

## Puritan Perspectives on Ministry

**Summarize (500 wds) and critically evaluate (1000 wds) William Ames' *Marrow of Theology* (= *Marrow of Sacred Divinity*) II.I – "Observance in General".**

### Summary

"Observance in General" heads the second and final division of *The Marrow of Theology*. Having treated "the first part of theology, or faith in God", Ames considers "observance toward God".

The section begins with a definition of "observance [*observantia*]" as "the submissive performance of the will of God for the glory of God" (1), which is then increasingly analysed and explained as follows<sup>1</sup>:

With reference to Scripture, it is argued that the revealed prescribing will of God (distinguished from his "secret, effectual or ordaining power") "describes our obedience" and explains Christ's (2-3, 22-24).

This will of God properly so commands the submission of our wills eagerly to serve Him as sons and also the strict duty of our obedience as servants such that our wills are conformed to God's will (4-9).

The goal of observance is the glory of God (10, 27) and the subordinate aim is our own salvation and blessedness (28).

The causes of observance are analysed in sections 13-19:

- A: Principal efficient cause: (I) indirectly, faith (14)  
 Brings forth obedience by:  
 (i) apprehending Christ, the fountain of life and power to do well  
 (ii) receiving the arguments of Scripture which induce obedience  
 (iii) obtaining grace (15)  
 (II) directly, sanctifying grace, granted in regeneration (16) without which sinful man cannot please God (17) though good deeds are called for from unbelievers (18)
- B: Contributory, moving cause(s): (I) respect for the majesty of God  
 (II) the kindness of God, to which we owe all that is in us in gratitude  
 (III) God's rightful command  
 (IV) the justice and usefulness of the things commanded  
 (V) the reward promised  
 (VI) the misery incurred by those who do otherwise (19)

The obedience is summarily contained in the Ten Commandments (20).

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Boughton, Lynne Courter, *Choice and Action: William Ames' Concept of the Mind's Operation in Moral Decisions* (Church History, 56, 1987, pp188-203), chart A, p191 (also attached) which analyses observance into causes, manner, subject, adjunct and effect.

The role of the perfect law is introduced in paragraph 21: it has directing though neither justifying nor ultimately condemning power for the faithful under the New Covenant (21).

Knowledge of God's commanded will for us is necessary for obedience. We are zealously to seek that knowledge (25).

This "should be accompanied by dread, a fear of transgressing it." (26, c.f. 11). We chiefly fear the offense, but also God's punishment. Since our obedience is not only given because of rewards and punishments it is not mercenary and our relationship with God is not cheapened by the fact that these things provoke us (29).

Grace, not observance, is the chief cause of eternal life yet by obedience we further possess the life to which we have already been given the right (30) since obedience itself is a step towards perfection (31) and God has graciously promised eternal life even to those who, inevitably imperfectly (32), obey him (33).

The sincere submission of every affection is called for so that the whole man is applied to his duty (34). Principally the will is to be made subject to God's will (35), expressed in readiness of will to do God's will (36), loving good and hating evil (37) resulting in confirmation of faith and hope (38) with a quiet, joyful and glorifying conscience (39).

### **Critical Evaluation**

#### Ames' aims

This section should be evaluated, at least in part, according to Ames' intention to write a concise theology for laymen that would lead them to godliness<sup>2</sup>.

Ames' short numbered paragraphs are pedagogically useful and the definitions and distinctions, employing Peter Ramus' dialectical method, are usually clear<sup>3</sup>, if with some repetition (e.g., cf. 3 & 23). Eusden suggests that Ames is answering implied questions throughout<sup>4</sup>, especially questions which are pressing for Christian living, and at times Ames seems to be usefully anticipating objections (e.g., 21, 29).

Observance is rightly seen as an aspect of theology and Ames is clear that doctrine should lead to devotion<sup>5</sup>, a movement reflected in the main division of *The Marrow* and

---

<sup>2</sup> See John Eusden's discussion in the introduction of Ames, William, *The Marrow of Theology* edited by John D. Eusden (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1968) translated from the third Latin edition, 1629. esp. pp2-3 and Ames' own statement of his purpose on pp69-70.

<sup>3</sup> In Boughton's opinion Ames is uncharacteristically imprecise in describing the relationship between the human will and intellect, op. cit. p189.

<sup>4</sup> Eusden, op. cit., p42. Ames had written in question-and-answer form in *Conscience: Its Laws or Cases* and the form was common in the catechisms of his day.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Carl Trueman comments "Ames' theology represents the blend of Reformed Orthodox theology and concern for practical, experiential piety that was so typical of the greatest Puritan divines." p13. Like Duns Scotus Ames sees theology as a practical not a speculative science and emphasises the intimate connection between doctrinal belief and practical piety. Trueman, Carl, 'William Ames' in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (IVP, Leicester, 2003). Similarly, Prozesky argues that "According to

familiar, for example, from Romans and Ephesians. The structure itself implies that good works flow from faith<sup>6</sup>.

This section is clearly adapted to motivate and inform practical Christian living (e.g., 19).

### Are there two wills in God?

Ames distinction between the “secret, effectual, ordaining-power” will of God and his prescribing will<sup>7</sup> is valid and pastorally useful, though it could be more fully and carefully expressed.

This (now) established Reformed distinction between the decretive and preceptive will of God makes good sense of the Biblical witness concerning what pleases God<sup>8</sup>.

In describing the decretive will of God, Ames strongly states divine sovereignty<sup>9</sup> (3), excluding libertarian free will. As the remainder of the chapter shows, Ames nevertheless maintains human responsibility to conform to the preceptive will of God. Such nuances seek to avoid making God the author of evil.

God’s decretive will is not always secret (as Ames might be taken to imply in paragraph 3) since to some extent God has revealed it. Rather, it is Ames’ point that only in so far as God’s normative will for us *has* been revealed does it function as the rule for our observance (23). This has the great pastoral merit of making the pathway of obedience clear for the believer: he is to live according to God’s revealed Word rather than seeking to pry into God’s secret plan for his life<sup>10</sup>.

While Ames’ distinctions are helpful, Frame comments that ultimately “God’s will is, of course, one.”<sup>11</sup> God’s decretive and preceptive wills are to be seen as aspects of God’s will, as what he wants, is pleased by or decides, rather than a metaphysical or psychological entity, or worse, entities, in God. Frame argues that the decretive and preceptive aspects of God’s will may be “perspectivally related. God decrees to act

Stoeffler he [Ames] viewed dogmatics and ethics as a unit, as may be seen from his contention that theology is not so much the science about God as ‘the knowledge of how to live for him’.” Citing F. E. Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, Leiden, 1971, p135. Prozesky, Martin H., *The Emergence of Dutch Pietism* (Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Volume 28, No. 1, January 1997) quoted p34.

<sup>6</sup> See further Eusden, op. cit., p47

<sup>7</sup> As Carl Trueman comments, in his concern to precisely define the willing of God, Ames draws on the terminology of the Middle Ages and is Catholic in the true sense of the word in quarrying the whole of Church tradition. Op. cit., p13

<sup>8</sup> See Frame, John, *The Doctrine of God* (Presbyterian & Reformed, Philipsburg, 2002) pp531-3 for Biblical texts which refer to (a) the decretive – Gen 50:20; Ps 51:18; Is 46:10; Mt 11:25f; Acts 2:23; Rm 9:18-f; Eph 1:1 and others - and (b) the preceptive – Ps 5:4; 103:21; Mt 7:21; Eph 5:17 and others - will of God.

<sup>9</sup> “... all creatures, including ungodly men and even devils, do the will of God with an obedience common to all of them.” (3)

<sup>10</sup> See also Frame’s discussion of wisdom and “God’s will for my life” as a third description of the will of God, op. cit., pp539ff

<sup>11</sup> Frame, op. cit., p530

according to his precepts... His precepts include the teaching that we should bow before God's sovereign decrees."<sup>12</sup>

### How does the human will work?

Ames' account of human willing and acting is not a simplistic one and demonstrates psychological depth<sup>13</sup>.

Though he focuses on the will (4, 5, 8, 16 esp. 35), Ames sees the mind, affections and actions, "the whole man", engaged in observance (34).

Ames' pastoral agenda drives his desire to motivate his readers to do the will of God.

Nevertheless, despite his interest in the human will, Ames maintains the classical Calvinistic position that "sanctifying grace is the very power by which we are lifted up to accommodate our will to the will of God" (16), "... since sin came, man cannot of himself do anything acceptable to God, any work of spiritual life, except it be done in Christ through faith and sanctifying grace." (17, c.f. also 30).

In the light of such words it is extraordinarily at variance even with this brief section of *The Marrow* that R. T. Kendall should think that Ames' theology is Arminian "in every way but in the theoretical explanation that lies behind the actual practice of the believer (or unbeliever)."<sup>14</sup>

"Theoretical" seems to function as little more than a term of abuse here: Ames maintains that the action of the Spirit of God is real, even if unseen. Indeed, "the principal efficient cause of observance as an inner, abiding principle is indirectly faith and directly sanctifying grace." (13).

Kendall seems to misunderstand the role of "the contributory, moving cause"(s) of observance (19). It must be recalled that although Ames addresses the human will, this

---

<sup>12</sup> Frame, op. cit. p542

<sup>13</sup> On this see further Boughton, op. cit. and the appended diagram which attempts to summarise moral psychology according to Ames. Boughton argues that: "Ames... was not concerned only with applying structured reasoning to revelation. He also probed the way in which the human mind was structured so as to make reason, choice, and action possible.... Ames took care in establishing the psychological foundations of human moral choices." p188f

<sup>14</sup> Kendall, R. T., *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1997) p157 and further: "There is to be seen in Ames's soteriology an elaborate system that revolves almost entirely around the role of the human will.... Ames's voluntarism appears to be the key to all he believes.... If he can lead a soul to a willingness to serve God, he has fulfilled the central task of divinity. The human will is the key.... Man is seen earning God's grace by a willingness to consecrate himself to a godly life. The irony is that this theology purports to lie in a thoroughly predestinarian system.... Ames actually goes beyond anything Arminius had published [in appealing to the human will]." The above quotations are taken respectively from pp151, 154, 157, 163, 164. Much could be said in response to this which lies beyond the scope of this essay. For example, it should be noted that Ames wrote extensively against Arminianism and was a respected observer at the Synod of Dort. His contemporaries would by no means have recognised Kendall's account of Ames' theology and it is not clear that Kendall's version should be preferred to that of Ames, his opponents and followers. See further the response in Helm, Paul, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1982).

does not mean that he expects the sinful human will to yield to this persuasion unaided (16-17). It is entirely appropriate to think that God the Holy Spirit would sovereignly ordain to use these arguments to operate on the human will.

When Kendall accuses Ames of a “quasi-perfectionism”<sup>15</sup>, “quasi” must bear considerable weight since Ames explicitly states: “our obedience while we live here is imperfect and defiled with mixture of sin” (32).

#### How is the human will best motivated to observance?

John Piper has questioned the role often assigned to gratitude in motivating the believer to good works. He might challenge Ames’ urging believers by “... the kindness of God towards us for which we owe him whatever is in us”<sup>16</sup>... Thus, our observance is nothing else than gratitude owed to God, and is rightly explained by theologians under that title.” (19) as “The Debtor’s Ethic”<sup>17</sup>. In Ames defence, it must be pointed out that he does not make gratitude the only or even the primary reason for godliness.

Ames is also willing to urge the promises to the obedient and the miseries due to the disobedient as subordinate reasons for observance. Although this conflicts with some notions of disinterested piety, it seems consistent with Scripture’s own practice, although the primary end of observance is God’s glory (27) and reward / punishment is not our chief motivation (29).

#### The role of the law of God

Ames argues (presumably partly with antinomians in his sights) that the (Old Testament) law of God is not abrogated among the faithful (21). It would seem hard to dissent from this, given Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:17 that he did not come to abolish the law, though he fulfilled it. How the commands of the Old Testament law apply to believers is not treated in detail here, though Ames argues for the Reformed “third use” of the law.

#### Conclusion

---

<sup>15</sup> Kendall, op. cit., p163

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps surprisingly this seems to echo the *via moderna* / nominalist semi-Pelagian concept of Gabriel Biel and others concerning *facere quod in se est*, lit., ‘doing what lies within you’. If this is deliberate, we should note that Ames has shifted the placing of the language: he does not have in view an (economically modelled) covenant in which God graciously rewards those who do their best (though it is insufficient), as with the unreformed scheme, but a response to grace already received. See further McGrath, Alister E., *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, second edition (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993) esp. pp75ff

<sup>17</sup> See further Piper, John, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, (IVP, Leicester, 1995), chapter 1 of which is entitled “The Debtor’s Ethic: Should We Try to Pay God Back?”, p31ff. Piper defends gratitude as a spontaneous exulting response to grace but explicitly rejects the idea that gratitude involves the notion that we *owe* the giver since this is to receive God’s gracious free gift as if it were a legal / business transaction. He points out that: “The Bible rarely, if ever, makes gratitude the impulse of moral behavior, or ingratitude the explanation of immorality.” Rather, Piper argues that faith, as trust in God’s future grace, is the Bible’s main grounds of the believer’s obedience.

One can imagine that the sons of the Leyden merchants may sometimes have found Ames' original lecture series, on which *The Marrow* is based, rather strong meat but that they would have been nourished by digesting it.

### Bibliography

- Ames, William, *The Marrow of Theology* edited by John D. Eusden (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1968) translated from the third Latin edition, 1629.
- Boughton, Lynne Courter, *Choice and Action: William Ames' Concept of the Mind's Operation in Moral Decisions* (Church History, 56, 1987, pp188-203)
- Frame, John, *The Doctrine of God* (Presbyterian & Reformed, Philipsburg, 2002)
- Helm, Paul, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1982)
- Kendall, R. T., *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1997)
- McGrath, Alistair E., *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, second edition (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993)
- Muller, Richard A., *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally From Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1985)
- Piper, John, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, (IVP, Leicester, 1995)
- Prozesky, Martin H., *The Emergence of Dutch Pietism* (Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Volume 28, No. 1, January 1997)
- Sherlock, Charles, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, Contours in Christian Theology series (IVP, Leicester, 1996)
- Truman, Carl, 'William Ames' in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (IVP, Leicester, 2003)