

Interdenominational Theological Center

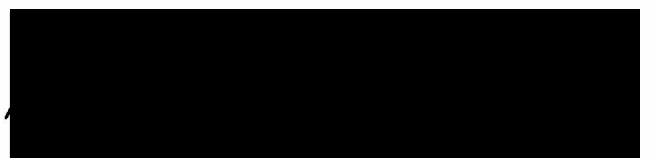
Senior Essay

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WILL OF GOD?

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## HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WILL OF GOD?

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. THE PROGRESSIVE MEANS OF REVELATION

- A. Nature
- B. Man
- C. History
- D. Church
- E. Scripture
- F. Jesus Christ

#### II. APPLICATION OF GOD'S REVEALED WILL TO THE REALM OF HUMAN RELATIONS

- A. Personal Life and Ministry of Jesus
- B. Ethical Witness in Social Contacts
- C. Jesus as Revealed Knowledge

### CONCLUSION

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of man's existence he has sought to perceive and understand the meaning and will of the almighty, creating, and sustaining force of the universe. He has been progressively led to meaningful and significant knowledge of the divine being.

The previous statement speaks of divine <sup>†</sup> "being" rather than the plural form and thus has narrowed concern from religion in general to its monotheistic forms. To narrow further the range of consideration, I propose to deal with the monotheism of the Judiac-Christian tradition.

While the Judaistic heritage laid the foundation for Christianity, we find in Christianity a new and fuller revelation of divine nature in history. Man, historically in the context of Christian beginnings, was pursuing a continuity of universal thought by seeking to know the basic core of reality in the world. Then, for the Christian, the advent, life, and ministry of Jesus add a new dimension to the concept of a living and active God.

Accepting the proposition that this God is living and active in human history and seeking to

advance the divine purpose and will among men, it will be the purpose of this essay to explore the means by which we can gain deeper and more vital knowledge and understanding of God's will for man. This will be approached by a look at the important consideration of the personal faith and ministry of Jesus, from the historical perspective, with specific interest in his interpretation and response to God's will.



## HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WILL OF GOD?

### I. THE PROGRESSIVE MEANS OF REVELATION

Even though we have limited the consideration to a specific religious faith, there are progressive steps in the faith, the same as in the overall historical religious quest of man.

One of the first media of revelation in the Christian faith itself is the fact of nature. In the Judaic-Christian heritage the cosmic order has always elicited awe and reverence. The wonders and evils of nature both have led to a conception of the natural order as a means by which God makes himself known. Words such as these from the Psalms tend to support this assertion: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Other passages seek to communicate his satisfaction because his will has been obeyed.<sup>2</sup> Still others threaten and heighten fear of natural calamity because of disobedience to the divine command.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psa. 19:1.

<sup>2</sup> II Chron. 1:1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 9:17-21.

While the element of fear, reward, or punishment is still outstanding, the natural order as v theologically conceived in Judaism and carried over into some phases of Christian thought is a definite means by which the universal God makes his will comprehensible to men.

Second, there is man himself. He is represented as a creature made in the "image of God."<sup>4</sup> Whether this has reference to anthropomorphic consideration on the one hand, or rational will, on the other, is of little importance in this paper. The idea is that the complexity, the intelligence, the abilities of man as a created being must in some way bespeak of an almost inconceivable source of wisdom and superior Being in the scheme of existence.

In the pre-Christian heritage and after the coming of Jesus Christ there were those men who stood in an elevated position--those thought to have "charismatic" power, filled with God, more than others.<sup>5</sup> They had the special ability for interpretation, with the inspiration coming directly from God. Whether patriarch, judge, priest, prophet, or apostle; or in the case that this was only a form of human cognition and interpretation, these men represent in the tradition another way by which the revelation of God was channeled to men by men.

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<sup>4</sup>Gen. 1:26.

<sup>5</sup>Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958, p. 246.

At a very real moment in history God sought to make himself known to man in such manner that the growing egocentric human will and mind would be brought to a new and convincing recognition of the divine reality in the world. This was accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth. With this we have the historical entrance of one who had been envisioned and looked for to demonstrate the will of God and show all people the way of God's kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

Out of this revelation which is thought by many to be continually progressive and developmental rather than static and unchanging, we have the emergence of the Church and the New Testament canon of the Christian faith; apart from Judaism, except as seen in the context of a higher and more complete expression out of that basic tradition.

While, in my opinion, these two media of revelation primarily confirm the fact of Jesus in history and the organized following and fellowship of the faithful, they will remain as signposts or media by which God reveals and we are able to know and understand to some extent what his will is for us.

As the quest for knowledge of the will of God is continued the significance of the person of Jesus Christ can be approached from two general points of view.

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<sup>6</sup>Joseph Klausner, Jesus of Nazareth (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1925), p. 259.

Whether considered separately or jointly one is from the theological viewpoint which seeks to interpret the meaning of a Christ of faith for a conscious, physical existence. This approach has merit especially as we view the limits of the mind and consciousness, the lack of knowledge that man has in the physical world, and the significance of theological interpretation for the total realm of the Christian faith.

The second point of view is that of the historical Jesus, the personal life and ministry of one who experienced all of the emotions and sensations of humanity and yet excelled to the height of human development. In him, as evidenced in the Synoptic accounts we confront the paradoxical God-man relationship. We also find a concrete ethical example. In light of these facts the writer would like to extend the question of how we know the will of God by considering the personal witness and ministry of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## II. APPLICATION OF GOD'S REVEALED WILL TO THE REALM OF HUMAN RELATIONS

There is great significance in a consideration of his life and ministry as a salient point of reference for us in these times. Quite often we become so involved in the Christological and speculative or

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<sup>7</sup>Several eminent scholars have dealt extensively with the questions surrounding the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. Goguel follows the historical view of Jesus' significance; Schweitzer combines the historical-theological significance; Bultmann, Robinson, Bornkamm, and Stauffer are advocates of the "new quest" of the historical Jesus.

theological matters surrounding Jesus that we fail to recognize the revelation to be seen in the practical facts of his historical existence.

Notwithstanding the valuable work of the "new quest" theologians, who are reconsidering some of the historical assumptions of the past, there are certain bold ideas which seem to stand out from Jesus' life and ministry.<sup>8</sup>

At this point in my thinking, based on the New Testament Synoptic accounts, it seems that more responsibility is placed upon man as he stands before God than many theological views admit. The total implication of Jesus' witness as revelation of divine will supports just this. If not, there would have been no need for Jesus to witness at such a high level of human perfection as he did. Otherwise his witness could have been at the opposite extreme--the lowest level of human performance. The admonition in the Sermon on the Mount, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"<sup>9</sup> would be of no significance if his life were not a concrete illustration of the possibility and necessity for this attainment.

The down-to-earth example of Jesus seems to say that there is an irrevocable responsibility of the part of man to avail himself to the divine forthcalling

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<sup>8</sup>Hugh Anderson, Jesus and Christian Origins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. vii-ix.

<sup>9</sup>Matt. 5:48.

the best he can in his spiritual and contemplative life and the social and ethical aspects of his existence. This he can and must do, being cognizant at the same time that his efforts and resources alone are not enough to bridge the total distance between him and his creator. Though this accomplishment may vary considerably in the individual, when he has reached the very highest that he can, God, through the Christ of faith, intercedes on his behalf. The worth of man in existence is totally negated if this is not the case.

It is at this point that we must contend with the inevitable problems. How do we know or comprehend his will so that the highest possible result will be reached? Can we equate action on our part with doing the will of God? What are the objective criteria by which we know God's will for us?

In attempting to deal with these questions, I will cast them against a background of man's spiritual, social, and ethical confrontations which become real considerations in his relationship with God and fellow men, through Jesus Christ.

Jesus' ministry and personal faith were the best source of revelation of the divine will to men. The message of the "kingdom," which his total witness reveals, is not simply the transformation of men and society into an exalted human community which would operate on principles of love, goodness and

righteousness. Moreover, it is the condition which would "grow out from," or "be the fruit of," the active rule of God in the hearts and minds of men.<sup>10</sup> This real and active relationship between God and man gives man the ability to perceive and know the will of God and respond actively in a given existential moment of his life, according to the guidelines given to us in the personal life and faith of Jesus Christ.

However, one must discern the universal and limitless aspects of Jesus' life because it is futile to project Him as one who produced specific formulas and exact codes of law to govern the lives of men as they exist and relate to each other in the physical world.

If an interpretation of this kind had been adopted and maintained to any dominant degree by the Christian church the static and legalistic elements of the faith would have long since relegated it to a minor and insignificant place in the history of the religions of men.

The universal and broad nature of Jesus' revelation of God's will to men make his domain vast rather than confined to a system of dogma for expression. Yet in all of this it is practical

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<sup>10</sup>Kirby Page, The Will of God For These Days (La Habra, California, 1945), pp. 33-42.

enough to be applied to any area of life and human interaction.

In his ministry, the Gospel accounts portray him as one who consistently transcended the binding legalism of the Jewish religion,<sup>11</sup> but never relenting in his effort to fulfill the will of God. The rule of God in his life was in itself a revelation of the will of God.

Even in light of the personal faith held by Jesus the milieu through which this "will of God" was made known was in his horizontal relationship with men. Thus, we have the situation where the primary relationship with God--personal and internalized, is projected and externalized as he lived and ministered with men.

Further, the mystical and miraculous elements of his witness were evidenced as he related to men. He was able to overcome the temptation for demonstration for the sake of wonder and splendor and in every event sought to improve the condition of men.<sup>12</sup>

Then, it is a fair conclusion that his pastoral witness and personal faith was not without its intricate connection with the ethical and social relationships with men.

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<sup>11</sup>Mark 2:15-19; 2:23-28; 3:1-6.

<sup>12</sup>J. Estlin Carpenter, The Historical Jesus and the Theological Christ (London: Philip Green, 1911), pp. 76-77.



When the total ministry and message of Jesus is taken into consideration it is not far afield to assert that there was set for us a towering example which casts upon us an irrevocable responsibility if the rule of God, or the will of God as conveyed through Jesus Christ, is to be real in the lives of men.

To extend the previous thought, the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel tradition addresses itself to the externalized performance of God's will by men after an internal confrontation and acceptance of God.

While many responsible scholars recognize that an actual "Sermon on the Mount" was delivered, they still tend to view the content of the Sermon as given in the canon as a compilation of the sayings of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> These sayings relate to almost every aspect of human inter-personal and inter-social contact. They also set a generalized standard by which we can discern some of the meaning of overt ethical performance of the will of God.

Hence, with the Sermon on the Mount and parallel passages from the Gospel stories we have, in addition to what Jesus "did" in his ministry, the things that he "said" in relation to spiritual values and inter-social contact.

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<sup>13</sup>Vincent Taylor, The Life and Ministry of Jesus (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), p. 100.

To be sure, his approach to the fulfillment of the divine will of God revealed in his life was different, unique, and significant for his historical contemporaries and has remained so even until now. His creative "style of life" which embodies and projects a principle of unselfish love and righteousness in everyday practical living situations that people face, through the inspiration of the Creator-God and his rule in the life and being of the individual is the essential guideline. As a result of this, the will of God is revealed through his life to us.

At this point another central question should be considered. Does the historic witness of Jesus Christ have direct implications and suggest important ethical responsibility for the individual as he stands before God, or are the theological views of Grace and Justification totally sufficient for the Christian?

If, for the purpose of clarity, the basic theological assumption is that "salvation or "damnation" comes from acceptance or rejection of God and his will for our lives, there must be some way by which we know his will and a reasonable standard by which we judge the performance of his will.

In other words, certain value judgements must be placed upon the "actions" of the Christian person

as he relates to other human beings. Even without a strict and binding code of evaluation, and a practical leaning toward pragmatic sanctions, there must be some determination or distinction between what is "good" and points to the will of God evident and active in human interaction, as opposed to that which is less good and seeks only to advance the self-centered ends of the human will.

This, indeed, presents us with a moral predicament. It is inherent in the nature of man to seek survival for the self. He is inclined to search for self-pleasure, self-comfort, and self-sufficiency in his existence. This is opposite to the meaning of the Christian ethic and the words of Jesus on the conditions of discipleship: "He that would find his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it."<sup>14</sup>

The predicament in which man finds himself is to reverse his natural inclinations and relegate his total self-seeking desires to secondary importance, making consideration of the rights and privileges of others the primary objective.

Again the historic witness of Jesus encompassed this ideal aim. The value and relevance of the revelation in him is outstanding in the twentieth century because of his living and dynamic emphasis on doing good as the fruit of the revelation

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<sup>14</sup>Matt. 10:39.

and relationship with God. This idea is conveyed to us in part in the words that follow: "Not every one who says to me Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."<sup>15</sup>

The relative problem of interpretation enters the problem now as one attempts to determine what is doing or fulfilling God's will and what is not.

Any given event may be interpreted differently by different individuals depending on their own personal experiences and faith. The meaning may be variously expressed, and thus, the significance confused.

In a situation of this kind when the fulfilling of God's will is judged strictly in theological perspective, the problem of relativism becomes a dilemma. It cannot be resolved because each individual is entitled to interpret the performance of the divine will according to his own inner judgment.<sup>16</sup>

The witness of Jesus seems to speak to this issue. His "sayings" and "doings" reflect or reveal what God expects to be the fruit of the relationship with himself. His use of hyperbole

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<sup>15</sup> Matt. 7:21.

<sup>16</sup> Emil Brunner, Revelation and Reason (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p. 48 ff.

as in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew demonstrates this point.

The Sermon on the Mount is another source of this type of revelation. Still, these examples should not be interpreted as a strict legalistic code. They are signposts which Jesus used in his ministry to point in the direction of and give guidance to those who would seek to do the will of God.

Thus, the position taken in this paper is that Jesus' historic witness was in itself a revelation of the will of God, providing a magnification of the ways we are expected to fulfill our relationship with reference to the divine will. It follows that Jesus, as the Synoptics portray him is revealed knowledge and that his down-to-earth, practical approach as a way through which God reaches mankind gives great emphasis to, and projects as a responsibility, the need for human justice, righteousness and love as the way in which God's will is performed in human history.

## CONCLUSION

How, then, do we know the will of God? We come to a reasonable and working understanding of his will for us through viewing the ministry and witnessing of Jesus Christ and patterning our lives after him.

To be sure, this is no easy task. The meaning of this does not advocate a simple and narrow-minded imitation of the biblical witness. Rather, it points to a creative application of the principles of self-giving love and goodness as we relate to other human beings.

It follows that our attitudes and thinking should be shaped by the unceasing quest to know and follow-through with the highest possible refinement of what we think that God would have us do; to achieve, at least in part, the highest level of the attributes of God which is possible for a human being.

The guidelines for this can be envisioned from many an ethical system but the effort to reach this plateau through a personal relationship with God makes the Christian ethic distinct.

Thus, the effort of the Christian must be to seek a firm personal relationship with God.

This relationship is enhanced and grows as the individual advances in his ability to perceive the will of God as evidenced in the highest revelation that we have--Jesus Christ.

Out of this flows the ethic of Christian love which must form the creative application in all human interpersonal and intersocial relationships.