

The Silent Spirit

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In the reformed community, operations of the Spirit are typically viewed with suspicion. If a reformed believer speaks of being "led by the Spirit" to do something, or of having "an impression," or "sensing" something from God, it's seen as psychological, not spiritual. This tendency seems to be an over-reaction to the excesses of the charismatic community.

An *active* Spirit, "speaking" to believers to lead them according to God's Word, is seen as a challenge to a closed canon – to *cessationism* – even if what is "impressed" is in alignment with Scripture. "God speaks in His Word and nowhere else." This limitation on the activity of the Holy Spirit, affects the Christian life, sapping its vitality. Fellowship with God becomes the dry assent and willful response to ink on a page. There is no give and take, no conversation with God. His Spirit apparently ceases to testify to our spirit once we're saved (Ro 8.16). This can lead to spiritual deadness and barren intellectualism.

While it may be grudgingly admitted that the Spirit regenerates the faculties, illumines the mind, sanctifies the life, and brings about the will of God, these things become the *bounds* of the Spirit's operations. In this view, the Spirit does not speak; He's *silent*. He spoke in the first century; but once His words were recorded, His relationship with believers ended, except through Scripture. Whatever comfort we may look for from Him, is not direct and personal, but indirect and textual.

"Oh, you can pray for wisdom, or courage, or boldness, but all of that comes from God's word, not from God directly. You see, you're mistaken to think that prayers are the ordained means of God's sovereign will, as it is being worked out in the world, through His Church, by the power of His Spirit, acting on the prayers of the saints. Frankly, we're not that involved in the process, insignificant worms that we are. So if you think you hear God speaking in His word, or see Him responding to your prayers, that's just psychological self-talk – a pleasant delusion. Ignore it. Use only your rational mind."

That snubs the Holy Spirit! It's as if He recorded the Scripture, and then closed His ears to our prayers after that first generation died, because God's word was cast in stone – and our life in Christ was cast in stone with it. We use phrases like, "Prayer changes us, but it cannot change God;" "God is going to do what God is going to;" "God speaks to us through His word, and we speak to God through prayer;" "God's mind and will are immutable" – all of which is true; but when this truth is applied to prayer in such a way that suggests prayer is ineffectual – a waste of our breath – then it's not God's sovereignty that's being affirmed, but *fatalism* – and that's unbiblical.

So we end up praying half-hearted prayers, because such fatalism convinces us that our prayers don't matter. God has already made up His mind. Our prayers lose their power to renew our heart and mind, because the Spirit isn't active except in the pages of Scripture. If we're not being renewed, not being transformed, that's *our* fault – because we're not applying what we know intellectually, by an act of our own will. That means we're acting in our own strength, because we doubt that God hears us, or would respond to us, or directly speaks to us. He becomes a very distant God, the lament of our current age.

When it comes to prayers for healing, "If it is Your will," becomes an escape clause in case it isn't answered. Or we "hedge our bet" so our prayer will get answered either way – we

don't want to suggest that God doesn't respond to prayer, even though that's how we act. *Why is it* that "conditional prayer" is used almost exclusively when it comes to healing?

The two primary places in Scripture where "if it is your will" is used, are Jas 4.15, and also 1Joh 5.14 – neither of which concern healing. In fact, 1John 5.14 doesn't deal with God's willingness to *answer* our prayers; it deals with whether God *hears* our prayers when they're against His *revealed* will. Notably, His *hidden* will is not addressed.

As for Jesus' prayer in the garden (Luk 22.42), he's asking to be relieved of the cup of God's wrath. We believers have no need to ever pray that prayer, nor to question whether it's God's will that we drink it. Christ drank it FOR us.

When Paul pleaded for the thorn to be removed (2Cor 12.7-10)– whatever that thorn was – there's no indication that he conditioned his plea with "if it is your will." That's because Paul understood that it was *permitted* by God, even though it was a "messenger from Satan." Satan cannot act outside the sovereignty of God. *Obviously* it was the will of God that Paul be given the thorn; but that didn't stop him from asking God to remove it. When it was not removed after three pleas, Paul understood that it was for his good and God's glory. "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content..." God's will for Paul was *revealed* to him, in not removing it.

That had nothing to do with how Paul prayed, and it had nothing to do with God's *hidden* will prior to that third plea. The Lord *said* to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That was for *Paul*, not for the Church, even though it's recorded in Scripture for our edification and encouragement. God's Word is not spoken directly to us when we read it, but it is nonetheless profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2Tim 3.16).

God's *moral will* is revealed to us in Scripture; His *hidden will* is not. By definition, His hidden will is mysterious. How our prayers coincide with God's sovereignty, is part of His hidden will: that means we don't need to concern ourselves with it when we pray – we don't need to account for it, because we *can't* account for it.

Imagine any New Testament blessings for the churches (which are a form of prayer) ending with "*If it is Your will.*" Take these, for example:

- "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" – *if that is His will.* (2Co 1:2)
- And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you," – *if that is His will.* (1Th 3:12)
- "Now I pray to God that you do no evil," – *if that is His will* (2Co 13:7)

Sounds a bit silly, doesn't it? But sickness, affliction, persecution – all the negative stuff that happens in life – somehow requires this escape clause, "If it is your will." Why? "Well, it might not be His will that I be healed." OK. But *what if it is?* That's what we mean by God's *hidden* will: we don't know, one way or the other. So in a sense, it's irrelevant to our prayers.

We cannot pray for God's hidden will to be revealed to us, so that we are privy to what God chooses to keep secret. That seems obvious enough. But what *can* we pray for? What *should* we pray for? (1) We pray that God's revealed will shall be fulfilled. "Your kingdom

come. Your will be done." And (2) we are not to be anxious for anything, but instead, we are to make our requests known to God – *not worrying about His will*.

Therefore, adding, "If it is your will," to a prayer for God's revealed will to be fulfilled, is nonsensical. And adding it to a prayer asking for our requests to be fulfilled, is just as nonsensical – because we cannot know what His hidden will is.

We're commanded (it is God's revealed will) to make our requests known to Him. And so we *make* those requests, and *leave* them with God. They're our *requests*. That means what God does with them is *His* business, not *ours*. Our duty is to pray for them. We don't have to make His hidden will part of our prayer. It's a given.

Now, it's one thing to add "if it is Your will" when praying for ourselves, simply as a sign of our submission to God – like Paul saying, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content..." But when we're praying for someone else, in their presence, it serves little purpose, and in its effect, it can undermine their confidence in God's good will toward them.

Again, *everything* that comes to us, comes from the hand of God. That doesn't mean we should not pray for its removal. Take Hezekiah's contrition and silent prayer:

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.'" ² Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, ³ "Remember now, O LORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done *what was* good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴ And it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁵ "Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶ "And I will add to your days fifteen years. (2Kng 20:1-6 ^{NKJ})

God is not *bound* to heal us simply because we pray for it; *but we still pray*. How and when He answers our prayer is not our concern. What we want to avoid in our prayers is doubt in God's love and good intentions for our well-being, both temporal or eternal.

So, pray for what you want, in full confidence of God's good will towards you. Read God's word, in full confidence that God will *reveal* Himself there, and *speak* to you there. And yet, listen for the voice of God's Spirit speaking to you directly. He is not silent, but He will never contradict the will of God recorded in the Scripture. We have been called by God, to fellowship and commune with Him – and that's a conversation, not a monologue.