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EDITORIAL: A CRITIQUE OF SAM WALDRON'S *THE CRUX OF THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL*

Rev. Martyn McGeown

Introduction

Sam Waldron's book, *The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel* (2019), with endorsements from such evangelical heavyweights as Paul Washer, Joel Beeke, Richard D. Phillips and Jeffrey Smith, is rare among books on the free offer of the gospel, in that it mentions, although it does not interact with the arguments of, the theologians of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and, therefore, with the friends of the Protestant Reformed Churches, such as the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF). It is nice to be acknowledged for once, since usually in books on this subject we are ignored, although we are the leading theological opponents of the well-meant offer in the modern church.

Waldron identifies three classes of Calvinists. The "first class" includes Joseph Hussey, John Gill and the Gospel Standard Strict Baptist Churches, whom we would also classify as classic hyper-Calvinists, for they deny duty faith and duty repentance. The "second class" includes Herman Hoeksema, Herman Hanko and David Engelsma—and the BRF. The "third class" includes the Marrow Men, Thomas Boston, Andrew Fuller, Ned Stonehouse, John Murray, the Majority Report of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Waldron advocates "third class" Calvinism. These types of Calvinists differ on how they answer two basic questions: "Does God command faith and salvation of the non-elect?" and "Does God desire faith and salvation of the non-elect?" The "first class" Calvinist answers "No" to both questions; the "third class" Calvinist answers "Yes" to both questions; and the "second class" Calvinist answers "Yes" to the first question but "No" to the second question.

We answer "Yes" to the first question but "No" to the second question.

Waldron's main point throughout the book is that if God has commanded something, He must also desire it. Therefore, since God commands all who

hear the preaching of the gospel to repent and believe, He must desire the salvation of all hearers of the gospel. For Waldron, therefore, God's will of command is synonymous with His desire.

To answer Waldron's argument we need to define our terms, beginning with God's will.

The Will of God: The Sovereign Determination of His Infinite Mind

I define God's will as follows: God's will is the sovereign determination of His infinite mind concerning all things. First, God has determined that the creature exists: "thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). Second, God has determined which creatures exist and how they relate to one another: "[God hath] determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). Third, God has determined the end of all creatures so that they serve Him and His glory: "the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11).

God's will, which is the sovereign determination of His infinite mind, is not like our wills. We, too, since we are rational, moral creatures, have wills. We determine things for ourselves and for other creatures. Nevertheless, our will, unlike God's will, is not sovereign and perfectly free, for it is the will of a creature. Our will is subject to God's will, which is the sovereign determination of God's infinite mind concerning us and our lives. Paul explained to the philosophers of Athens: "[God hath] determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26).

Take a concrete example. God determined that the Greek philosopher Socrates should be born in Athens in about 470 BC (historians do not know the day of his birth, but God knows and determined it with exactitude) and would spend his life in Greece. God also determined that Socrates would die in 399 BC of hemlock poisoning administered by his own hand at the command of the authorities of Athens. Crucially, God also determined that Socrates would never hear or believe the gospel of Christ but would perish everlastingly in hell for his sins, as a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction (Rom. 9:22). God did not purpose the salvation of Socrates; God did not decree the salvation

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of Socrates; and God did not will the salvation of Socrates. In other words, Socrates was reprobate.

God never acts involuntarily but always purposefully. God never acts reluctantly but what God does, He does willingly. God never acts under compulsion, for no one compels Him to act contrary to His will and no one compels Him to will something or not to will something else. God is sovereign and free to will or not to will, according to His own determination and good pleasure. In other words, God is God.

God could have willed not to create the universe but He willed otherwise. God could have willed not to save a people but He willed otherwise. God could have willed to save Socrates but He willed otherwise. God could have seen to it that Socrates heard the gospel but He willed otherwise. “Whatsoever the Lord pleased,” writes the Psalmist, “that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places” (Ps. 135:6). Wicked, pagan Nebuchadnezzar confesses this truth concerning God’s sovereignty in Daniel 4:35: “And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”

In addition, God’s will is in perfect harmony with His Being. God’s will is eternal for He decreed all things in eternity. God’s will is holy, for in His decrees He seeks Himself and His glory. God’s will is just and righteous, for what He determines is always in perfect harmony with His holiness. God’s will is wise for, with perfect knowledge, He knows how best to bring glory to His name. God’s will is unchangeable for God never alters His determination concerning anything. Finally, God’s will is powerful and irresistible, for no creature can frustrate God’s will.

To return to our example of the pagan philosopher, God eternally determined not to save Socrates, that is, He eternally reprobated him. God’s will to destroy Socrates in the way of his sins is holy, for God determined that He would best be glorified not through the salvation of Socrates but through the damnation of Socrates. God’s will to destroy Socrates is just, for God Himself is the standard of justice and Socrates, as a sinful man, was not entitled to God’s mercy, could not demand it and did not even desire it. If Socrates expostulated with God, “Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his

will?” (Rom. 9:19), the Almighty would respond, “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” (Rom. 9:20). God’s will to destroy Socrates is unchangeable, powerful and irresistible, so that no creature in heaven or in earth could prevent the execution of God’s decree of reprobation and, therefore, the damnation, of that ungodly man. About that ungodly philosopher, we can paraphrase the words of Solomon: “The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even Socrates for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4). About Socrates we could write, “When Socrates sprang up as the grass, and when all such ungodly, unbelieving, pagan and idolatrous philosophers flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed forever” (Ps. 92:7). While it is true that God’s “tender mercies are over all his works,” Socrates, although a creature, was not a “work” of God in the sense of Psalm 145, for all God’s works “shall praise [Him] ... and all [His] *saints* shall praise Him, [speaking] of the glory of [His] kingdom and [talking] of [His] glory,” which is not true of Socrates, who never praised the true God. Instead, “the LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked [including Socrates] will he destroy” (Ps. 145:9-11, 20). Socrates was not included in the “world” that God loves and saves (John 3:16). Socrates is not included in the “whole world” whose propitiation and advocate Christ is (I John 2:1-2). Socrates was not one whose perishing God did not will (II Pet. 3:9) but rather one whose perishing God determined. Socrates is not among the “all men” whom God wills to be saved and for whom Christ made a ransom (I Tim. 2:4-5), something that even Waldron would concede because, with respect to John 3:16, I Timothy 2:4-5 and II Peter 3:9, he writes, “I actually do not regard any of these passages as proof texts for the Free Offer” (132).¹

In addition, had Socrates visited Jerusalem in the fourth century BC and met some of God’s children there (which, of course, God never decreed that Socrates, the bounds of whose habitation God had determined, would do), and if he had come across a copy of the Old Testament Scriptures, he would have been duty-bound to believe in the true God, to serve Him and to believe in the promise of the coming Messiah. Although Socrates was under obligation to turn from sin and believe in the true God, according to the testimony

¹ All page numbers in parenthesis in the body of this article are taken from Sam Waldron, *The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel* (Greenbrier, AR: Free Grace Press, 2019).

of Romans 1, where we learn that Socrates and men like him have enough knowledge of the true God to be without excuse, but insufficient knowledge to be saved, God determined that Socrates would live and die in pagan darkness under His wrath and curse.

It would, therefore, be utter madness to suggest that God desired the salvation of Socrates. And if God did not desire the salvation of Socrates or of the multitudes that lived in the same era and region as Socrates, He does not desire the salvation of all men.

Therefore, whether man lives or dies, whether he is happy or miserable, whether he is wicked or good, whether he is elect or reprobate, whether he believes or disbelieves, and whether he repents or remains impenitent, he always does God's sovereign will. He can never escape God's will. In this sense, we can say that even the devils do God's will. They are in His hand and they are subject to His will. The *Heidelberg Catechism* refers to this in its treatment of providence: "all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move" (A. 28). The *Belgic Confession* makes a similar statement in Article 13: "He rules and governs [all creatures] according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment ... nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father." Jesus applies this to something as simple as a sparrow or the hairs of our head: they do not fall to the ground without the will of God or, to state it positively, they fall to the ground according to God's will (Matt. 10:29-31).

The Will of God: The Duty of Man

What we have described so far is God's will of decree or His decretive will. Waldron correctly identifies this will: "The decretive will tells us what God will do" (43). A fuller and better explanation, however, is, that the decretive will tells what God has *determined* to do or has *determined* to be done. Synonyms of God's decretive will are His counsel and His good pleasure.

But there is something else that the Bible calls God's "will." It is not what God has determined to do or what God has determined to do with His creatures, but it is what God has commanded His creatures (especially human beings) to do. The Bible calls what God has commanded us to do His "will." Christ

says, for example, in Matthew 7:21, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” The *Heidelberg Catechism* encourages us to ask, “grant that we ... may renounce our own will, and without murmuring obey Thy will, which is only good” (A. 124). This will—or this aspect of God’s will—is His will of command or His preceptive will, the will of God’s precept, which must be contrasted with His will of decree or decretive will. Since the *Catechism* refers to our “obeying” that will of God, the reference is not to God’s decree but to His command. God’s will of command is expressed fully in His moral Law.

God’s will for the creature is fulfilled whether he obeys God or not. If God (in His decretive will) has determined the everlasting destruction of a man, he will not obey God’s will (His preceptive will). He cannot be subject to God’s law (Rom. 8:7-8), which inability is the sinner’s own fault. Nevertheless, God’s will is not thwarted, for a disobedient, unbelieving, impenitent man is destroyed in the way of his sins and perishes justly for his iniquity. When a man hears God’s Law, it is not his business to ask, “What has God determined concerning me in His eternal counsel. Should I obey or not?” Instead, that man should ask, “What does God *command* me *to do*?” and then he should do it. Because he does not do it, that man is condemned. Similarly, when a man hears the gospel with the call, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31), he must not ask, “What is God’s eternal determination concerning me: am I elect or reprobate?” Instead, he must believe. He must lay hold of Jesus Christ, forsake his sins, and trust only in the crucified and resurrected Saviour. When he does not believe, he is damned and deservedly so.

So far I have used the example of Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), the ungodly philosopher who lived and died without hearing the gospel. I used him to illustrate God’s decree of reprobation. The *Canons of Dordt* explain reprobation:

... not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal election of God; whom God ... hath decreed to leave in the common misery ... and not to bestow upon them saving faith ... at last for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever (I:15).

However, Socrates never heard the gospel. Therefore, I offer a second example, one of Christ's disciples, Judas Iscariot. Judas Iscariot can never say that he never heard the gospel, for he was one of the twelve disciples and, therefore, very close to Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). Judas heard many of the sermons of Jesus Christ, such as His parables and the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24-25). Judas witnessed many of Christ's miracles. Judas was even sent forth with the other disciples to teach, preach, heal and cast out devils (Matt. 10:7-8). Yet Judas was reprobate: "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). "Ye are clean, but not all" (John 13:10). "I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me" (John 13:18). "None of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12).

What we have said of Socrates applies equally to Judas. God eternally determined not to save Judas but to reject him in His sovereign decree of reprobation. Since reprobation must serve election, God determined that Judas should be the human instrument by which Jesus was delivered to His enemies. Thus wicked, perfidious, treacherous Judas served the salvation of the church, unwillingly, unconsciously and unwittingly. Peter explained this in Acts 1:16: "Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus." Later the church prays even more emphatically,

For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done (Acts 4:27-28).

The actions of Judas were preordained or predetermined—even willed—in God's eternal decree. Yet Judas does not escape responsibility or accountability in the least: he acted most willingly, wickedly and greedily. Covetousness motivated him, not a desire to fulfil God's decree.

Judas heard the gospel but God had eternally decreed that Judas should not be saved. Judas heard the gospel but God had determined to harden Judas

through the gospel (Rom. 9:18; II Cor. 2:15-16). What, then, was God's will concerning Judas and the gospel? And what, then, is God's will with respect to every reprobate sinner who hears the gospel? That is the issue that divides us from advocates of the well-meant offer, such as Sam Waldron; and hyper-Calvinists, such as those who hold the historic position of the Gospel Standard Strict Baptist Churches.

According to God's will of decree or His decretive will, Judas, although he would hear the gospel, would not believe it, for God decreed not to give him faith. According to God's will of command or His preceptive will, Judas was duty-bound to believe the gospel. God commanded—required and demanded—of Judas that he should love, honour and obey Jesus Christ. God commanded—required and demanded—of Judas that he should believe in Jesus Christ (John 5:23), that is, that he should know Him, trust in Him and appropriate Him for salvation. God commanded—required and demanded—of Judas that he should turn from his sins in the true sorrow of repentance to live a new and godly life. God commanded—required and demanded—of Judas (although not for salvation) that he should keep the law of the Ten Commandments perfectly. And God's command—requirement and demand—was so serious that God damned Judas to everlasting punishment in hell because Judas did not love, honour and obey Jesus Christ. God commanded—required and demanded—this of Judas, although God had determined never to save Judas, although God never loved Judas but always hated him, and although Christ did not make atonement for Judas' sins, so that for Judas forgiveness of sins, justification and everlasting life were impossible.

Judas is an unusual case, of course, because we *know* that he was reprobate. Such is not true with the congregations in which we hear the gospel today. An unbelieving visitor might be reprobate but we cannot tell. A member, one currently in good standing, might be a hypocrite and a reprobate, but we cannot tell. Moreover, charity forbids us even to *suspect* a fellow church member. We may not say or even think, "I wonder if he is truly a child of God. Maybe he is reprobate." The *Canons of Dordt* forbid us to speak and think thus. Instead, "With respect to those who make an external profession of faith and live regular lives, we are bound, after the example of the apostle, to judge and speak of them in the most favorable manner" (III/IV:15).

We summarize. God's will, sometimes called His "will of decree," is the determination of His infinite mind concerning all things. God's will of decree *always happens*. No creature can stop God's will of decree from being fulfilled. Whatever happens in history is the outworking in time of God's eternal will of decree. In addition, there is God's will of command. God commands the creature to do certain things: He commands us to love Him and our neighbours. He commands us to believe in Jesus Christ and to repent of our sins. God's will of command is *rarely obeyed*: no wicked, unbelieving person ever performs it; Satan and his demons always disobey it; and even believers have only a small beginning of obedience to it (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 114). Only Christ and the angels—and the saints in glory—perfectly obey God's will of command.

So far Waldron agrees, although his presentation of reprobation is considerably softer than mine.

The Will of God: What God Desires or Wants

Waldron introduces a third idea: there is God's will of decree, God's will of command and God's will of *desire*. Waldron argues that God did not decree to save the reprobate (we agree against the Arminians), and that God commands the reprobate to repent and believe the gospel (we agree against the hyper-Calvinists), and that, therefore, God desires to save the reprobate (we disagree against Waldron and other advocates of the free offer). Waldron writes, "God commands, wills, and desires, the salvation of all who hear the gospel. On the other hand ... God has not decreed, or predestined, or willed, the salvation of all who hear the gospel" (42). "God earnestly desires the salvation of every man who hears the gospel. He sends them the gospel—with the desire, intention, and will—that they might be saved by it" (100). "God genuinely and sincerely desires the salvation of all those to whom we are preaching" (142). Citations from Waldron could be multiplied.

The problem with Waldron's contention is his introduction of a facet of God's will that Scripture does not reveal Him to have. God decrees or determines all things (His will of decree or decretive will). God commands His creatures to do certain things (His will of command or perceptive will). These two facts are clearly revealed in Scripture as God's will but where does the Bible speak of God *desiring something that does not occur*?

In human beings, a desire expresses an emotional attachment to something: if I desire something but I do not have it, then I am sad, disappointed or frustrated, and must learn contentment with God's will not to grant me my desire. If I desire something and do possess it, then I am happy, content or satisfied, but I must be careful not have inordinate or even sinful desires, which the Bible calls lusts. If a human being has desires, he must find a way to fulfil his desires or he must ask someone—such as God—to fulfil his desires: “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Ps. 37:4).

But we cannot speak thus of God. God is not disappointed, sad or frustrated if He does not possess what He desires. God does not need to learn contentment to cope with unfulfilled and unsatisfied longings. God does not have to ask someone to fulfil His desires for He is the Almighty. A god with unfulfilled desires is not the perfectly wise God of Scripture who knows exactly what to do in order to achieve His goal. What God desires, He decrees. What God does not desire, He does not decree. It really is that simple.

Why, then, does God *command* something that He has not decreed? Why did God command Adam not to eat the forbidden fruit, when He had determined that Adam should fall? Why did God command reprobate Cain to love his brother, when He had determined that Abel should die at his brother's hand? Why did God command Joseph's brothers to love him, when He had determined to save Israel by means of Joseph's enslavement and future exaltation in Egypt? Why did God command reprobate Pharaoh to let Israel go and then harden his heart so that he did not let them go, since God had determined to deliver Israel through the ten plagues, the destruction of Egypt and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? We could multiply biblical examples. And why does God command every reprobate person who hears the gospel to repent and believe, when He has determined *not* to give them saving faith and repentance?

Waldron's answer, which is the answer of all advocates of the free offer, is that God did not decree it but that God commands it and, therefore, God *desires* it—He earnestly, sincerely and passionately desires it. To put it differently, He *wants* it, although He knows that He can never have it because He has made it impossible for it to happen. Instead of electing the reprobate, He rejected them; instead of redeeming the reprobate, He excluded them from Christ's