. We may cross God's secret will, and [yet] do well<sup>12</sup>... [On the other hand] a wicked man may do [something] according to God's secret will, and yet sin... (Deut. 29:29). The will of God, as it is revealed, must be the rule of our actions. A rule must be open, or else it is no rule'.<sup>13</sup>

Pink: 'We much prefer to adopt the distinction made by the older Calvinists between God's secret and revealed will; or, to state it another way, his disposing and his preceptive will'.<sup>14</sup>

Coming closer to Ella, Brine also rightly distinguished between these two aspects of God's will: 'God's word and not his secret purpose is the rule of our conduct'.<sup>15</sup>

And, above all, Gill, in his turn, did the very same:

There is but one will in God; but for our better understanding it, it may be distinguished... The distinction [between] the secret and revealed will of God has generally obtained among sound divines... Whatever God has determined... that is his secret will... There is the revealed will of God in the gospel; which respects the kind invitations, and gracious regards of God to men... The most accurate distinction of the will of God, is into that of precept and [that of] purpose; or, [into that of] the commanding [will] and [that of the] decreeing will of God. God's will of precept, or his commanding will, is that which is often

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<sup>11</sup> Manton: *Practical* p121.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of a child praying for a sick parent, for instance, referred to by Manton.

<sup>13</sup> Sibbes: *Epitaph* in *Works* Vol.6 p499.

<sup>14</sup> Pink pp243-246. There is plenty more; for instance: Dagg pp99-110; Philip Henry in Williams Part 1 p253; Latimer p369; Bavinck pp236-237,241; Marbury pp365-369; and so on and on.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller: *Worthy* in *Works* p170.

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spoken of in Scripture, as what should be done by men... This is the rule of men's duty... The decreeing will of God [however] is [the] only [one], properly speaking, [which should be called] his will; the other is [properly speaking] his word.<sup>16</sup>

Again: 'God's will is either secret or revealed, purposing or commanding; the one is the rule of his own actions, the other of his creatures; now it oftentimes is so, that what accords with the secret and purposing will of God, is a disobedience to his revealed and commanding will'. Gill quoted Manton with approval: 'Things that are most against [God's] revealed will, fall under the ordination of his secret will; and, whilst men break commandments, they fulfil decrees: his revealed will shows what should be done, his secret will what will be done'.<sup>17</sup>

So why did Ella write so dismissively against the biblical principle? Ella was scathing against 'free offer enthusiasts who with greater or lesser surgical skills strive to dissect the mind of God into its desires and decrees... revealed will and secret will... special love and universal love; common grace and saving grace'.<sup>18</sup> Gill was no 'free offer enthusiast' but even he agreed with much of what Ella dismissed!

### ***2. These two aspects of God's will are completely consistent; they make one will***

Having said what I have about the two aspects of God's will, I do not want to be misunderstood. God's pleasure and his decree do not exist in two watertight compartments; there is considerable overlap; indeed, they are one. The fact that Scripture speaks of the two aspects of God's will, is, in itself, yet another example of God accommodating himself to the smallness of our understanding. But just because God has pitied our feeble limitations, and spoken in this way, we dare not try to reduce or simplify or resolve the will of God into two neat little packages, which we vainly imagine we are big enough to carry in our pocket. God's will is infinite!

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<sup>16</sup> Gill: *Body* Vol.1, pp102-106.

<sup>17</sup> Gill: *Cause* p74; Manton: *Jude* p126.

<sup>18</sup> Ella: *The Free Offer* pp70-71; Gill p289.

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And the two aspects of this infinite will make one will: ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure’ (Isa. 46:10). ‘The good pleasure of his will... according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself’ (Eph. 1:5,9). ‘Now may the God of peace... make you complete in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well pleasing in his sight’ (Heb. 13:20-21). ‘The Spirit... makes intercession according to the will of God’ (Rom. 8:27); that is, ‘agreeably to the will of God, as it pleases him’. Sometimes God’s pleasure is nothing less than his decree (1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 53:10; 55:11; Gal. 1:15; Col. 1:19 *etc.*) God’s will is one.

This must not be forgotten. Although it does not always look like it – since the will of God appears to us to be twofold – the truth is, as Calvin said: ‘God’s will is simple’; that is, it is a unity, it is one.<sup>19</sup> God does not have two contradictory wills; he is not in two minds; he has one consistent will. As Calvin pointed out:

Augustine did... by way of concession and explanation to his adversaries, make mention of a twofold will, or of different wills of God – a secret will, and an open or revealed will – but he so represented that twofold will as to show that they are in such consummate harmony with each other, that the last day will make it most gloriously manifest that there never was, nor is, in this multiform way of God’s workings and doings, the least variance, conflict or contradiction, but the most divine and infinite harmony and oneness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.12 Part 1 p247.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin: *Calvin’s Calvinism* p307. So what did Calvin mean when he said: ‘For as to that distinction commonly held in the schools concerning the twofold will of God, such distinction is by no means admitted by us’? How could he say this when he so clearly held to the twofold will of God? The answer is, Calvin here was rightly dismissing an aberration of the truth, a doctrine taught by ‘the sophists of Sorbon’ which, though ‘plausible and pleasant to the ears of Pighius’, was in fact ‘a blasphemy deservedly abhorred in its sound to all godly ears’; namely, that one aspect of God’s will is ‘ordinate’ and the other ‘absolute’. Calvin deduced that the sophists were saying God’s absolute will is ‘inordinate’ or ‘tyrannical’. Taking this to be the case, Calvin was rightly adamant; there is nothing inordinate about God’s will; he decrees everything ‘with the highest’ or ‘most righteous reason’; man should not proudly try to censure God for, if he does, he will find God’s ‘vengeance is gloriously just!’ As for the two aspects of the one will of God, Calvin was not rejecting the

This is right; the twofold will of God is one consistent whole. Gill agreed: ‘These two wills, though they differ, are not contradictory’.<sup>21</sup>

**3. These two aspects of God’s will, though completely consistent, do not always seem to be so**

As Jerom Zanchius said: ‘Although the will of God, considered in itself, is simply one and the same, yet, in condescension to the present capacities of man, the divine will is very properly distinguished into secret and revealed’.<sup>22</sup> This is the point; even though the will of God ‘is simply one and the same’, we are right to speak of its twofold aspect. More than that, to us there sometimes seems to be a conflict between the two aspects of God’s will, and this is what makes our paradox. Calvin again: ‘Although, therefore, God’s will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned’.<sup>23</sup> As Marbury said: ‘Now sometimes there seems to be an opposition between these two wills

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concept itself. Certainly not! As I have shown, he most definitely held the double aspect of God’s will. Indeed, in so doing, Calvin claimed he was ‘following Augustine and other godly teachers’ in this distinction in the ‘twofold will of God’ (Calvin: *Calvin’s Calvinism* pp118-119,197,266-267). Again, Calvin dismissed the ‘madness’ of ‘unlearned men’ who ‘vainly talk’, showing not only ‘their ignorance in religion, but [who] are also wholly destitute of commonsense’. What did he have in mind? When they tried to reason that since God ‘wills the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4), hence there is no election, which makes a distinction between one man and another’. Calvin gave this short shrift: ‘For what is more absurd than to conclude that there is a twofold will in God, because he speaks otherwise with us than is consistent with his incomprehensible majesty? God’s will then is one and simple, but manifold as to the perceptions of men; for we cannot comprehend his hidden purpose... Hence the Lord accommodates himself to the measure of our capacities’ (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.15 Part 1 p277). This is the point I am making. As it seems to us, as revealed in Scripture, God has a twofold will, but the fact is God’s will is one. We cannot reconcile the twofold will of God – but God has no need to, since he has but one will.

<sup>21</sup> Gill: *Cause* p159.

<sup>22</sup> Zanchius p47.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.12 Part 1 p247.



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of God'.<sup>24</sup> I emphasise the *appears* and the *seems* in all this. To God, there is no conflict whatsoever; the conflict is, as Calvin noted, entirely and only 'as far as our senses are concerned'; it is as it *seems* to us.

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This is the paradox we have to live with. And in doing so, we must remember, as Calvin said: 'Though to our apprehension the will of God is manifold, yet he does not in himself will opposites, but, according to his manifold wisdom... [he] transcends our senses, until such time as it shall be given us to know how he mysteriously wills what now seems to be adverse to his will'.<sup>25</sup> Zanchius illustrated the point: 'Thus it was his revealed will that Pharaoh should let the Israelites go, that Abraham should sacrifice his son, and that Peter should not deny Christ; but, as was proved by the event, it was his secret will that Pharaoh should not let Israel go (Exod. 4:21), that Abraham should not sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:12), and that Peter should deny his Lord (Matt. 26:34)'.<sup>26</sup> The lesson is clear. While we often have to admit our inability to discern God's purpose in events, and often find a paradox, to God there is no inconsistency whatsoever. Meanwhile we, obeying his revealed will, must wait his time to make all things clear to us.

Herman Bavinck, noting that 'God's preceptive will *seems* to be in conflict with his decretive will', applied the principle to the specific case I am dealing with in this book: 'According to the former he wills the salvation of all men, while according to the latter he does not'. But, as Bavinck rightly said: 'It should be observed, however, that the idea of the two wills in God [being] opposed to each other is erroneous'.<sup>27</sup>

Let me continue with my previous quote from Gill:

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<sup>24</sup> Marbury p367.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p257; see also Vol.1 pp202-203. Calvin's words were paraphrased by Pink: God 'mysteriously wills what now seems contrary to his will' (Pink p198).

<sup>26</sup> Zanchius p47.

<sup>27</sup> Bavinck p238, emphasis mine. See also Taylor pp20-21; Owen: *Display* in *Works* Vol.10 pp46-49; and so on.

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These two wills, though they differ, are not contradictory; the purpose of God is from eternity, his command is in time; the one is within himself, the other put forth from himself; the one is always fulfilled, the other seldom; the one cannot be resisted, the other may; the will of command only signifies [that] what is the pleasure of God should be the duty of man, or what he should do, but not what he shall do. Now admitting that it is God's will of command that... all mankind should repent, believe and obey, it does not follow that it is the determining will of God to give grace to all men to repent, believe and obey. Nor does it contradict such a will in God, determining to give grace to some to enable them to repent, believe and obey, and to deny it to others.<sup>28</sup>

Exactly so. Again:

God sometimes wishes that to be done by others which he himself does not think fit to execute... [This desire] is... expressive of what, if done, would be... well-pleasing to him, but not of what is his proper will and determination should be done... God's commanding and approving will is one thing, and his determining will another. In the former sense, God wills what he does not see fit to execute; it is what he commands and approves of, that men should... repent... when he does not see fit to give them the grace to enable them to do these things; but God never wills, that is determines, anything but he sees fit to execute, and does execute, it. Besides, it is one thing for God to will and wish, that is, command, and approve, what is entirely man's duty to do, though he does not see fit to give him grace to execute it.<sup>29</sup>

This is excellent.<sup>30</sup> Sadly, at this point Gill's hyper-Calvinism reared its head, and he drew back. It is altogether 'another thing', he said, 'to will and wish the salvation of all men... which, if he did wish, he would surely see fit to execute'.<sup>31</sup> Why? Why did Gill make this exception? He had just said that there are some things God desires but does not decree. He was right! I gave evidence of it in chapter 6. The salvation of all sinners is a case in point. God

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<sup>28</sup> Gill: *Cause* p159; see also same volume pp154-155. Note how Gill was here conceding that God commands all mankind to repent, believe and obey the gospel. This takes us back to the first question – duty faith.

<sup>29</sup> Gill: *Cause* pp173-174.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, by it Gill effectively destroyed his hyper-Calvinism.

<sup>31</sup> Gill: *Cause* p174. Note, Gill here defined 'will and wish' as 'command, and approve... man's duty'.

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in his revealed will shows that he desires the salvation of all sinners, but it is clear he has not decreed to save them all. It is a particular example of the general truth that God's revealed precept may command or desire a certain thing, while his secret decree is designed to bring about another.

Gouge, speaking of the free offer, hit the nail on the head:

It may safely be granted that the offer is general, because it is made by [and to] such as know not the secret counsel of God. Though there is no contrariety between God's secret and revealed will, yet there is a difference between the determination of God's counsel and [the] dispensation thereof. Many things are determined which are not revealed... In the manner also of revealing God's will, many things are so ordered, as they do not directly declare what is determined... God often conceals part of his counsel purposely, to effect what he intended. To apply this to the point in hand: though Christ is, by the outward dispensation of God's ordinances, offered to all, yet it may not thence be inferred that Christ actually died for all. The offer is made to all, without exception of any, that, among those all, they for whom Christ was indeed given might believe, and others made inexcusable.<sup>32</sup>

While God has eternally decreed the certain salvation of his elect, he has commanded us to offer the gospel fully and freely to every sinner, to the elect and the reprobate alike.<sup>33</sup> God's secret will and purpose determines the salvation of his elect; his revealed will shows his desire that all men should be saved. In Scripture, God has expressed his yearning desire that all sinners should come to repentance and faith, turn from their wicked ways and live; he takes no pleasure in their continued refusal to listen to him and yield to his entreaties. He commands and urges all to repent and believe. Naturally, this is a great deep. We cannot reconcile God's invitations in the gospel – his revealed will of precept or command to all sinners to believe and repent – with the undeniable fact that God does not effectually call all sinners. It is, as I say, a paradox.

Manley Sr:

God is perfectly sincere in his counsels and invitations, notwithstanding his divine foreknowledge of the consequences. That a

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<sup>32</sup> Gouge p668.

<sup>33</sup> In any case, we do not know who is which.

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God of omniscience foresees that one person will repent, and that another will not, must be admitted by all. Yet he offers mercy to all. Now, is God sincere, calling on men to repent, when he knows they will not? Oh yes! He is sincere, and earnest, and has no pleasure in the death of him that dies. Now, can these things be consistent? Facts may show.<sup>34</sup>

Edwards: ‘The Arminians<sup>35</sup> ridicule the distinction between the secret and [the] revealed will of God... the distinction between the decree and [the] law of God, because we say he may decree one thing, and command another. And so, they argue, we hold a contrariety in God, as if one will of his contradicted another. However, if they will call this a contradiction of wills, we know that there is such a thing;<sup>36</sup> so that it is the greatest absurdity to dispute about it’.<sup>37</sup>

In short, it is perfectly proper to say that God desires the salvation of all men, and yet assert that he has not decreed that all men shall be saved. Adapting Manley’s words: Facts do indeed show! This is a paradox to us, but to God it is not.

The question is: What are we to do with this paradox?

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<sup>34</sup> *Southern Baptist Sermons* p27.

<sup>35</sup> They are not alone. Some hyper-Calvinists do it too!

<sup>36</sup> Edwards was not saying that there is a contradiction in the two wills of God; rather, though these two wills may *seem* to contradict each other, nevertheless there is no contradiction in God.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards illustrated the point from Abraham and Isaac, Pharaoh, Absalom, Jeroboam, the crucifixion of Christ, and so on (Edwards pp526-529).