

Seventh Thesis

If God has a will, it does not include children being killed by drunk drivers, people dying from cancer or earthquakes.

Just before I started to college, the husband of the woman who taught me English three out of the four years I was in high school was killed. He was a highway engineer and, as I recall it, he was struck by a speeding vehicle while working on the expansion of I-85 north of Charlotte. I went to the viewing and the funeral and I remember her telling me later that she had heard quite enough of people insisting to her that God had killed her husband. “Oh, it’s God’s will.” “God took him to be with him in heaven.” Even at the tender age of 18, I understood and agreed with her evaluation. It wasn’t God driving that car.

I have wondered from time to time in my life how many people have turned away from the church because some well-meaning soul told the parents of a child who died young from disease or malfeasance or just by accident that God had willed their child to die. Who could continue to worship a god who had willed their child to die? I suppose there are those but I also believe that even in the best of circumstances such a parent would retain an anger of massive proportions toward God if they truly believe that God willed their child to die. Who, in fact, would worship a God who had killed that God’s own child? And even if you’d worship such a God would you let him babysit your child?

The whole concept of “God’s will” was an albatross for me in my earlier religious life. If God willed everything to happen the way it does then why did I have to “make a decision for Jesus” as I sometimes heard it put. If God’s will held sway, then why didn’t God just take care of it for me? And, in fact, I learned later that Calvin agreed with me. He thought that God did make those decisions. (Let’s face it; there are no real Calvinists left. The Presbyterians, by and large, have bought into the general American Christian myth that God is an accountant and we all have to apply for salvation. What the world needs is a few good thoroughgoing Calvinists, *n’est ce pas?*) It seemed to me, growing up, that either God had a will that controlled everything OR I had to decide to accept Jesus – but not both. How could it be both? I was confused.

Then as I started to pay more attention to sermons as I grew, I just got more and more confused. I heard lots of preachers (many of them less than eloquent or logical in their deliveries) tell me about God’s “permissive will” and God’s “perfect will”. As far as I understand it (which I admit is not far), “perfect will” is the will of God that we can’t change no matter what. I can’t tell that there’s much rhyme or reason about this concept of “perfect will”. Sometimes someone dying might be God’s perfect will. That person had to die in order to help accomplish something in God’s perfect will. Sometimes a car accident is God’s perfect will. Sometimes a natural disaster is God’s perfect will. But not all of the time. Sometimes someone’s death is someone else’s fault (rather than God’s). I think it sort of depends on what God’s goal is. Or maybe it depends on whether the person determining whether it was perfect or permissive will loved the person who died. To tell the truth it is all but incomprehensible.

God’s permissive will, on the other hand, is supposedly that stuff that God would really like to happen but he’s decided to throw us a bone and let us have a say in it. That would be the will of

the Burger King of Kings – we can have it our way. So we can choose to obey God’s permissive will or we can blow God off and do whatever we want and God won’t interfere. So sometimes a child dying at the hands of a drunk driver is part of God’s permissive will – i.e., God allowed the drunk driver to decide to drink and then drive and the child was killed. Whoops. Sometimes cancer is part of permissive will – someone decides to smoke and gets cancer and dies. So sorry. I never understood the part about natural disaster because it seemed to me that they should be just perfect will but I never heard anyone take that position consistently. If Billy Graham had built his house on the San Andreas Fault would God have prevented the fault from moving whenever the Grahams were in residence? Hmmmm.

I was always flabbergasted, I think, that nobody talking about these various types of will thought that maybe God should have made the salvation of his beloved children part of his perfect will. I mean, really. God would cause you to have a serious disease as a child as part of his perfect will so that when you grew up you’d have certain attributes?? but would neglect to be sure you were going to spend eternity in heaven? Geez. That seems kind of harsh to me. Not to mention the level of cruelty that seems inherent in allowing a drunk driver to kill someone’s loved one. Or dropping a plane on your house. Or dropping the plane you’re in on someone else’s house.

And yes, certainly, I heard folks quote from Job, God asking where we were when God created the hippo. But I found that less than compelling. Okay, fine. I wasn’t around when God created the hippo and I don’t understand everything or have all power and all knowledge. But I think I’m perfectly within my rights as a citizen of creation to question the sanity of a god who behaves like I was led to believe God behaves. Killing someone here, but making someone over there filthy rich. I don’t think knowing how (or why) to create a hippo has much to do with having some inkling about the moral value of rubbing out a kid on a tricycle.

It seems to me that the whole permissive/perfect will conversation results from a conflict in religious thought between on the one hand, the conservative Christian concept that God is in control of everything and has a plan and on the other hand, the perception humans tend to have that they can make decisions for themselves. I have spoken very briefly in an earlier article about free will. I have a friend who posits that there isn’t any such thing. And when I bother to think about it I understand why he may be correct. But most of us, I think, do at least perceive ourselves to have choices. We believe that we’re making decisions. And I think that if you perceive that you have free will then you may as well act as though you do even if free will is indefensible philosophically.

So if God has all power and all knowledge and is everywhere, but we can see that not everyone is a Christian (and conservatives can see very clearly that not everyone is Christian like they are – which to them means not at all), then there has to be an escape valve for God. There has to be a reason why an all-powerful God isn’t worshipped by each and every living thing in creation. And so you have this concept of permissive will. God allows us to burn in hell if we choose to (although, God help me, who would really choose to if you had all the necessary information to make that decision I don’t know). I think conservative Christians have even made the decision to lessen an emphasis on God’s love for this reason. An infinitely loving God couldn’t let his children suffer forever no matter what, could he? So the conservative God is at least as much

“just” as he is “loving”. So – if we break the rules or make the wrong choices then God’s justice requires that we pay the penalty. And what a penalty it is!

For my part, I have resolved my dilemma by acknowledging that the concept of God having an all-encompassing will that plans out the span of human existence, including each and every detail of each person’s life, is untenable. (Although to be fair, my friend who believes there is no free will is probably much closer to believing in the equivalent of an all-encompassing “will” because he thinks that we do what we have to do and have no real choices to make. Isn’t it odd that my atheist (or so he claims) friend is more likely to accept something that looks very much like “God’s will” than I am?)

Just as an aside, I think the problem of an omniscient God plays in here also. Briefly, if God knows everything (is God a teenager?) then God knows everything that has happened and will happen. And if God created time, then God is outside of time and therefore, you’d think, would perceive creation as a whole, not as a temporal progression. I didn’t come up with this, of course. I think Augustine described it as God viewing a scroll rolled out on which all of time is recorded – but God sees the whole scroll. That would mean that God knows what is going to happen to me a week from next Tuesday, but God is not predicting the future, God is outside of time altogether. Did that help? (I can’t say it helped me.) But if God is outside of time and sees all of creation at once – for instance, God sees my entire life spread out over an unrolled scroll – then God knows everything I have done and will do. God knows how my life ends up. No free will really, right? And again, if God sees disaster looming on my temporal horizon and doesn’t (or can’t?) do anything, then does God love me? or is God powerless over that scroll of time? I digress.

Concurrent with my faithful disbelief in anything conceptually like the “Will of God” I encountered in my formative years, I do believe that “salvation” (which I will address in later articles) is entirely under God’s control. Weird, huh? I never promised consistency or rose gardens. I don’t think that God has to have a will in order to act. And if God offers grace, God can decide who receives that grace without having to get consent from the recipients. Actually, I think the concept that we have to accept salvation fits right in with the substitutionary atonement theory. If God is, in fact, an accountant, and we owe God something in exchange for our wretched sinfulness, and God has offered us a bailout plan (i.e., Jesus), then it makes sense that the bailout plan would be in the form of handing out offers that we must then accept. And, okay, I’m off topic now, but if conservative Christians see their own salvation as a bailout plan then why are they so upset about the fiscal bailouts the government is currently throwing about. Er. Excuse me.

In the end, I think that God is God and we can only know what we can know about God through experience and interpretation. I have certain experiences and I interpret them as experiences of God. I know many people in the world who interpret the same things as scientific phenomena (even if they are unexplained phenomena) or as physiological reactions to unknown stimuli. It’s all good. Of course, most of those scientific types are just as fundamentalist about their interpretations as the most strident fundamentalist Christian, but God and I love them anyway. I don’t think we know God through the experience of God’s will. Even if the will some Christians sometimes espouse were true, it would be incomprehensible – not discernibly different from the

will of Zeus or Hera. So I live and let live and pray that the people around me with all the answers will let me live as well.