

God's Will and My Worldview: Paul and Each of Us

Romans 11:33 – 12:13

March 11, 2018

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While I had no idea how old he was at the time I first met him in 1976, I now know that John Frederick Jansen was 58 and I was 22. John was born in the Netherlands in 1917 and came to the United States when he was 5. He was one of my professors of New Testament at Austin Seminary. Dr. Jansen's colleague in the worship and preaching department was Bob Shelton. Bob used to tease John, saying, "John, whenever you are in a Biblical or theological argument, and you feel uncertain about what point of Scripture or logic to make next, you often shift categories and quote a hymn!" They would laugh together. Bob had to have been teasing, because he is the one who was invited to churches and retreats all over the place to teach a seminar called, "The Theology of Willie Nelson;" and he and another professor once had a side-bet-going on who could use the most phrases from Willie's songs in their class lectures! Hymns and even Willie Nelson songs contain theology. It may not be considered "good theology" or "sound theology" by everyone or every group, but many argue that poetry and story are often more meaningful vessels for communicating God's faith, hope, and love in the human theatre than are theological arguments themselves, whether in the category called dogmatics, or the category called systematics, or the category called apologetics. There's even evidence right here at the end of Romans, chapter 11, that the Apostle Paul agrees.

Since the beginning of chapter 9, Paul has undertaken the task of answering someone's or some group's question, "What about God's relationship to the Jews since Christians now insist that Jesus – who was a Jew – is the Messiah promised by God, and yet not recognized as the Messiah by the religious traditions of Judaism?" As one who was born a Jew and who, to the day he died, was grateful for the influence of his Rabbinical training which would be one pillar of his Christian theology, Paul basically says to the followers of Jesus in Rome to whom he writes: "Don't worry about the promise God made to your Jewish brothers and sisters. God is not a 'taker-back' on promises made (11:1-2a, 28b-29). God's promise to those of the Jewish faith tradition is as strong going forward as God's promise to those who recognize Jesus as the embodiment of God's love through Jesus' own life, ministry, death, and the mystery of his resurrection (11:32). Then when Paul finishes saying all he feels led to declare-by-argument on this in three chapters, he breaks into an ascription of praise / a song of doxology crediting the mystery of God's will with accomplishing more than we as humans can comprehend. At verse 33: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how puzzling are his ways!" That's the proclamation of praise; then Paul begins singing as someone sings while driving down the road or cooking at the grill or hiking down a trail. You or I may not get all the words of the song perfect, so we fill in as best we can. At verses 34 and 35, Paul actually is paraphrasing three questions from Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 13 and 14. He doesn't get all the words exactly correct. He changes them a bit, from the original in Isaiah: "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord? Who, as the Lord's counselor, has instructed the Lord? Whom did the Lord consult for the Lord's own enlightenment, who taught the Lord the path of justice, taught the Lord knowledge and showed the Lord understanding?" Basically three questions from Isaiah 40, which Paul paraphrases with three questions this way: "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been the Lord's counselor? Who has ever given a gift to the Lord that the Lord needed to repay?" And the answer to all six questions – 3 from Isaiah, 3 from Romans – is a resounding, "No one!"

Two fairly current Southern sayings come to my mind which indicate that a person has finished offering an argument or opinion, sometimes a very brief argument or opinion. Someone might close with the words, "Just sayin'," or with the words, "I'm thinkin'." That's basically the way Paul has closed his argument with doxology and a paraphrase of acknowledgement that God's will is a mystery greater than all of us, yet it is a will which can be trusted as we see that will in Jesus. Remember how Paul wrote in a

pair of previous letters, one to the church at Corinth and one to the church at Philippi? At 1st Corinthians 2:16: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct the Lord?” But we have the mind of Christ.” And at Philippians 2:5, “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus.” You and I may not be able to know totally the mind or will of God related to the intricacies and challenges and mysteries we face in life; but the mind of Jesus Christ is a gift from God freely and graciously given. It is enough; and, as the saying goes, “It will rock your world.”

Paul had experienced a shoulder-shaking change in his faith, thinking, and ministry from his earlier orientation as a zealous Pharisee of his historic religious community. And after his conversion to follow Jesus, over the next 20 years his understandings of God’s will evolved and broadened and deepened. This letter to the church at Rome, for that reason, is considered by many to be the high-water mark, or the crown jewel, of his teaching and evangelistic ministry.

So if the Apostle Paul could paraphrase Isaiah from Scripture as he breaks into praise of God and asks rhetorical questions to draw a presentation to a close, and if John Jansen could conclude theology arguments quoting hymns, and Bob Shelton could hold a class’s or a congregation’s attention quoting Willie Nelson songs in lectures and sermons, then I’m going to shift gears slightly with two Country song titles. In terms of you and me comprehending what influences us to appreciate God’s will in daily life, imagine God singing to us the words of the song Jim Reeves made famous beginning in 1963: “Welcome to my world!” And imagine – if you and I and others are welcomed to God’s world with the unearnable “mind of Christ Jesus” – how you and I can respond with the words sung by Amy Grant and by Ronnie Milsap in 1977: “What a difference you’ve made in my life!”

The difference is not simply a comfort and confidence to sing on an easy day or fairly easy season in one’s life, “I in my Savior am happy and blest.” The difference is being able to sing that or any other song to God with trust when the world is crashing down around you, sometimes because there is financial distress which is real, or illness or injury which is real, or estrangement or grief in a treasured relationship which is real. All of those are covered when God says, “Welcome to my world!” Yet there is more. Like Paul, you and I can become convinced that “the mind of Christ” makes such a difference that we no longer worry about who exactly will be changed by some formula for salvation. We then sense our lives being shaped in such a way that the difference God’s love makes for the entire world opens us (1) to live from gratitude to God, (2) to respect (with God’s help) every other person, and (3) to care for others – no matter how different or similar from us. With your and my world being “rocked” that way, it’s possible to live with less worry about our own fate, since the whole world belongs to God; and God’s promise reaches farther than what we can see, or measure, or know (if Isaiah and Paul are to be believed).

I’ve been particularly thinking this week about Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus whom I have known or read about, who have variously journeyed in faith to where they became convinced that God’s love is wider than we can imagine. Those Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus whom I’ve heard or read about from various points in history – and some of whom I’ve known personally in various places – have been pushed to the edges (or out) of their own faith groups, because those doing the pushing were convinced that, for God’s love to make a difference, a person has to believe the doctrine, the dogma, and the apologetics just the way those say who desire tight definitions and boundaries in teaching and believing how God’s will works in the world. I don’t know about you, but my inclination is to pay attention to Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul, growing toward the convictions (1) that God’s will is arguably full of mystery, and (2) that in Jesus is a way of living, thinking, of loving so wide and gracious from God’s irrevocable promise, that every morning, noon, and night we can welcome one another to partnerships of caring with hospitality, with trust in God, with respect for all, and with constancy in prayer. I’m thinkin’, and you can too; because Paul was thinkin’ this long before us; and God long before Paul. – All honor and praise be to God.