

# Does God Have Two Contradictory Wills?

Some sincere Reformed believers have a real problem trying to harmonise certain scriptural statements about God. They read that God is said to love the world or desire the redemption of 'all' and so they see a problem. How does this fit in with the clear Biblical teaching that God only elects some and that Jesus only gave his life for the sheep and not the goats?

They then make the mistake of Uzzah. You remember that Uzzah tried to steady the ark when the oxen carrying it stumbled. He was sincere, he was zealous - and he was struck dead (2 Sam 6:6-7). Uzzah seems to readers to be a good man, seeking the Lord's testimony; but God says that he was struck dead for his error. The whole situation was a mess, the ark should never have been on a cart, even a new cart, anyway. God's word had been ignored and the situation deteriorated into death. Two things come out of this: sincerity does not guarantee truth, and God doesn't need any man to steady his own testimony. He is quite capable of doing that himself. Our job is just to obey his word.

If God's word appears to be mysterious, either seek to understand the statements correctly in a Biblical context, or let them stand as they are and leave it to the Lord. Don't invent new doctrines and don't invent new rules of interpretation such a 'paradox'. Sadly this is what has happened.

## The mistakes

Sincere believers make various suggestions in their efforts to solve the apparent contradiction.

Historically, some evangelicals taught an Arminian Gospel. The essence of this Gospel is universal grace, universal atonement and man's strength: God loves everyone, Christ died for everyone, God wants everyone to be saved; it is then up to man to exercise his free will to choose Christ and repent.

Some French teachers later tried to unify these Arminian universalistic principles with Calvinism, producing Amyraldism. God loves everyone, decrees salvation for all and Christ died for everyone, so men just have to believe. Since men don't believe, God gives faith to the elect. [Obviously it is a confused and contradictory system - all can be saved by their own strength, but only the elect are saved by particular grace.]

The main error in Reformed churches today is rooted more in Amyraldism than Calvinism. This is the universalistic notion that God loves everyone and desires the salvation of all. The death of Christ is sufficient for all, even if only effective for some. Calvinists holding this notion, despite claiming to believe in election, then find themselves preaching a perverted Gospel. This is called by various names: the 'well-meant offer', the 'free offer', the 'sincere offer' and so on. It teaches that when the Gospel is preached God intends and desires the salvation of reprobates. How can God love those he hates? How can he desire the salvation of those he has damned?

Some try to solve the apparent problem by saying that the Bible contains many examples of doctrinal paradox, where two opposite things are both stated to be true: God loves everyone, but he only saves a limited number, whom he loves more. Hate really means, 'to love less' (it doesn't). God wants all men to be saved in his heart; but only effectually wills

a limited number to be actually saved. This sort of reasoning is fallacious and foolish. If the Bible is full of such paradoxes, how can we ever be sure what is correct?

Such a 'paradox' is more commonly stated today as God having two contradictory wills. People affirm this with confidence as a number of eminent theologians and commentators have taught two wills in God in the past.

The two wills in God have been given various names. There is validity in theologians analysing the different aspects of God's will as we see it (see Appendix One); but the error is to suggest two contradictory wills in God to explain why God only saves some, but says he wants to save all. Theologians suggest:

1. *Decretive will* (God's plan and purpose). Versus *Preceptive will* (God's precepts, commands).
2. *Decretive will* - God's will of decree, that which is certain to be done (e.g. the decree to save the elect). Versus *Permissive will*, what God permits, (God permits people to reject the Gospel).
3. *God's absolute will* - equals God's decretive will, what God holds most dear (the elect are saved). Versus *God's will of desire*, or complacential will; God's innate good character, what God wants to happen, but doesn't always happen (he would love everyone to be saved). God has desires that are not achieved (such as the happiness of his people).
4. *Secret will* - equals God's decretive will that is invisible to us (we don't know who are elect). Versus *Revealed will* - the testimony of the Gospel message (salvation offered to everyone).

There are others.<sup>1</sup>

Some examples of these

*God wills that sickness should be relieved, and sorrow mitigated, and that the oppressed go free, because it is agreeable to his nature; though it is not true that he wills it in the sense that he exerts his absolute power to produce it. A parent wills the welfare of his child. It is in accordance with his nature...(but) if the child is not virtuous, it is his own fault.*

Albert Barnes; *Notes on the NT*, Vol 8; Blackie & Son, p130.

*When it said in the text that God will have all men to be saved ... and in the same sense 2 Pt 3:9 we must understand it not with respect to his decretive will but to his complacential will, that is the repentance and life of a sinner is very pleasing to his holiness and mercy.*

Matthew Poole; *Comm. on the Bible*, Vol 3; Banner of Truth (1969) p777.

*God willeth, to wit, with a will whereby he inviteth, and putteth no bar; not with a will whereby he effecteth it.*

John Trapp; *Comm. on the NT*, Baker (1981) p639.

*We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God's will.*

I Howard Marshall; *Pastoral Epistles*, on 1 Tim 2:4

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<sup>1</sup> Such as: sovereign will vs. moral will, efficient will vs. permissive will, *voluntas signi* (will of sign) and *voluntas beneplaciti* (will of good pleasure). See Appendix One on decretive will and preceptive will.

The key problem with defenders of the free offer is that they conceive of a plan of God whereby he intends the salvation of all, but underneath there is a deeper plan whereby God only works the salvation of some. This posits contradiction in God.

As David Engelsma says,

*Reformed theology will not permit those who maintain both a sincere desire of God to save all and the decree of election, that is, the defenders of the offer, to find any refuge in their distinction between two wills in God. The 'paradox' behind which they hide at the crucial moment is not a Biblical Reformed 'paradox', but absurdity, absurdity which serves to introduce conflict into the Being and decree of God and the heresy of universal grace into the Reformed churches.*  
*Hyper Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel, RFPA, (1980) p185.*

### Teaching a contradictory will misrepresents God

God is God. God's desires are always fulfilled because he is God; they must have a final conclusion. Everything God desires is achieved or God would cease to be sovereign. A god that desires something but fails to achieve it is not the God of the Bible. A God that is thwarted by men rejecting him is not the Christian's God. The Bible clearly states that God's will is always accomplished.

- I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does *it*, that men should fear before Him. (Eccles 3:14)
- Who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed. (Job 23:13-14).
- The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations. (Ps 33:11)
- There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD's counsel -- that will stand. (Prov 19:21)
- *There is* no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD. (Prov 21:30)
- My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure. (Isa 46:10)
- He does according to His will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?' (Dan 4:35)

God's attributes include unity, immutability and simplicity. God cannot be divided, cannot change and cannot suffer contradiction. What he is in himself and what he is in his revelation are indivisible. Yet many Reformed teachers these days suggest that God not only has two wills, but also two types of love, two purposes and two attitudes to the reprobate. He wills their salvation, then he doesn't. He loves them, then he doesn't. He desires their salvation, then he damns them. He offers them salvation, but without any power so he knows there is no chance of them receiving it. God also changes from love to hate, from offering salvation to sentencing wrath, from desire to desertion. What kind of God is this?

If God really desired the salvation of everyone, then there would be no hell.

Any apparent (not real) paradox in the Bible must be explained on the basis of God's self-revelation. God's innate desires for man's happiness and health, for instance, *will* have a final conclusion for we are told that these are the characteristics of heaven (Rev 22:2, 3; 21:4). Scripture tells us that God's innate desire for the good of man are ultimately established in the new earth, not here. An apparent paradox cannot be the foundation of false doctrine or misrepresenting God.

## Does God have two contradictory wills?

There is no indication in scripture of a double will in God. As far as salvation is concerned, there is one, single divine purpose running throughout redemption history; that is to save the elect, who are God's covenant people; a bride for his Son, and a testimony to God. There is no indication of any attempt to save the non-elect (reprobate), neither is there any declaration of love for them; on the contrary, God is said to hate the wicked.

The idea of God's two opposing wills is necessary to fix an imaginary problem. This problem is that God truly offers salvation to everyone, that Christ died for everyone and that God loves everyone, but only the elect are saved. However, there is no problem, and no need for two opposing wills in God, if Christ did not die for everyone and that God does not desire/intend the salvation of reprobates. Thus the sincere offer of salvation to all is a charade and there is no need to suggest two contrary wills in God.

There are massive theological problems caused by 'Calvinists' who believe that God genuinely offers salvation to all.

- How can salvation be offered to those for whom Christ did not die, unless the offer is a lie? [For this reason many have abandoned limited atonement, a key strand of Calvinism.]
- It means that God is deceiving the reprobate by offering a salvation that they can never have.
- It means that God does something imperfectly – he offers people something which cannot be fulfilled; he also loves certain people but that love then fails.
- Trying to get around this, some pervert the concept of a secret and a revealed will in God, whereby he genuinely desires the salvation of all and offers grace to all (revealed will) but only gives it to some (secret will for the elect). But this means that God both loves and hates the same people, either:
  - Perfectly at the same time (he loves the reprobate even though he has predestined him to condemnation, thus positing confusion in God),
  - Imperfectly in various qualities (he loves the reprobate with a lesser love than the elect, thus positing God's love is divided)
  - At different times (he loves the reprobate in time but hates them in hell, positing a change in God).

Clearly, the concept of two contradictory wills in God solves no problems but poses many new ones; all of which demean the glory of God. It is a concept that should be rejected as false.

## Conclusion

There is a genuine way to analyse God's will and understand manifold expressions in it (see Appendix One), but the idea that there are two contradictory wills opposing each other in God is both false and dangerous, not to say blasphemous. The cause of the problem is that Reformed teachers have espoused Arminian principles of universalism to produce the well-meant or free offer in the Gospel; that God genuinely seeks the salvation of all who hear it because he loves everyone.

If we are consistent Calvinists and stick to Biblical principles, there is no problem. God does not love everyone. Scripture never says he does but it says he hates some (Ps 11:5; Rm 9:13). Jesus did not die for everyone, but died for his people (Matt 1:21, 20:28; Jn 10:15; Acts 20:28). Only those chosen by God in eternity will be given grace to believe and

repent (Eph 1:4-5; 2 Tim 1:9; 2 Thess 2:13). Those who are not elect are reprobated by God and will demonstrate his wrath and justice (Prov 16:4; Rm 9:22; 1 Pt 2:8; 2 Pt 2:9; Jude 4).

Any scriptures that seem to contradict this must be carefully interpreted in context and, when this is done properly, there is no ground for universalism at all (see Appendix Two for some key problematic texts).

Modern Calvinists should consider their heritage; they would have no support from the Reformers in suggesting two wills in God. The notion of a double will in God was anathema to Calvin:

*Nothing is less accordant with the nature of God that he should have a double will ... He does not in himself will opposites.*

John Calvin, *Institutes* 3:24,17.

*The will of God is immutable, and his truth is always consistent with itself.*

John Calvin, *Institutes* 3:2,12

The idea of a contradictory will was also anathema for Calvin's later successor:

*The will of God is only one and most simple.*

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, Page 220

Turretin was so vigorously opposed to the growing Amyraldism of his day that he wrote the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675, with John Heidegger, as a confession to specifically confront its errors and reaffirm the formulas of the Synod of Dort.

The concept of God having two opposing wills was hateful even for the Dutch theologian that many modern Amyraldians try to use for support:

*[To] ascribe to God something actually absurd by placing at the same time, in the very same decree, yes and no, ... should be resisted with all our strength.*

Abraham Kuyper, *Particular Grace*, RFPA, (2001) p80.

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## Appendix One

### Theological Technical Note:

Theologians talk about a theological distinction, not dichotomy, in our perception of God's will and have done since the before the Reformation. Often this is stated as operating between God's prescriptive / preceptive will (will of command) and his decretive will of purpose. God's prescriptive will is his precept or command to men. God's decree is his power applied to achieve his will, purpose. His preceptive will is what we should do, God's law, which is often violated; his decretive will is what he will do, the decree that always comes to pass.

God's prescriptive will is, [God] now commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30); this is his will of command. His decretive will is that he has decreed the repentance only of the elect. There is no contradiction here. God commands all men to repent; but he decrees the salvation of the elect, who do repent, and he decrees the condemnation of the reprobate, who do not repent.

After saying that God's will; is unified, the great Calvinist theologian Turretin then explains the difference between God's decretive will and God's preceptive will:

*Although the will in God is only one ... yet because it is occupied differently about various objects, it thus happens that in our manner of conception, it may be apprehended as manifold ... Hence have arisen various distinctions of the will of God. The first and principal is that of the decretive and preceptive will. (Inst. Vol 1. p220)*

God's will is unified and simple, but to our sight it appears complex.

So, in scripture, God's will is sometimes referring to the absolute decree, and sometimes God's commands to men:

<b>Will of Decree</b>	<b>Will of precept</b>
For who has resisted His will? Rm 9:19	Teach me to do Your will. Ps 143:10
Being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. Eph 1:11	Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what <i>is</i> that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Rm 12:2
For <i>it is</i> better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 1 Pt 3:17	For this is the will of God ... doing good. 1 Pt 2:15
Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls <i>to Him</i> . 1 Pt 4:19	He no longer should live the rest of <i>his</i> time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. 1 Pt 4:2
Election	Repent and believe.
God hardened Pharaoh's heart and held the Isrealites.	God commanded Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.
God foreordained the adultery of David with Bathsheba and that she should be Solomon's mother.	Do not commit adultery.

In analysing these differences, theologians have used various names to identify the manifold aspects of God's will. These are more or less helpful, but decretive and preceptive will is probably the most useful. However, this does not support any notion of a contradictory will in God.

The error of supporters of the free offer is to use this technical division to teach a contradiction in God. This was not done by historical, sound theologians and there is no Biblical support for it. Indeed, it verges on blasphemy to teach contradiction in God. Reformed theologians taught this technical division in God's will, but condemned Amyraldism and any idea that God intended the salvation of reprobates.

Also one cannot infer God's intention or desire from his command. He commanded Pharaoh to release his people while his intention was that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. God's command showed Pharaoh his duty, freeing the Hebrew slaves was pleasing to God. This hardened Pharaoh in his sin and certified his condemnation.

The same is true in the Gospel. Responsibility does not imply ability. God commands all men to repent (Acts 17:30), but all men cannot repent because they will never receive the grace to do so. God's command that all believe does not show an intention that he will give faith to all. This is where the advocates of the free offer go astray. They understand the universal command to believe and repent as indicating a universalism in the atonement and a love of God to all. But the Gospel has a double effect; it brings light and life to the elect, but it also hardens the reprobate. The elect obey the Gospel command to believe and repent, but the reprobate are hardened and are further condemned.

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## Appendix Two

### Problem Texts

The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2Pt 3:9)

Peter is clearly referring to the elect here. He is talking about 'us', the one's God is longsuffering towards; the ones the promises relate to, the one's called 'beloved' in the previous verse. If Peter really meant that all would come to repentance, then there would be no hell and Peter would be teaching universalism, which we know he did not hold. Peter had harsh things to say about the wicked who are not elect; in fact, Peter speaks of the wicked only a few verses later (v17). In chapter two there is a long condemnation of the reprobate; of these he says, **God will reserve the unjust under punishment for the Day of Judgment (2:9)**. The reprobate are reserved for condemnation because they are not chosen to life.

The context of this verse is Peter's encouragement about the coming of the Lord and his point here is to confirm that Christ will not return until all the elect of God are saved. Since the full number of God's people has not yet been born, the Second Coming is delayed. God will hold back the Last Day until all his chosen people come to repentance.

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**I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! (Ezek 33:11)**

**'Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord GOD, 'and not that he should turn from his ways and live?' (Ezek 18:23)**

God commands all people to turn, to repent. It gives him pleasure when they do. Those that turn are saved and are thus elect since repentance is a grace gift of God. Those that do not repent will die eternally. The Ezekiel passages particularly emphasise a distinction in salvation, not a universal desire for salvation. God's justice is seen in the condemnation of the wicked, but this does not give him pleasure. We should simply leave these passages to say what they say.

God does not gain pleasure from the death of anyone and thus has chosen some to eternal life in his great mercy. Those who choose to sin are left to judgment. The death of his own Son gave him no pleasure, but he allowed it because it glorified himself. God genuinely doesn't enjoy the death of anyone, but since all men by nature refuse him, he has sovereignly chosen some to life.

No Calvinist denies that God has no pleasure in the death of men and is pleased with man's repentance. This is all these texts say. There is no hint here that God desires, wills and intends the salvation of all.

*Such passages simply assert the essential benevolence of God. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He does take pleasure in the salvation of men. Yet as a matter of fact, in perfect consistency his benevolence, for reasons sufficient, though not revealed to us, he has provided no redemption for lost angels, and no efficacious grace for the non-elect of mankind.*

A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*; Nelson (1883) p227

Perhaps we can look at this theologically. The word 'pleasure' is the Hebrew word #pex' *chaphets* (Strong's 2654) meaning to take delight in, pleasure in. This same word is used of the Lord's desire to kill Eli's sons for their sin, **The LORD *desired* to kill them.** (1 Sam 2:25). How do we square this? God doesn't desire the death of the wicked one minute, but does the next. We must try to imagine God's purposes in eternity where he sees all things and determines the future on Earth.

In general terms God looked upon the world of men, full of sin and rebellion, where their end is death and hell. He does not take pleasure in this; death is an aberration, an affront to God the creator of life. It is the fulness of sin that causes death and it is abhorrent. In his mercy, God determined to rescue a portion of mankind and undertook for them to bring hope and life to the world. God didn't need to do this, he could have destroyed the world and started anew, but in his love he chose to give grace and sonship to the elect. These elect people are saved and glorified through God's sovereign grace.

But God's justice must also be fulfilled, and sin must be condemned. So hell is decreed as the punishment for sin. Those who are not chosen for salvation are left in sin and must suffer condemnation. Since Eli's sons were clearly reprobate, God desired their death, as he desires the death of all decreed to wrath.

God's taking no pleasure in the death of the wicked generally led to his election of some to life. His testimony of justice and wrath against sin leads to his specific desire for the death and condemnation of reprobates.

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