

Thomas Boston and the doctrine of God's will

Mackenzie, Jonathan Peter

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Jonathan Mackenzie 1/12/10

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is the Reformed doctrine of the will of God and its pastoral application in the theology of Thomas Boston (1676-1732). The objective of this thesis is to establish Boston's doctrine of the will of God and how he applies that doctrine pastorally. We shall argue that one significant key to understanding Boston and his theology is the use he makes of the doctrine of the will of God, particularly in relation to God's providence. This is a common theme in Reformed theology but the way in which Boston worked the theme out in his practical theology and in his pastoral care marks him out as significant.

We shall begin (chapter 1) with a brief introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Boston, before concentrating (chapter 2) on his *Memoirs*, in which it becomes very clear that his understanding of the doctrine of the will of God, particularly in relation to God's providence, is not only a theological idea but an intensely personal way of understanding his own life and circumstances and those of his parishioners.

In order to understand Boston's doctrine of the will of God in its context within the wider Reformed tradition, we shall consider (chapter 3) very briefly the contribution of the Fathers, before focussing in on the writings of John Calvin (1509-64). We shall then consider the use of the doctrine of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), which was adopted as the Principal Subordinate Standard of the Church of Scotland in 1647 and to which Boston, as a Minister in that Church, would have been required to subscribe. We shall also consider in passing the influence upon Boston of John Flavel's *The Mystery of Providence* (1676-77).

With that background and context we shall then (chapter 4) examine closely Boston's doctrine of the will of God, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the providence of God. This will encompass such themes as God's being and attributes; the decrees of God; the problem of evil; election and reprobation; and free will. The pastoral and practical applications of this theological perspective will then be examined (chapter 5), demonstrating how significant a theme the will of God was for the way in which Boston ministered to his congregation in his preaching and pastoral care, as well as his wider ministry to the church through his writings.

We shall then draw the threads of the study together and offer some conclusions as well as some suggestions for further study (chapter 6).

Abbreviations

ST – *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas.

CVE - *Creation, Variety and Existence*, ST Vol. 8, Thomas Aquinas

SCG – *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas.

CG – *City of God*, Augustine.

CW – *Complete Works*, Thomas Boston.

CL – *Crook in the Lot*, Thomas Boston.

CEPG – *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, John Calvin.

SPG – *The Secret Providence of God*, John Calvin.

BLW – *The Bondage and Liberation of the will*, John Calvin.

GFC – *Of Grace and Free Choice*, Bernard of Clairvaux.

PRRD – *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Richard Muller.

WCF – *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

WCF, LC – *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism*.

WCF, SC, – *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Shorter Catechism*.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Thomas Boston and the Doctrine of God's Will

The focus of this thesis is the Reformed doctrine of the will of God and its pastoral application in the theology of Thomas Boston (1676-1732). The main objective of our investigation is to understand Thomas Boston's doctrine of providence as the unfolding of the divine will and how he used that doctrine in his pastoral ministry. To this end we shall first get to know Thomas Boston, looking at who he was, what he did, where he did it, and how. We shall proceed by painting a picture of the man, his ministry, his works, and the interest that has been shown in him. This shall be followed by an introduction to the doctrine of the will of God and its Reformed context in particular, noting the limitations such a project entails.

Boston - the man and his reputation

Boston was a Church of Scotland minister who spent the first eight years of his ministry in the parish of Simprin and the remainder at Etterick, both in the rural Scottish borders. Boston was primarily a Reformed minister and preacher of the gospel,¹ rather than an academic theologian,² although his theological capabilities in writing were impressive.³ He became commonly known as the 'Pastor of Etterick.'⁴

¹About 10 of the 12 volumes which make up Boston's collected works deal with sermons. T. Boston, *The Complete Works of The Late Rev. Thomas Boston, Ettrick*, collected papers, edited by Rev. Samuel M'Millan (London: William Tegg and Co., 1854).

²Wilson describes Boston the theologian, as being, first 'biblical, then 'evangelical,' thirdly 'Calvinistic,' and lastly 'Witsian.' J. Wilson, "The Pastor of Ettrick," *Sword & Trowel* 14 (1878): 26.

³Boston, *CW*.

⁴Throughout the Morrison edition of his *Memoirs*, Boston speaks of Etterick, T. Boston, *Memoirs of the Life, Time, and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston*, with an introduction by G. H. Morrison (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), and Boston includes the second 'e' in his address of his letters, T. Boston, "Letter to Mrs Shiell," letter, CM/B97. MSS Box 2.3.7-8 (Edinburgh, New College, 1732), but it is often referred to as Ettrick, see, W. Addison, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Boston of Ettrick* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1936); J. L. Watson,

Thomas Boston was very much a man of his day, by which I mean he was poor in both health and wealth for a large part of his life.⁵ He was a family man, coming from a big family and having a large family of his own.⁶ Boston describes himself as being ‘naturally bashful, timorous, and much subject to the fear of man ...’,⁷ and ‘very little useful in converse, being naturally silent.’⁸ Boston was certainly no extrovert. Physically, Boston was frequently and progressively unwell, worse in spring, better in the autumn.⁹ An example of his suffering is provided on the occasion he said he ‘was seized with a severe fainting fit, and had almost fainted away, but that I was eased by vomiting, as usual.’¹⁰ There are numerous occasions in his *Memoirs* where Boston makes note of his frequent and painful maladies but his troubles were not confined only to the physical aspects of his wellbeing. There were times during his ministry when he became ‘downright melancholy,’ confused and troubled of mind. ‘Many a heavy and melancholy day have I had, through various causes and occasions, which holy providence hath laid before me.’¹¹ However, he relates how he ‘does better’ spiritually when in company where he has observed that he is less inclined to fall into temptation.¹² Although Boston was often melancholy he was not pessimistic, he was exceedingly introspective¹³ yet incredibly sociable for the rural surroundings of

The Pastor of Ettrick: Thomas Boston (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1883); D. J. Innes, "Thomas Boston of Ettrick," in *Faith and a Good Conscience*, D. M. Lloyd-Jones, chair (Chiswick: The Evangelical Magazine, 1962), 32-46.

⁵He speaks of his physical pain to others in his private letters. Boston, "Letter to Mrs Shiell"

⁶Boston was the youngest of seven children, his youngest sister died before he knew her but all the others survived into adulthood to have many children of their own. Boston had ten children, six of whom died while very young.

⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 29.

⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 253.

⁹Note the curious incident of the pea being inserted into a muscle of his leg as a remedy for soreness! Needless to say, it added to his pain. Boston recalls, ‘There was hardly a step of the management of the pea, wherein there was an error committed.’ Boston, *Memoirs*, 469ff.

¹⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 102. Cf. Boston, *Memoirs*, 135.

¹¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 137. In his introduction Low says, ‘probably there never was a man who carried so uniformly and constantly into practice a belief in the Almighty’s close incessant supervision of every act and fact of live.’ T. Boston, *A General Account of My Life*, with an introduction by Rev. George D. Low (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), xliv.

¹²Boston, *Memoirs*, 145.

¹³His final two sermons were on the necessity of self-examination. Boston, *CW*, II.497ff. Monday mornings were reserved for self-examination, S. A. Woodruff III, "The Pastoral Ministry in the

his setting, but seldom given over to mirth. He was not a theorist but a doer, a man with a practical work ethic who filled his time with a productive workload. His character was such that he became a leader among the Marrowmen. Despite his honest self-portrayal, Boston was very much loved by his parishioners, contemporaries and commentators.

Whenever works on Scottish Church history emerge,¹⁴ Thomas Boston not only finds a place of significance, but is often heralded as a Reformed Scottish theologian of great stature.¹⁵ Walker provides a glowing appraisal of the man,

Among these I notice, first and foremost, Thomas Boston, whom I cannot but regard as one of the great figures in our theological history. Brave, honest, capable, forming his own opinions about everything, never letting a question lie by him unsettled; combining with the aspirations or ambitions of a strong and active intellect, a sense of responsibility which pressed him to work with his might; in spite of the most unfavourable circumstances, he won his way to theological eminence, and left his mark both on the theology and the religion of his country.¹⁶

Thomson says, ‘It would be difficult to name a man who has a higher claim to an honourable place in the Christian biography of Scotland in the eighteenth century than Thomas Boston of Etterick.’¹⁷ MacLeod also speaks highly of Boston, saying he was a ‘remarkable man and good divine,’ a ‘gracious and great divine,’ and ‘one of the brightest lights in the firmament of the Reformed Church in Scotland.’¹⁸ Innes highlights Thomson’s appraisal of Boston’s pastoral ministry,

Church of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century, with Special Reference to Thomas Boston, John Willison and John Erskine," unpublished doctoral thesis (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1966), 98. Woodruff rightly recognizes self-examination as a common occurrence for ministers in the eighteenth century (113).

¹⁴To situate Boston within his time-frame and tradition, see, J. M. Reid, *Kirk & Nation. The Story of the Reformed Church of Scotland* (London: Skeffington & Son, 1960); J. MacLeod, *Scottish Theology. In Relation to Church History* (Edinburgh: John Knox Press, 1974); T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology. From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); J. Walker, *Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560-1750* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982).

¹⁵MacLeod, 204-20 Cf. Woodruff III, 65.

¹⁶Walker, J., 30.

¹⁷A. Thomson, *Thomas Boston. His Life & Times* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 15.

¹⁸MacLeod, 145-46. Cf. Addison calls it ‘one of the housebooks of Scottish piety’ and that it ‘rendered an inestimable service to our country.’ Addison, 169.

The assertion is not likely to be challenged that, if Scotland had been searched during the earlier part of the eighteenth century, there was not a minister of Christ within its bounds who, alike in his personal character and in the discharge of his pastoral functions, approached nearer to the apostolic model than did this man of God.¹⁹

Boston's fame is due primarily to his involvement with the Marrow controversy²⁰ and secondarily, as a result of the popularity of his writing.²¹ The popularity of his books in years gone by and the influence they have had in shaping the Reformed tradition within Scotland have not been matched with interest in the man himself, let alone his doctrine of the will of God.²²

Boston - his situation and inheritance

Boston was born after his own nation had codified over a century of Reformed orthodoxy in the Westminster Confession of 1646. Boston had witnessed varied political and religious changes within Scotland²³ as the,

Glorious Revolution of William of Orange in 1688, the resultant abolition of episcopacy in 1689, and the restoration of the Scottish General Assembly in 1690 all occurred during Boston's adolescence and shaped the ecclesiastical landscape of his adult ministry by officially re-establishing Presbyterianism polity and Westminster Calvinism in Scotland.²⁴

¹⁹Innes, 32.

²⁰D. C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy 1718-1723. An Historical and Theological Analysis*. Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988). For misunderstandings surrounding the controversy see also, A. T. B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*. Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1997), 43-45. The two other major ecclesiastical controversies of Boston's day were to do with the Auchterarder Creed (1717), and the case of Professor John Simson (1717 & 1729).

²¹T. Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1839); T. Boston, *The Crook in the Lot. The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men*, edited by D. Kistler, with an introduction by M. Bradley (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2001).

²²A chapter on Boston's doctrine of predestination can be found in, McGowan, Ch.4.

²³Boston, *CW*, IX.229.

²⁴P. G. Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1999), 3.

Boston lived in a post-Westminster Confession world where ‘Calvinism’ was an established expression denoting a certain theological tradition. It was in this political climate and theological tradition that Boston formulates and expresses his own doctrine of God’s will as the pastor of Simprin and Etterick.

Ryken has sufficiently established the context in which Boston laboured without the need for detailed repetition.²⁵ The following points are of importance for this thesis in establishing Boston’s Reformed doctrine of God’s will. Firstly, Boston’s continual insertion of biblical texts is immediately apparent in his works, revealing Scripture as his primary authoritative source.²⁶ Secondly, Ryken notes Boston’s ‘grasp of the historical and geographical scope of international Calvinism,’ but of equal importance he highlights Boston’s ‘Augustinian pedigree,’²⁷ locating him firmly within the Reformed tradition. Thirdly, Boston was well read. Although Boston’s knowledge of the Early Fathers appears to be scant²⁸ and the lack of reference to them in his writing is noticeable, his knowledge of the works of the Magisterial Reformers and those who followed is impressive. Ryken points out,

The fact of the matter is that he was familiar with the main currents of Reformed theology during both of the centuries which preceded his own. Among the Reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546; Wittenberg; *Galatians, Thirtie Foure Special and Chosen Sermons*) and John Calvin (1509-64; Geneva; *Institutio, Catechism, Genesis*) held pride of place for Boston. Boston’s affection for Luther’s understanding of law and gospel is confirmed both by the frequency with which he cited Luther and by his defence of strongly Lutheran themes in the *Marrow*. Boston also read John Knox’s (1514-72) *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, of course, and the *Common Places* of Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563; Berne). Boston was equally familiar with theologians of post-Reformation continental Reformed orthodoxy. The most prominent of his late sixteenth century sources were Theodore Beza (1519-1605; Geneva; *Confession, Propositions and Principles of Divinitie*), Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83; Heidelberg; *Corpus ... Catecheticarum Explicationum*), whom Boston ‘read

²⁵Ryken, Chp 2.

²⁶Cf. Addison, 165.

²⁷Ryken, 6.

²⁸‘His own reading among patristic sources appears to have been limited to a brief encounter with Irenaeus (fl. 175-95; *Adversus Haereses*).’ Ryken, 18.

over three or four times' before going to divinity school ... and Hieronymus Zanchius (1516-90; Heidelberg; *Opera*).²⁹

It is apparent then, how informed and influenced Boston was by Reformed theologians, how well grounded he was in the knowledge of Reformed ideas, and how eager he was to understand the Reformed heritage of his church. One of the major influences of his life preceding his ordination was Flavel's *The Mystery of Providence*.³⁰ Interestingly, when Boston describes himself, the terms 'Calvinist,' 'Reformed,' 'Orthodox,' 'Puritan,' etc, are scarcely if ever used, instead he labels himself 'preacher of the gospel of Christ,' and as a 'sinner.'³¹ In the providence of God however, when his collected works were published, the very first page of his twelve volumes clearly reveals his affectionate endorsement of the Westminster standards.³² The number of quotes from and references to Calvin are more limited (as are quotes and references in general in the works of Boston), and yet still the term 'Calvinist' is placed upon Boston.³³ It is more accurate to describe him as a Scottish minister of the Reformed tradition.

Ryken highlights many of the pre-Reformation influences on Boston, influences that affected the majority of Reformed theology. For example, Ryken sees Boston's *Fourfold State* originating with Augustine in his *De Correptione et Gratia*,³⁴ saying it is a 'theological construct of noble lineage, sired by Augustine and propagated first to Peter Lombard and his commentators, then ultimately to the theologians of Reformed orthodoxy.'³⁵ Although Ryken also notes that, 'As far as can be determined, Thomas Boston did not have direct contact with writings

²⁹Ryken, 14-15. In the appendix of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* there is listed a whole host of theologians (Calvin included, being second in the list after Luther), as support for the work, as evidence that the Marrow men were well read, thorough theologians and knowledgeable about the history of the Reformed tradition and continuing in that line. Boston, *CW*, VII.480-81.

³⁰J. Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence. The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968). Cf. D. J. Bruggink, "The Theology of Thomas Boston 1676-1732," Ph.D (Edinburgh University, 1956), 70; 72.

³¹Boston, *CW*, II.671-72.

³²Boston, *CW*, I.9.

³³'Considered as a theologian, Thomas Boston was an international Calvinist; considered as preacher, he was Puritan.' Ryken, 31.

³⁴Ryken, 67.

³⁵Ryken, 57.

of either Augustine or Lombard.³⁶ Having not read them does not disqualify Boston's doctrine from following in their theology,³⁷ because 'He gave close attention to the systematic works of Ursinus, Sharp, the Leiden professors, Wendelinus, Essenius, Zanchius, and Turretin, all of which use Lombard's fourfold structure as the point of departure for extended theological analysis of the human will.' This reveals two things, a) the influence a certain theological tradition can have on a person's theology, even unknowingly, and b) the difficulty that exists in establishing sources for Boston's theology. On the whole, Boston rarely mentions other theologians in his written works, there is the occasional reference to Augustine and irregular mentions of a few philosophers but a noticeable lack of references to works he has read, used or enjoyed. There are sporadic hints however, which show just how widely read Boston was in the Reformed tradition.³⁸ Most noticeably, in his *Miscellaneous Questions* (VI), which form some of his earlier works,³⁹ he exhibits the knowledge of a fine scholar, providing a liberal sprinkling of names, sources, and citations of works which he has both read and engages with in his discussions.⁴⁰ This also reveals that Boston chose to write in a simplistic style, fitted for his country parishioners, but simplicity coupled with power, as in Luther's commentary on Galatians which Boston adored.⁴¹ He must have made a conscious decision to write almost entirely in his own words, reproving arguments brought against his view of Scripture without, on the whole, referring to the names, schools, or movements

³⁶Ryken, 70.

³⁷'From Ursinus to Turretin, Boston's Reformed sources remain squarely within the Augustinian and Lombardian tradition of the *status quadruplex*, employing that structure primarily to describe the various states of the will.' Ryken, 76. Boston does occasionally refer to Augustine in his writings. T. Boston, *Repentance. Turning from sin to God: What It Means and Why It's Necessary* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publishers, 2005), 162; Boston, *CW*, II.88.

³⁸Boston's *Memoirs* mention some of the works he engaged with including Turretine's four volumes which he seemed to value. Boston, *CW*, XII.230.

³⁹Boston, *CW*, VI.v.

⁴⁰Within the first 100 pages of volume VI, Boston, for example, cites, Beza (21; 37; 50), Witsius (25), Luther (18; 19; 23), Origen and Ambrose (18), Plato (28), Zanchius (28; 40; 50), Rutherford (37; 51); Chrysostom (42), Anselm (42), Ursinus (50), Owen (54), Augustine (99), and Calvin (51; 61; 80; 92; 93). Boston, *CW*, VI.

⁴¹Cf. Bruggink, 75.

that stood behind those arguments.⁴² This makes Boston's works both original and important, for he is relaying the historical theology of the Reformed tradition in fresh words, in a way that communicated that theology in relevant ways.

What I have tried to show is that Boston's doctrine of God's will, will not have been formulated void of a theological tradition, a history of theology, nor an understanding of Scripture, whether his theology originates directly from his predecessors or whether he inherits it second or third hand from a tradition that spans centuries. Boston's doctrine of God's will can legitimately be termed 'Reformed' in the light of his adherence to the Westminster Confession,⁴³ his admiration of the post-Reformation continental Reformed orthodox scholars he studied, and his interest in the works of the Magisterial Reformers. The background to Boston's doctrine of the will of God is important, but only in as much as it helps explain the journey, the final destination, Boston's own expression of the doctrine of God's will, is of immense importance, for it is this doctrine that he pastorally applied and made nationally accessible.

1.3 Boston's ministry

Boston's ministry has all the components one would expect to find from a rural pastor. Etterick life was remote and harsh, Boston himself got lost within his own parish,⁴⁴ and many of his flock were illiterate. 'Boston and his parishioners were afforded frequent reminders of human mortality. The most reliable data show that no more than half of the early eighteenth-century populace survived past their tenth birthdays.'⁴⁵ Within that setting, Boston primarily loved to preach.⁴⁶ He

⁴²Although at times he does mention those he is opposed to, for example, the Pelagians, Socinians and Arminians. Boston, *CW*, XI.174.

⁴³Boston, *CW*, V.288; Boston, *CW*, VII.9-145; Boston, *CW*, VII.487; etc. The strong influence of the WCF on Boston has been noted by both McGowan (208) and Ryken (20-21). 'Despite Boston's premonitions of the gospel being "exchanged for rationalism" (XII.334), subscription and adherence to the Westminster Standards continued to be nearly universal in the Church of Scotland at least through the first half of the eighteenth century.' Ryken, 48-49.

⁴⁴Boston, *CW*, XII.217.

⁴⁵Ryken, 37.

preached simply, with earthy illustrations, often agricultural, grounding his message in recognizable pictures of rural life. One such jewel is found in his book on repentance where he says, ‘most people even die as they live. Repentance is a flower rarely seen springing up from a deathbed.’⁴⁷ Apart from the Sunday service sermons, there were mid-week sermons, Bible studies and prayer meetings. The vast majority of his written works are transcribed sermons, with the most influential books resulting from various sermon series, first delivered as the weekly ‘ordinary,’ that is, the text of Scripture and theme for the sermon preached. Boston’s sermons are delivered most often according to a set form, with the subject taken from a single verse.⁴⁸

He makes mention of the best sermon he ever preached on the 9th February 1707, delivered at Simprin on 2 Corinthians 11:2,⁴⁹ and was pleased that, despite his frequent ill health, he never missed a sermon.⁵⁰ He was a gifted preacher and preaching formed the bedrock of his overall ministry but he was also a man of earnest prayer, as his *Memoirs* testify, being littered with references to his prayer-life. Boston’s dedication to preaching, prayer and Bible study made him a man of sensitivity in his pastoral duty, even though he could be confrontational and forthright at times. His plans to lecture on the WCF were laid aside when he judged they were too complex for his parishioners.⁵¹ He was active in visitation work, praying for the sick and catechizing his flock, besides helping with communion services of other parishes and involvement in the Church of Scotland’s General Assemblies. His personal character is revealed somewhat in the following entry from his *Memoirs* describing his pastoring duties:

I visited the sick, and spent the afternoon in catechising, and found great ignorance prevailing. On the Tuesday, visiting a sick woman grossly ignorant, after I had laid out before her

⁴⁶‘He was an outstanding and mighty preacher.’ Innes, 37. For a chronological order of all Boston’s sermons while at Etterick, see, Addison, 147ff.

⁴⁷Boston, *Repentance*, 153.

⁴⁸For a full outline of his method of preaching, see, Ryken, 28. The method itself adds nothing to our objective, it does however make Boston’s sermons very structured.

⁴⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 190.

⁵⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 206.

⁵¹Boston, *CW*, XII.158.

wretched state by nature, she told me she had believed all her days. I thereupon sat as astonished for a while, lifted up my eyes to the Lord, and addressed myself to her again for her conviction; howbeit, nothing but stupidity appeared. Therefore I saw I had enough ado among my handful.⁵²

Despite this candid entry of his memoirs, Boston the pastor was loved by a good many of his parishioners once he was established in the community. However, Boston first described his parishioners as being stained by adultery, fornication, a lack of repentance, and a slighting of ordinances.⁵³ Innes says,

Boston was obviously not only a mighty preacher, but also a faithful pastor - and he related the one to the other, applying the preaching in the homes, and gaining suggestions for future sermons from the homes. It is when we see these two parts of his ministry combining and co-operating, preaching and pastoral visitation, and all of course conjoined with prayer, that we can the more easily account for that rich harvest of souls which he was again and again called upon to reap. The living sympathy of the man watered the good seed of the Word which had been sown. And those home visits, winning the affection and the confidence of the people, invested his preaching with a double power, and opened the way for the entrance of the Word.⁵⁴

It was on one of these home visits that he came across *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, a book that reflects Boston's approach to theology in that its contents are simply presented; it is not a technical work. He was a lover of books,⁵⁵ frustrated by his limited library, but as we have seen, well read in the works of the Reformers.⁵⁶ His lack of a significant personal library both hindered and helped him in his ministry,⁵⁷ and his life-long practice of providing hospitality (especially over communion weekends) is described as a trial carved out by the sovereign pleasure of God, because of the ingratitude of its recipients.⁵⁸ Yet it was in the daily mix of studying, praying, reading and visiting that Boston produced his

⁵²Boston, *Memoirs*, 112.

⁵³Addison, 159-60. Cf. Ryken, 39, for a longer list of offences!

⁵⁴Cf. Innes, 41.

⁵⁵Boston knew Latin, Hebrew, French and Dutch. Innes, 45.

⁵⁶Boston's known library can be found in, Ryken, 312-19. See also, Addison, 36. He even read Antonia Bourignon's work, a French mystic whose works were translated by the Reformed Peter Poiret, but were condemned by the Assembly of 1710. Boston was a keen writer, as a theologian, in his letters to friends, as a clerk, as a Hebraist, and a dabbler in poetry, see, Boston, *Memoirs*, 250.

⁵⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 168.

⁵⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 411.

powerful sermons, which in time have proved to be of enduring importance to those who have discovered them.

1.4 Boston's works⁵⁹

Most of Boston's works were published posthumously but his most popular book, *The Fourfold State*, was in print during his life-time, with the publication process being recorded in his *Memoirs*. It is worth hearing the glowing praises of his works by renowned theologians in their own right, to show just how highly Boston's works have been valued, and to begin to see why they have been exceedingly influential in years gone by. The *Fourfold State* is a work which describes the nature of humanity before the Fall, as fallen, as fallen and redeemed, and in their eternal destinies. MacLeod provides an outstanding recommendation of the book,

The work, however, of his pen that has left its mark deepest on the world is his *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. There is no book of practical divinity, not even William Guthrie's *Trial of a Saving Interest in Christ*, nor Rutherford's *Letters*, that was more read in the godly homes of Scotland than this treatise. It did more to mould the thought of his countrymen than anything except the Westminster Shorter Catechism.⁶⁰

Morrison is equally enthralled with the work, saying,

It is so orderly and clear, so rich in just and beautiful citation, so searching, and here and there so softening; it is strong in its appeals, so full, for all its doctrine, of warmth and human life; it is so couched in language of the homeliest and truest ring, rising at times into unquestionable eloquence, that the secret of its acceptance is not far to seek.⁶¹

⁵⁹For a chronological order of Boston's published works, see, Addison, 167ff. See also, T. Boston, *Sermons and Discourses on Several Important Subjects in Divinity* (Edinburgh, 1756), Eighteenth Century Collections Online [accessed: 4/5/2010], sourced from the British Library via UHI Millennium Institute; T. Boston, *The Great sin and Chief Guiltiness of Scotland* (Bodleian Library [Oxford], 1650), Eighteenth Century Collections Online [accessed: 4/5/2010], sourced from the Bodleian Library via UHI Millennium Institute.

⁶⁰MacLeod, 146.

⁶¹Boston, *Memoirs*, xxii-xxiii.

Reekie affirms the importance of this work by noting, ‘it became a best-seller for a hundred years. In many a Scottish drawing-room and shepherd’s cottage the book lay beside the Bible. The Bible and Boston were considered inseparable.’⁶² T. F. Torrance simply adds that this work was ‘the most published (over 80 editions), the most widely read, and probably the most influential book in Scottish theology.’⁶³ It is quite clear from the *Fourfold State* alone, that Boston’s importance as a theologian ought to be prominent.⁶⁴

However, it is not only Boston’s *Fourfold State* that has been spoken of highly, many of his works have proven to be popular and some are still being published today.⁶⁵ His autobiography,⁶⁶ in the words of MacLeod, ‘is one of our Scots religious classics in the realm of spiritual self-portraiture.’⁶⁷ In the recommendatory note of Morrison’s edition,⁶⁸ Alexander Whyte says,

The issue of this scholarly and artistic edition of Thomas Boston’s Autobiography is an event of national importance. His sound and commanding commonsense, his immense industry, his great learning attained to amid unparalleled difficulties, his sometime Shakespearean style, his life of faith and prayer, and his pulpit and pastoral efficiency and success, all combine to make Boston’s *Memoirs of his Life, Time and Writings* a book to be always at hand in every Scottish Manse, as well as in every well-read, patriotic, and pious Scottish home.⁶⁹

Whyte’s use of the term ‘Shakespearean style’ matches Wilson’s evaluation of the *Memoirs* when he says, ‘though prolix and antiquated in style, and sometimes too

⁶²A. G. Reekie, "Boston of Ettrick," *Evangelical Quarterly* 20 (1948): 71.

⁶³Torrance, T. F., 220. Cf. Thomson, 15.

⁶⁴Apparently, thousands were converted from this work alone. Innes, 46. Boston did make a posthumous contribution to *The Fundamentals*, T. Boston, "The Nature of Regeneration," in *The Fundamentals, Vol. 2*, edited by R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008 Reprint), 128-32.

⁶⁵Boston, *Repentance*; T. Boston, *The Art of Man-Fishing. A Puritan’s View of Evangelism*, with an introduction by J. I. Packer (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1998); Boston, *CL*.

⁶⁶Boston, *CW*, XII. This is originally made up of two separate works, *Passages of My Life* and *A General Account of My Life*, their amalgamation resulted in the *Memoirs*, which are found in his *Works*. Unless otherwise stated this is the edition we shall be referring to given its popularity and accessibility.

⁶⁷MacLeod, 146.

⁶⁸This edition includes illustrations and photos of Boston and the particular areas of interest for his life such as Ettrick church. Boston, *Memoirs*, 6, 96, 212, 280, 328, 402, 476.

⁶⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, v.

morbidly subjective, is yet, we venture to affirm, one of the most valuable autobiographies to the Christian minister ever written'.⁷⁰ Although the style of his *Memoirs* may be a negative point, it does not detract from the overwhelmingly positive evaluation of its content, which in itself reveals a significant understanding of Boston's theology of providence under God's will.

Other of his famous works include, *The Crook in the Lot*,⁷¹ 'a book once extensively read and prized by afflicted persons in Scotland,'⁷² and still in print today is *A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing*,⁷³ which Packer introduces as a work 'constantly hailed by evangelicals as a masterpiece on ministry, worthy to stand on the same shelf as Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*.'⁷⁴ A lesser known work is Boston's *A View of the Covenant of Grace*,⁷⁵ which highlights his indebtedness to federal theology, and 'ranks among the best works ever written on the Covenant and deserves the widest possible readership.'⁷⁶ In Boston's *Tractatus Stigmologicus Hebraicus*,⁷⁷ he produced a detailed and thoroughly researched work into the Hebrew accents.⁷⁸ Walker observes that he 'was the best Hebrew scholar in Scotland, as he was the freshest and most powerful of Scottish living theologians.'⁷⁹ The extent of positive reviews about Boston's works makes the glaring neglect of interest in them all the more noticeable.

⁷⁰Wilson, 27.

⁷¹Boston, *CW*, III; Henceforth, Boston, *CL*.

⁷²Wilson, 60.

⁷³Boston, *CW*, V; Boston, *The Art of Man-Fishing*. Early copies of *The Art of Man-Fishing* and *The Fourfold State* are included in, T. Boston, *Boston's Works Vol. 1* (Glasgow: William Brownlie, 1796).

⁷⁴Boston, *The Art of Man-Fishing*, 7-8.

⁷⁵T. Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, M. H. Watts, with an introduction by M. H. Watts (Lewes: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1990).

⁷⁶Boston, *Covenant of Grace*, Introduction by Watts, 6.

⁷⁷This is not included in his works because, I presume, of its specialized nature.

⁷⁸Boston wrestled with the idea that Hebrew accents were actually part of the divinely inspired Scriptures and he sought to understand their exact meaning and find a system by which they could be understood. Although the idea is universally rejected today, MacLeod says, 'It is likely that it is the most elaborate treatment that any Hebrew question has met with at the hands of the Scottish ministry.' MacLeod, 151. See also, Thomson, Ch.8; Boston, *Memoirs*, xxxii. Other works published posthumously include, *The Crook in the Lot*, *Christian Life Delineated*, and *Body of Divinity*. Boston, *CL*, xi.

⁷⁹Walker, J., 32.

The Marrow controversy is the event which took Boston from his secluded rural setting and placed him in the fore of ecclesiastical debate and politics.⁸⁰ Boston is central to this controversy as it was he who ‘rediscovered’⁸¹ the little book called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*⁸² (most probably written by Edward Fisher) as he notes in his *Memoirs* and defended its contents.⁸³ Boston had actually been studying the book for a number of years with some delight and in complete ignorance of any potential danger for controversy, before it became a major public debate within the church.⁸⁴ He delighted in the book so much, he had it re-published adding his own notes to the text.⁸⁵ The book was condemned by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1720 for being Antinomian in nature⁸⁶ but in its defence stood twelve ministers of which Boston was one.⁸⁷ More has been written on the Marrow controversy⁸⁸ than on Boston himself and the actual controversy falls outside the confines of this study except when Boston’s teaching and notes from the *Marrow* impact his doctrine of God’s will.⁸⁹ Ralph Erskine penned the following words three years after the Marrow controversy:

The great, the grave judicious Boston’s gone,
 Who once like Athanasius stood alone,
 Whose golden pen to future times will bear
 His fame, till in the clouds his Lord appear.⁹⁰

The estimation of Boston’s contemporaries, concerning his character, conduct and works, was that his fame would remain as an enduring testimony within Scottish

⁸⁰Thomson, Ch.10; Lachman.

⁸¹Wilson, 29.

⁸²Boston, *CW*, VII.

⁸³The fact that Boston was borrowing a book is not surprising, for although he was exceedingly well read, his own personal library is well documented as being meagre. Boston, *Memoirs*, xxvii.

⁸⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, xxviii.

⁸⁵Boston, *CW*, VII.

⁸⁶‘how a Scotch Assembly could condemn the book, as it was yet to be condemned, and could deliberately find in it an antinomian bias, must surely remain a mystery for ever.’ Boston, *Memoirs*, xxviii.

⁸⁷Thomson, 137.

⁸⁸MacLeod, 139-66.

⁸⁹The condemning of the *Marrow* and its teaching as heretical by the General Assembly has been repeatedly denounced and the judgment shown to be at fault. See, McGowan, Ch.3.

⁹⁰Quoted in, Wilson, 61.

history.⁹¹ The reality is, most Scottish theologians know little, if anything, about him today.⁹²

In light then of Boston's works and influence within Scottish theology and the Reformed tradition, one is left to raise the question over why so little attention has been paid to him and his theology? In 1878, Wilson explicitly states, 'No Scottish writings on practical religion were more extensively read a generation or so back than those of Boston. At one time it is said there was on average one book of Boston's to every Scottish family.'⁹³ Therefore, seventy years after Wilson's remarks, Reekie's description of Boston is correct, 'In Scotland's gallery of forgotten greatness none have faded so far into the shades as Thomas Boston who, though he spent most of his life in the lonely vale of Etterick, won a national reputation which placed his work next to the Bible and Shakespeare.'⁹⁴ Thomson further lamented the fact that a century and half after Boston's death no biography of his life had been written.⁹⁵

1.5 Works on Boston

Why has Boston faded so far from the fame that his contemporaries thought him so worthy of retaining? In the last century only three significant works have been produced with a specific interest in Thomas Boston, taking the total to six,⁹⁶ since his death in 1732. On the biographical front, Thomson's work, *Thomas Boston: His Life and Times*,⁹⁷ is still accessible, whereas Addison's *The Life and Writings*

⁹¹Jonathan Edwards described him as a 'Truly great divine,' in Boston, *Covenant of Grace*, 2.

⁹²'Some of the great Scottish divines of past generations have been "rediscovered" of recent years; others remain in comparative obscurity. Boston of Etterick, unfortunately, belongs to this latter group.' Innes, 32.

⁹³Wilson, 25. On the same page however, he does mention that Boston's works have not received universal approval, noting in his own day that they were nearly out of print.

⁹⁴Reekie, 69.

⁹⁵Thomson, 13.

⁹⁶This does not include, T. Boston, *The Beauties of Boston* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1979), which is simply a compendium of his *Works*.

⁹⁷Thomson. This is a reprint of an old book.

of *Thomas Boston of Etterick*⁹⁸ and Watson's *The Pastor of Etterick: Thomas Boston*,⁹⁹ are both no longer in print. The two major works which are currently available focus on different aspects of Boston's theology, these are McGowan's *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*¹⁰⁰ and Ryken's *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State*,¹⁰¹ but there also exists an unpublished Ph.D thesis by Bruggink entitled *The Theology of Thomas Boston 1676-1732*, this also focuses on covenant theology.¹⁰² Of the six primary works on Thomas Boston, four are the result of Ph.D dissertations or theses.¹⁰³ Thomson's biography of Boston and Watson's *The Pastor of Etterick*, are the only pieces of literature written on Boston to reach a popular audience and both of these were written in the late eighteenth hundreds. One other unpublished thesis deals in part with Boston's pastoral ministry.¹⁰⁴ Apart from these few significant contributions to the study of Boston there remain only a handful of journal articles, none devoting more than a few pages to their worthy subject.¹⁰⁵

The literature dedicated to Thomas Boston does not reflect the significance he has had on Scottish Reformed theology nor do justice to a man of his achievements. As someone who is described as one of the most influential Scottish theologians, whose works for over a hundred years proved more popular in Scotland than any other single author, renowned for his preaching ability and Hebraic achievements, one cannot help noticing the void that exists in the academic interest in him. This study into Boston's doctrine of God's will and its pastoral application is therefore necessary on a number of levels. Firstly, to foster renewed interest in one of Scotland's most influential theologians and his works. Secondly, for attaining a better understanding of the doctrine of God's will within the Scottish Reformed

⁹⁸Addison.

⁹⁹Watson, J. L.

¹⁰⁰McGowan.

¹⁰¹Ryken.

¹⁰²Bruggink.

¹⁰³Addison; Bruggink; McGowan; Ryken.

¹⁰⁴Woodruff III.

¹⁰⁵J. D. McMillan, "Thomas Boston and the Free Offer of the Gospel," *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* (1988); Reekie; Innes; Wilson.

tradition. And, thirdly, to inform our understanding of how one of Scotland's most renowned and influential theologians applied that doctrine in his pastoral ministry, since the doctrine of God's will has been important within Reformed theology.

1.6 The Doctrine of the Will of God

The literature relevant to the field of God's will in Reformed theology is both diverse and impressive. This is due to the number of centuries in which Reformed theology has existed and the number of themes this doctrine encompasses. It is helpful therefore, to begin by briefly highlighting the general concept of 'God's will' for the Reformed faith. This shall be followed by a survey of the literature relevant to the specific topic of God's will, rather than the multitude of works that are connected to or impact that doctrine. There appears to be a vast imbalance between the amount of works related to God's will and the actual literature dedicated specifically to that subject. The works related to God's will, those on providence, election, free will, etc, are absolutely necessary for understanding the will of God, but only when they are viewed in relation to each other as well as to the will of God. Lastly, it is necessary to identify the limitations of this study given the scale of the subject and the confines of any thesis.

1.7 The general concept of God's will in Reformed theology

The term 'God's will' is open to a number of interpretations and its relationship to God's being and act of creation can be very problematic to define. A Reformed theology on the will of God must be based upon Scriptural revelation,¹⁰⁶ given the

¹⁰⁶'If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture.' J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 1.6.2. Some books which deal with the subject of God and his attributes, including his will, fail to include a single reference to Scripture! R. H. Nash, *The Concept of God. An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

Reformed standard of *Sola Scriptura*.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, Shedd in his *Dogmatic Theology* rightly says, ‘The phrase *God’s will* is ambiguous,’¹⁰⁸ and any attempt to gain a complete understanding of God’s will is difficult because the biblical revelation is multifarious and complex.¹⁰⁹ The terms ‘God’s will’ and ‘will of God’ are used extensively in and outside of the Reformed tradition, often describing different aspects of how God works in relation to his creation. Berkhof, in his Reformed *Systematic Theology*, aptly demonstrates this;

The word “will” as applied to God does not always have the same connotation in Scripture. It may denote (1) the whole moral nature of God, including such attributes as love, holiness, righteousness, etc.; (2) the faculty of self determination, i.e., the power to determine self to a course of action or to form a plan; (3) the product of this activity, that is, the predetermined plan or purpose; (4) the power to execute this plan and to realize this purpose (the will in action or omnipotence); and (5) the rule of life laid down for rational creatures.¹¹⁰

There also exists a common contemporaneous use of the phrase ‘God’s will’ in literature, denoting solely the exploration of personal guidance.¹¹¹ This current trend is a clear moving away from how the subject has traditionally been approached. Historically, God’s will has been discussed within the context of God’s being and attributes,¹¹² as in Charnock’s *The Existence and Attributes of God*,¹¹³ or in relation to philosophical dilemmas, such as the relationship between

¹⁰⁷R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 43.

¹⁰⁸W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), 349.

¹⁰⁹Romans chapter nine portrays God as totally sovereign in his choice of saving some people and rejecting others (Rom. 9:18, cf. Lamentations 3:37-38). Yet other passages place real responsibility upon mankind to receive the salvation God has provided for them, such as 1 Cor. 15:2; Ezek. 18.

¹¹⁰L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 76.

¹¹¹Such as the short popular book, O. Guinness, *The Call. Finding & Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2002).

¹¹²H. Hoeskema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 61-130; H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith. A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 128-42; Shedd, W. G. T., 274-364; J. Frame, *The Doctrine of God. A Theology of Lordship* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002). Frame places his section on the decrees 313ff, well after his section on God’s attributes 80-182. Although interestingly, Frame also includes a discussion on a ‘third aspect’ of God’s will, that in relation to discerning God’s will for our lives, 539ff.

¹¹³S. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

God's sovereignty and mankind's freedom,¹¹⁴ or God's relationship to evil.¹¹⁵ God's will has also been discussed in connection with the closely associated themes of providence¹¹⁶ and predestination,¹¹⁷ both of which help form part of the unique identity of the Reformed tradition.¹¹⁸ Therefore, contemporary Christian literature engaging with the theology of God's will is noticeably different from older documents dealing with the same subject; the former looking at God's guidance for our lives, the latter looking at God's will in relation to his being.¹¹⁹ It is this latter sense which we are interested in. One exception to this recent trend is Waltke's *Finding the Will of God, A Pagan Notion?* which convincingly shows

¹¹⁴D. Basinger, and R. Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will. Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Illinois: IVP, 1986). See also, D. H. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); J. M. J. Harm Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God. Thomas Aquinas on God's Infallible Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996).

¹¹⁵Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 2.12.6; M. M Adams, and R. M Adams, eds., *The Problem of Evil. Oxford Readings in Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1990); W. C. Placher, "An Engagement with Marilyn McCord Adams's Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 461-67; G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); K. Surin, "The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35:2 (1982): 97-116; J. Feinberg, *Theologies and Evil* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979); F. Mora, "Thank God for Evil?" *Philosophy* 58 (1983): 399-401.

¹¹⁶P. Helm, *The Providence of God. Contours of Christian Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 138; U. Zwingli, *On the Providence of God*, S. M. & Hinke Jackson, W. J. (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1983); N. H. G. Robinson, "Is Providence Credible Today?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30:3 (1977): 215-32; B. W. Farley, *The Providence of God in a Reformed Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988); J. Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, translated by D. Laing (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Vol.5.

¹¹⁷Those who are ordained to life are understood to be given to Christ. These are predestined and called according to the purpose, of whom none perishes; and on this account, no one, though he change from good to bad, ends his life so. For he is ordained and hence given to Christ that he should not perish but have eternal life.' J. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, translated and edited by J. K. S. Reid (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1961), 66. See also, L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1965); T. Aquinas, *Providence and Predestination*, R. W. Mulligan (Chicago: Regency, 1953); R. A. Muller, "The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology: Issue or Non-Issue?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 184-210. For a brief history of the teaching of election throughout Christendom, see, R. A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will. God's Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility*. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 15-36.

¹¹⁸A. Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy 1625-1750. Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus Van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen*. Brill's Series in Church History (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 146.

¹¹⁹For example, many modern books at a popular level on seeking God's will rarely, if ever, distinguish between God's decretive and preceptive will, or mention the differences between God's decree and his law. See, P. D. Jensen, and T. Payne, *Guidance and the Voice of God* (Surrey: The Good Book Company, 1997).

that God's will for our lives is to live according to righteousness and that trying to 'divine' God's will by other means is unbiblical.¹²⁰

The phraseology surrounding God's will is a terminological minefield. This is the case simply because the terminology used to speak about God's will is used in different ways, at different times, by different people, sometimes using different terms to describe the same thing, other times using the same terms to mean totally different things. For example, take the sentence 'The cause of election is God's will.' On the surface it is a straight forward sentence but Zanchius (1516-1590) points out that 'election' can be understood in four different ways,¹²¹ then Calvin uses the fourfold scheme of causation pioneered by Aristotle, besides the notion of 'cause' being associated with 'blame,' then there are the numerous ways 'God's will' has been understood as detailed above. The example sentence can therefore be interpreted to mean something other than the intention of the original writer of the sentence. This all goes to show the need for an in depth study on the will of God, that some form of consensus may be reached regarding what language is used to discuss the doctrine.

1.8 Literature specifically on the will of God

The subject of God's will is taken up as part of a wider discourse in countless books, articles and theses, ranging from interaction with God's will in a whole chapter to a passing paragraph, revealing the importance of the doctrine. However, in terms of works directly engaging with God's will and how it comprehensively works, there remains a void. An important point to notice is that works with 'the will of God' in the title do not necessarily focus on God's will *per se*. For example, Rainbow's *The Will of God and the Cross*, is at heart an investigation of its subtitle, *An Historical and Theological Study of John Calvin's*

¹²⁰B. K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God. A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

¹²¹J. Zanchius, "The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted: With a Preliminary Discourse on the Divine Attributes," in *The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady*, translated by A. Toplady (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), 687-88.

Doctrine of Limited Atonement.¹²² Rainbow's book of course touches on the subject of election, which is relevant to the study of God's will but its primary focus is the doctrine of limited atonement. Hoitenga's *John Calvin and the Will*¹²³ is a Reformed study of Calvin and the human will, not the divine, as is Leith's *The Doctrine of the Will in the Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹²⁴ Hoitenga looks at the will in its various states, as created, fallen and under grace, dealing with a similar subject area to Boston's *Fourfold State*.¹²⁵

Riddell's article on *God's Eternal Decrees*¹²⁶ has a promising title but is concerned merely with the doctrine of predestination in connection with the WCF. It does however make some early comments of the importance and determinative nature of God's decrees in and throughout the Westminster Confession. He notes that the section of God's eternal decrees is an addition in comparison to the earlier Scots Confession between the chapters on the Trinity and Creation. Riddell believed the WCF and its emphasis on God's eternal decrees were unhelpful, stating, 'we are at least more likely to avoid disastrous shipwreck if we abandon the doctrine of the divine decrees in its traditional form, and seek to give the work of Christ, to the action of God in history, its true and Biblical place.'¹²⁷ A number of works have been produced which also see a clear moving away from the theology of Calvin in the theology of the WCF.¹²⁸ Riddell's article is another case of a work being connected to the doctrine of God's will but indirectly, God's will

¹²²J. H. Rainbow, *The Will of God and the Cross. An Historical and Theological Study of John Calvin's Doctrine of Limited Redemption*, monograph no. 22, D. Y. Hadidian, gen. ed. Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1990).

¹²³D. J. Hoitenga, *John Calvin and the Will. A Critique and Corrective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

¹²⁴J. H. Leith, "The Doctrine of the Will in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*," in *Reformatio Perennis. Essays on Calvin and the Reformation in Honour of Ford Lewis Battles*, edited by B. A. Gerrish (Pittsburg: The Pickwick Press, 1981), 49-66.

¹²⁵Boston, *Fourfold State*.

¹²⁶J. G. Riddell, "God's Eternal Decrees," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2, no. 04 (1949): 352-63.

¹²⁷Riddell, 362.

¹²⁸R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Paternoster Press, 1997); Torrance, T. F.; C. M. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology. The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handal Press, 1985). Cf. P. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982); R. A. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (1996): 125-60.

is not its primary focus. Shedd argues the opposite case to Riddell in his *Calvinism: Pure & Unmixed. A Defense of the Westminster Standards*.¹²⁹ In this brief defence, Shedd deals with the need to reaffirm the WCF's chapter of the divine decrees, and does so with some success.

In contrast to the titles above, Zanchius' *Doctrine of Absolute Predestination* contains an extended introduction of God's attributes with a particular emphasis on the will of God.¹³⁰ Yet, again, Zanchius himself acknowledges that his introduction focusing on God's attributes is designed to clear the way for understanding the singular doctrine of predestination. Another article which deals with the will of God is Strehle's *Calvinism, Augustinianism, and the will of God*.¹³¹ Although Strehle deals briefly with the concept of a 'revealed' and 'hidden' will in God, he too, focuses on election and arrives at a few strange conclusions. Strehle sees a 'discrepancy between the work of the Father and the work of the Son'¹³² in the will of God in Reformed theology, saying,

The freedom of God in limiting the work of Christ, assigning merit through covenant, imputing righteousness to sinners and guilt to the innocent all bespeak of a divine will dis severed from that which is true and just and exacting. The Father who according to scripture could not spare his own Son actually works here above and beyond what as been revealed and wrought in Christ. The work which Christ offered to the Father, while allegedly sufficient in value to cleanse the sins of the whole world, does not really suffice to propitiate the Father in this regard, but is immediately limited in value to the purposes for which the Father accepts and intends it, i.e., the salvation of the elect.¹³³

Strehle therefore concludes that the God that is revealed in Christ is not the real God of Reformed theology; the real God is the one that stands behind Christ - the hidden God, the Aristotelian 'unmoved mover'.¹³⁴ He sees a separation between

¹²⁹G. T. W. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Unmixed. A Defense of the Westminster Standards* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1893).

¹³⁰Zanchius, 675-687.

¹³¹S. Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 47 (1992): 221-37.

¹³²Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God," 232.

¹³³Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God," 231.

¹³⁴Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God," 233.

the secret will of God and the God of revelation in Christ in Reformed theology. Needless to say, Strehle does not show much sympathy for the Reformed position regarding God's will; even so, his final words do not reflect any Reformed writing I have seen on this subject.

The will of God in Calvinism is thus extended to all but a limited to a few, united to its essence but free from its demands, revealed in Christ but hidden within the Father's most free will (*liberum arbitrium*). His freedom allows him to act one way in creation and another way in redemption, one way in righteousness and another way in mercy, one way in Christ and another way in the Father. His ways are not one and narrow, simple and smooth, but even at odds with himself.¹³⁵

Now consider Williamson's words in his commentary on the WCF regarding the divine decrees, 'It is the Reformed teaching that all the works of God, and of the three Persons of the God-head, are in perfect harmony. The plan of God is never contradicted by the works of God by which the plan is executed.'¹³⁶ The conclusions could not be more polar. It is regrettably the case that many who oppose Reformed theology present its teachings in a way that Reformed theologians would not recognize. As we seek to understand Boston's doctrine of the will of God, a level of clarity regarding his Reformed position will hopefully help combat views such as Strehle's, which makes considerable claims in a relatively limited article.

Muller is more significant for this study because he consistently engages with Reformed theology, God's will and Calvin. Muller's *Christ and the Decree*¹³⁷ focuses on Christology and predestination within Reformed theology, with other works concentrated on predestination.¹³⁸ Muller has engaged with the formative

¹³⁵Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God," 236-37.

¹³⁶G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 35.

¹³⁷R. A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986).

¹³⁸Muller, "The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology"; R. A. Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis*, the Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, edited by C. R. Trueman and R. S. Scott (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 33-60.

years of the Reformed tradition,¹³⁹ providence in the theology of Arminius, and possibly one of the best articles ever written in his *The Myth of Decretal Theology*.¹⁴⁰ His most important work for this thesis however, is his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics - The Divine Essence and Attributes*.¹⁴¹ In this volume Muller directly explores the Reformed theology of God's essence and attributes in relation to God's will, the terminology used to describe these relationships, the distinctions related to God's will, and those attributes revealed in the manifestation of God willing. This is probably the most comprehensive treatment of God's will to date, Reformed tradition or otherwise, but it is in a more compendium-like approach, interacting with a wide-ranging cross section of Reformed theologians between 1520 to 1725. There is nothing here which relates the doctrine of God's will to Boston, and although it has a focus on tracing the rise and development of God's essence and attributes, which cannot be faulted for depth, it does not relate with equal measure to the doctrines of providence, free will, election, etc, and hence a comprehensive understanding of God's will in particular remains to be sought.

In light of the above literature we can see two things. Firstly, very few works specifically deal with the will of God in Reformed theology even when the term 'will of God' is in the title. Secondly, no work currently exists that looks specifically at the doctrine of God's will, relating that doctrine comprehensively to the major areas of interest that impact and inform our knowledge of that doctrine. This thesis aims to provide a detailed, in depth, study on God's will in Reformed theology as expressed and applied by Thomas Boston, with the purpose of revealing how a full understanding of Boston needs to comprehend his doctrine of providence as proceeding from the divine will. Bruggink suggests that the

¹³⁹Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists"; R. A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin. Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴⁰R. A. Muller, "The Myth of 'Decretal Theology'," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 159-67.

¹⁴¹R. A. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).

over-riding framework of Boston's theology is the federal scheme,¹⁴² to which himself and McGowan dedicate their PhD's. Although federal theology is a dominant theme for Boston's theology, in his preaching and everyday life, and to an extent in his doctrinal theology, I would argue that providence as the unfolding of God's will is an equally essential aspect of Boston's over-all theology. If the former is crucial for Boston's theological schemes, the latter is certainly more prevalent in his everyday life. I agree with Bruggink that the divine decrees do not dominate Boston,¹⁴³ his is not a 'decretal theology,' in the sense that his theology does not always originate from the decrees; they are not the starting point for his theology. The providence of God, as the actualizing of the divine will, does however seem to dominate how he lives his daily life.¹⁴⁴

1.9 Thesis limitations

Given the scope of the objective above, it is essential to emphasize the necessary limits of the task ahead and to indicate how the investigation shall be structured.

1) Although the Reformed doctrine of God's will encompasses such things as free will, election and God's attributes, we shall focus on Boston's doctrine of providence as flowing from God's will, whilst engaging with the other areas that compose God's will in its unity and entirety. Our primary doctrinal concern is always God's will as this is where providence originates for Boston.

2) The focus of this investigation is to understand the will of God in Thomas Boston's theology. Although we shall set the historical context for the doctrine in Reformed history by seeking to understand John Calvin's (1509-64) doctrine of God's will, and the importance of the WCF's doctrine (1646),¹⁴⁵ this shall be done

¹⁴²Bruggink, 83-4.

¹⁴³Bruggink, 84.

¹⁴⁴See chapter 2, regarding Boston's application of the will of God in his own life in the *Memoirs*. The decisions he makes, the books he reads, the friends he has, the pains he suffers, the evils he experiences, are all weighed in the balance of God's will.

¹⁴⁵*The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981).

only so far as they show Boston's doctrine to be soundly in the Reformed tradition, and that Boston himself understood this as so.

3) Given the scope of the thesis and its focus upon Reformed theology, we shall limit the study strictly to that confine. This means not engaging to great extents with Reformed off-shoots such as Arminianism¹⁴⁶ or Amyraldianism¹⁴⁷ (both of which are important developments within the history of Reformed thought), nor the more recent interaction of Reformed theologians with Open Theism.¹⁴⁸

4) Fourth, I shall not be attempting a defence of Thomas Boston's Reformed doctrine of God's will, I am no Milton, 'That to the height of this great argument I may assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to men.'¹⁴⁹ We are seeking to ascertain what the Reformed doctrine of God's will is as expressed by Boston, and how he applied that knowledge pastorally.

5) Finally, it would be too great a task to look into every aspect of Boston's pastoral ministry, so we are specifically limiting our focus to how he applied his doctrine of the will of God.

¹⁴⁶W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 371-513; John Owen, *The Death of Christ*, vol. 10 of *The Works of John Owen. The Death of Christ*, edited by W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 10-137.

¹⁴⁷R. Nicole, *Moyse Amyrault* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1981). See also, S. Strehle, "Universal Grace and Amyraldianism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989): 345-57.

¹⁴⁸C. Pinnock, *The Openness of God. A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1993); J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks. A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998); B. A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory. A Critique of Open Theism* (Leicester: IVP, 2000); S. J. Wellum, "Divine Sovereignty, Omniscience, Inerrancy and Open Theism: An Evaluation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 257-77; Frame; R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 346-80; B. R. Keepers, "My Only Comfort in Life and in Death: A Pastoral Response to Open Theism," *Reformed Review (Online)* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 72-92; I. D. Campbell, "Open Thoughts on Open Theism," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21:1 (2003): 34-56.

¹⁴⁹J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, edited by J. Leonard. Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1.24-26.

1.10 Conclusion

What have we established? Thomas Boston was a Reformed parish minister of the Church of Scotland. He is a lover of the WCF, writing commentaries on it, lecturing on it, adhering to it, and frequently quoting its theology. Boston loves it because he understands it and views it as a wonderful achievement of precision and definition regarding Reformed theology, captured, codified and established as his Church's national standard. Boston had great affection for the magisterial Reformers, was well versed in the theology of the continental Reformed orthodox theologians that preceded him, and his commitment to the Westminster Confession bears his personal testimony that the Scottish Reformed tradition had reached a crescendo in its formal expression of its faith. We have established that there is an imbalance between Boston's achievements and the interest that is shown in him, and his ability to extensively popularize Reformed theology has largely gone unnoticed. We have also seen that Boston was a dedicated and much loved pastor of his rural flock. Given his Reformed credentials, his reputation as a preacher, and his ability to communicate with the masses, it is with great interest that we shall explore his doctrine of the will of God as it manifests itself in providence and see how he utilized that doctrine in his pastoral ministry. We have also seen how works specifically on God's will are very limited, leaving a double void concerning our choice of doctrine and personal subject. We have then, a specific doctrine (the will of God), in a specific subject (the theology of Boston), with a specific purpose (to see how Boston applies his doctrine of God's will pastorally).

Chapter 2

Boston's Memoirs

The personal memoirs of a man of integrity are an indispensable source of information for understanding that person. The argument of this chapter is to show that providence as part of the sovereign will of God is a key factor for fully understanding Boston. I am not suggesting that if a person understands Boston's doctrine of God's will as it unfolds in providence they therefore fully understand Boston. I am arguing that if a person neglects this aspect of Boston's theology and life they will have a deficient understanding of how Boston thought, lived and practiced theology on a daily basis. No-one would deny that Federal theology is of critical importance for understanding Boston's conceptual framework for his theology, indeed, three of the four theses on Boston deal with his Federal theology.¹⁵⁰ Federal theology is vital for understanding Boston's theology, but of equal importance and universal neglect, is the argument that providence is as indispensable. The content of Boston's *Memoirs* is important because they reveal his love of providence and how he lived his life in relation to providence. Another question to answer is what motivated Boston to write such a document that is so heavily orientated towards recording God's sovereign ways in his life? We shall therefore aim to show the following:

1. Boston's *Memoirs* exhibit sufficient evidence to suggest providence is an essential component for understanding Boston's life and doctrine.
2. We shall examine to what extent John Flavel's book *The Mystery of Providence*, influenced Boston's *Memoirs*.

Taken together, these should reveal just how crucial the subject of divine providence is towards a comprehensive understanding of Boston's life and ministry.

¹⁵⁰McGowan; Bruggink; these deal specifically with the subject, and it forms the background and theological content of Ryken's study on the *Fourfold State*, Ryken.

2.1 Divine Providence in the *Memoirs* of Thomas Boston

In order to understand Boston's doctrine of the will of God as it unfolds in providence it is necessary to see how he applied his knowledge of that doctrine to his own life. Boston's *Memoirs* provide a unique insight into the character of the man, his belief in the sovereign will of God, and how he managed to live in accordance with that doctrine. Boston only taught others things he himself practised or strived for in his own life, so his pastoral application of God's will is one borne from personal experience and carried along in empathy for his fellow believers. Boston's firm belief in the will of God and divine providence is evident from his introductory address to his children. 'My dear children, - I apprehend, that by the time it is designed, under the conduct of all-disposing Providence, this should come into your hands, ye may be desirous to know your father's manner of life.'¹⁵¹ His opening words¹⁵² are therefore, an insightful indication of the tone and content of the work to follow, best summarized perhaps by his statement that he has, 'an awful regard to the sovereign disposal of holy Providence, to which I desire to submit all.'¹⁵³ Boston's *Memoirs* could conceivably be viewed as a commentary or record of God's providential dealings in his life. The postscript aptly highlights with what gusto Boston sought to recall God's sovereign ways in his life:

It will be obvious to the intelligent reader, that the radical principle upon which the narrative in these Memoirs is founded, is, "That God hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." This principle the author believed with his whole heart: it was often an anchor to his soul; and every minister of the Church of Scotland is bound, by his subscription, and ordination vows, to maintain it. This, kept in view, will account for the author's ascribing to an over-ruling Providence many incidents, which some may think might be resolved into natural causes.¹⁵⁴

This is a succinct description packed full of subtle indications as to the overall tenor of the work. Firstly we see that there is something 'obvious' going on in

¹⁵¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 1.

¹⁵²Written on 28th October 1730, as he compiled his notes.

¹⁵³Boston, *Memoirs*, 3.

¹⁵⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, Postscript.

this document and that is its foundational belief that ‘God ordains whatsoever comes to pass.’ There is a clear declaration that this founding principal is viewed as a ‘radical’ principle. There is no indication as to what is meant by the term ‘radical’ to describe a stalwart statement taken from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Nevertheless, it remains ‘obvious’ that the content of the *Memoirs* has such an emphasis on an ‘over-ruling Providence’ that this is viewed as the foundation of the work. It would be one thing to trawl through Boston’s *Memoirs* in the hope of discerning some indication of the influence of providence in his life, it is quite another to have such an open declaration in the postscript that Boston’s life was governed by the radical principal that God ordains all things by his providence. In order to understand this radical principle in the *Memoirs* more fully and provide evidence that providence is a key factor for understanding Boston and his theology, we shall examine from the *Memoirs*;

- a. Boston’s personal characteristics and providence.
- b. Boston’s observation of providence.
- c. Boston’s view of providence with regard to his trials in life.
- d. Boston’s submission of his heart to God’s will and providential ways.
- e. Boston’s understanding of the will of God in relation to his attributes.

2.2 Personal characteristics

There is evidence to suggest that Boston was the type of person who would be well suited to noting and recording God’s providence in his life. Boston was introspective by nature and this was accompanied by a tender conscience so that it appears in his *Memoirs* that he almost finds pleasure a difficulty to bear. He notes the time that a new parcel of books were coming for him and, ‘Ere I got them home, they had stolen away my heart, and I was extremely fond of them. This raised in me a great fear ... And it sent me to God ... This was a piece of trouble to me for two or three days.’¹⁵⁵ He had a tender conscience that is troubled for a few days over enjoying some new books. At times, Boston’s patience is admirable as

¹⁵⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 173.

he waits upon the Lord but occasionally we find him waiting out of a fear of taking action because he cannot observe what God's will is in a matter. For example, regarding the publishing of the *Fourfold State*, he says his thoughts were being tossed about, he did not want to place before readers a substandard work and yet he thought providence was leading him to write it. He described this process as being a substantial burden that he could barely cope with, and so decided to wait on God for a 'token of his mind.'¹⁵⁶ When Boston can observe God's providence in his experience it brings him a great sense of comfort and assurance, a confirmation to press on despite opposition or confrontation, yet at times, Boston's desire to know the hidden will of God almost cripples him, resulting in confusion and fear. Retrospectively,¹⁵⁷ Boston can always find something good in the lot God has dealt him, as he testifies, 'I had a heart-melting view of the conduct of holy Providence towards poor me, from my childhood even until now. O! How am I deeply indebted to a gracious God preventing me with kindness, and working about me for ends I knew nothing of in the time!'¹⁵⁸ This is one of the strengths of Boston's doctrine of God's will, the ability to look back and give thanks to God for every circumstance of life. Both these positive and negative aspects of his theology of providence reveal that it was a subject central enough to govern how he lived day by day. Watson bears testimony to this when she says, 'He intensely realizes that he [Boston] has a work for God to perform, and as an ambassador cannot fulfil his mission without being intimately acquainted with the will of his sovereign, his first care was in every circumstance of his life, even the minutest, to ascertain the mind of God about it.'¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 335.

¹⁵⁷Large sections of the *Memoirs* were written retrospectively or added to by Boston at a later date than the events being recorded.

¹⁵⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 371.

¹⁵⁹Watson, J. L., 19.

Boston views his entire pastoral ministry as being overshadowed by the guiding hand of his heavenly Father.¹⁶⁰ There is no surprise to find him relating that ‘an amazing conduct of Providence’¹⁶¹ directs his preaching the word, regarding the subjects he is led to and the people present to hear his preaching. He states his amazement just how the Lord leads his texts for preaching so that there is a continual sermon to move onto once he has finished one, emphatically attributing this conduct of providence to the finger of God.¹⁶² Indeed, much of Boston’s pastoral ministry is an application of the lessons he has learnt himself through life, and his emphasis on the observation of providence and the ways and means of coping with trials, are a direct result of how his Father has moulded his own life experiences, adjoined to his natural disposition. Boston was aware of his tendency to fall into the ‘woe is me’ mentality, ‘for I considered, that unto the trials God lays in men’s way, they often add much of their own, which makes them far more bulky and weighty than otherwise they are in very deed; and here I was convinced, that I had laid too much of my own, suffering some things to sink into my spirit, which were not so much to be regarded.’¹⁶³ This is a repeated confession of Boston’s, it appears he has an extremely tender disposition regarding introspection, and recognizes that he magnifies his own trials,¹⁶⁴ and at times is filled with terror and confusion ‘having a native tendency to heighten my great trial.’¹⁶⁵

Boston’s physical, mental and spiritual make-up, set within the post-Westminster Reformed tradition of rural Scotland, produced an industrious, godly, and serious individual, whose knowledge and doctrine of the will of God brought great comfort and thankfulness as he surveyed the life he had lived. It also proved a

¹⁶⁰Boston recalls in September 1927 that, ‘I am signally indebted to Him; for that to this day, as far as I can remember, I was never kept from preaching one Lord’s day.’ Boston, *Memoirs*, 395. Cf. Boston, *Memoirs*, 473.

¹⁶¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 221.

¹⁶²Boston, *Memoirs*, 300.

¹⁶³Boston, *Memoirs*, 246.

¹⁶⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 247. Bruggink points out that introspective self-examination was a common aspect of Christian discipline in Boston’s age, Bruggink, 319.

¹⁶⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 247.

tremendous help in pastoring people during the trials of their own lives. However, the same doctrine also caused Boston to read erroneously into situations and to pastor inappropriately at times.¹⁶⁶ It could also cause him to be fearful, which is a product of a deficient view of God's love ('There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.' 1 Jn. 4:18). There are therefore times when Boston's doctrine of God's will becomes divorced from the being and attributes of God. Nevertheless, this is the man (with said temperament), that God used mightily to help the people of Scotland in their own particular trials in his popular *The Crook in the Lot*,¹⁶⁷ the driving force of which was his strong doctrine of God's will as it unfolds in providence. On the personal level, it is clear from the record of his life that God's providence is a key factor for understanding Boston.

2.3 Boston's observation of providence

Providence appears to be almost a fixation in Boston's life,¹⁶⁸ but on the whole, not one that he recognizes as being troubling, rather a joyful, constant help. Listen to his own words recalling some time spent discussing the subject.

The evening-exercise, on the question concerning the providences of God, was sweet to me: and in converse after it, it was a pleasure to think and speak of the saints' grounds of

¹⁶⁶Although in the following case Boston proved to be correct, his method of pastoral care is no model to adopt. 'After the woman was brought to a confession, the adulterer stiffly denied. Dealing with his conscience, I took one of the twins she had brought forth, and holding it before his face, posed him with his being the father of it. Nevertheless he persisted in the denial, though evidently under consternation, his moisture being visibly dried up in the struggle with his conscience. He being removed, I went out and dealt with him privately: and having observed that two of his children he had by his wife, had been removed by death, soon after, or about the time in which, as was alleged, he begot those two adulterous ones, I told him that it seemed to me, God had written his sin in that his punishment. To which he answered, That indeed he himself thought so; and so confessed.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 221-22.

¹⁶⁷It was not until Sunday the 13th of September 1730, two years before Boston's death, that he ventured on his set of sermons regarding the 'crook on the lot.' As he himself says, 'To this I was led, by my own case, and the case of several in the parish; and was confirmed in that's being the Lord's message to them, by the providential occurrences of that day.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 447. These sermons are delivered from decades of personal experience, after years of pastoral ministry and a wealth of knowledge, and were published posthumously in 1737.

¹⁶⁸Unlike Calvin, who had no central dogma to his overall theological outlook, one could argue quite a tight case that the unfolding of God's will in providence was a central dogma in Boston's theology. Boston, *Memoirs*, 231.

encouragement from that head, under trouble, particularly, how it is their God that guides the world; and nothing do they meet with but what comes through their Lord's fingers; how He weighs their troubles to the least grain, that no more falls to their share than they need; and how they have a covenant-right to chastisements, to the Lord's dealing with them as with sons, to be rightly educated, not as servants, whom the master will not strike, but put away at the term.¹⁶⁹

It is simply a pleasure for Boston to discuss the providence of God. His entire mind set is geared towards the observation of providence, how it unfolds, the blessings that flow from it, attributing to it many of the successful aspects of his pastoral ministry. He views the books that come into his hand as being providentially sent,¹⁷⁰ as well as the ordering of Church services.¹⁷¹ He preached a series of sermons on observing providence¹⁷² which he calls 'the sweet subject,'¹⁷³ also preaching on the slow conduct of providence against the wicked from Eccl. 8:11.¹⁷⁴ Regarding Boston's good friendship with Mr Wilson he says, 'In the which mixture, whereby he served as a spur to me, and I as a bridle to him, I have often admired the wise conduct of Providence that matched us together.'¹⁷⁵ In his private letters he encourages one woman with the simple words, 'Trust him with his conducting of you.'¹⁷⁶

The observation of providence is a central theme in the pastoral ministry and personal application of God's will in Boston's life.¹⁷⁷ Boston learned to be comforted in his trials by observing providence, knowing that God had done all things well in the past gave him confidence for the future. His delight in the will of God is evident from his *Memoirs*, where he speaks about God's decree as having always been wonderful in his life, and although he doesn't understand

¹⁶⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 106.

¹⁷⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 113. Cf. Boston, *Memoirs*, 169.

¹⁷¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 130.

¹⁷²Boston, *CW*, I.260ff.

¹⁷³Boston, *Memoirs*, 310.

¹⁷⁴Boston, *CW*, VI.481.

¹⁷⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 242.

¹⁷⁶Boston, "Letter to Mrs Shiel."

¹⁷⁷Keepers' says, 'Arguably, there are few Christian doctrines that have stronger applications for the Christian life than the doctrine of divine providence.' Keepers, 72. This is because it touches on issues such as poverty, illness, family, employment, and everything common to life.

God's ways he trusts them. Left to himself, Boston says, he would never have chosen the good things God has blessed him with though the hard and difficult times, 'It is the Lord's way with me, to shake me out of myself, and to make me renounce my own wisdom, or rather folly.'¹⁷⁸ Here we have a clear recognition that God's ways are incomprehensible yet welcomed; an acknowledgement that God brings him into unwanted paths in order for him to learn the most valuable lessons and draw him closer to himself. At one point Boston makes the observation that even seemingly trifling things in life that we count as mere annoyances also come providentially from the sovereign hand of God with the intention of imparting patience to the one who would learn, and the ability to wait on the Lord.¹⁷⁹

Below follows a list of examples concerned with Boston's varied and frequent descriptions of providence, it may appear a little excessive but it is necessary to drive home the absolute centrality of how the doctrine of God's will as it unfolds in his life was constantly at the forefront of Boston's mind. The list confirms how central the observation of providence was in Boston's life. The variety of terms and use of adjectives adds to the sense of Boston's indulgence of the subject. He speaks of a 'Holy wise providence,'¹⁸⁰ calls himself 'a child of providence,'¹⁸¹ describes it saying 'Wonderful, wonderful, is the conduct of providence,'¹⁸² recognizing it can appear as 'cross providences,'¹⁸³ as a 'kind and watchful Providence,'¹⁸⁴ an 'all-wise providence,'¹⁸⁵ a 'good Providence of God,'¹⁸⁶ an 'early providence,'¹⁸⁷ a 'special providence,'¹⁸⁸ and a 'foreseeing Providence.'¹⁸⁹

¹⁷⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 94-95.

¹⁷⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 267-68.

¹⁸⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 18.

¹⁸¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 33.

¹⁸²Boston, *Memoirs*, 196.

¹⁸³Boston, *Memoirs*, 38.

¹⁸⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 121.

¹⁸⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 157.

¹⁸⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 236.

¹⁸⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 166.

¹⁸⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 261.

¹⁸⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 360.

There can be the ‘means of Providence,’¹⁹⁰ and ‘the method of Providence,’¹⁹¹ a ‘determination of Providence,’¹⁹² a ‘surprising conduct of providence,’¹⁹³ a ‘kind disposal of Providence,’¹⁹⁴ an ‘admirable conduct of Providence,’¹⁹⁵ a ‘kind management of Providence,’¹⁹⁶ a ‘beauty of providence,’¹⁹⁷ and a ‘moving of providence.’¹⁹⁸ There can be a ‘call of providence,’¹⁹⁹ a ‘strange conduct of Providence,’²⁰⁰ a ‘course of ordinary providence,’²⁰¹ the ‘merciful conduct of Providence,’²⁰² or a ‘wonderful stroke of Providence,’²⁰³ the ‘awful steps of Providence,’²⁰⁴ and an ‘awful voice of Providence,’²⁰⁵ and ‘the beautiful step of providence,’²⁰⁶ places where ‘Providence thus quickly began to move,’²⁰⁷ and so ‘The upshot of all was, to follow the conduct of Providence.’²⁰⁸ Often you will notice ‘providence’ is spelt with a capital ‘P,’ being a descriptive term for God himself or shorthand for the God ‘who ordains everything that comes to pass.’

Boston readily admits to be an observer and applier of providence,²⁰⁹ although strangely, he was reluctant to venture on teaching the subject (of the unfolding of the divine will), seemingly unaware of his abilities in this area. He notes, ‘I preached on the observing of providences, from Ps. cvii. and I observe how the Lord led me to it, through several difficulties, drying up to me another subject I thought to have been on. I was afraid to venture on this subject, not knowing how

¹⁹⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 461.

¹⁹¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 465.

¹⁹²Boston, *Memoirs*, 75.

¹⁹³Boston, *Memoirs*, 236.

¹⁹⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 212.

¹⁹⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 364.

¹⁹⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 443.

¹⁹⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 359.

¹⁹⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 335.

¹⁹⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 346.

²⁰⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 446.

²⁰¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 325.

²⁰²Boston, *Memoirs*, 472.

²⁰³Boston, *Memoirs*, 467.

²⁰⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 309.

²⁰⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 304.

²⁰⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 318.

²⁰⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 277.

²⁰⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 150.

²⁰⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 198.

to manage it; but the Lord was pleased to lay to my hand liberally, for all the scrimpiness I feared.²¹⁰

It is clear from his *Memoirs* that it was while he was writing his diary that he pondered the ways of God in his everyday life.²¹¹ As Boston looks back over his life he understands nothing to have been a mistake. When in his youth he bypassed an open coffin with a dead body turning black inside, he recalls how that sight of decaying dust stuck in his mind as a reminder of his own mortality.²¹² Sometimes things that were at the time very perplexing, especially regarding their goodness or usefulness, only reveal their true colours years afterwards. Regarding a job that Boston took as a notary, he says that although at the time he would rather have been elsewhere, he can now look back at the blessed hand of providence that taught him how to style papers which has proved useful ever since. He testifies to how providence had been helping him from the beginning.²¹³ Regarding his job with the Kennet family, he says that it was providence that led him to it, and from his subsequent work, and when that employment terminated, it was providence again that was the guiding hand.²¹⁴ Boston's high view of providence is seen by him as a very positive thing.

Not only are there no mistakes in the unfolding of God's will but there are always lessons to be learned from observing providence, and Boston looked for them at every opportunity, often in fine detail. One day, around the time of their infrequent communion, one of Boston's servant boys had gone missing, presumed drunk. Boston concludes from this one small incident, that the devil was trying to cause havoc at that communion time but had in fact missed the mark since it caused everyone to become more focused on the sacrament, and Boston notes that

²¹⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 199.

²¹¹'Thus did the Lord point out my sin, sending me to study at that time, who would not study when I should have done it. This I never saw till just now that I was writing this day's progress.'
Boston, *Memoirs*, 202.

²¹²Boston, *Memoirs*, 11.

²¹³Boston, *Memoirs*, 15.

²¹⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 28.

he had learned to be more dutiful in looking after the boy after that trial.²¹⁵ This is a good example of how Boston's belief in the sovereign will of God could change the perspective on a dire situation into one of usefulness and hope.

Despite his frequent observations of providence, Boston never consciously placed the revelation of providence above Scripture; rather it was always subservient to it. He once noted that if he was to act according to the reading of his current circumstances, that would have made 'a Bible of providence,' something he was clearly opposed to, opting instead to follow his duty.²¹⁶ By providence's observation Boston can see how God has kept him from certain sins,²¹⁷ and that the unfolding of God's will in providence was not just a 'teacher' but also an 'encourager.' Being laden with a 'dampish sadness and unbelieving heaviness' Boston remembered Isa. 1:10 and says, 'By the above word and providence, I got my heart somewhat elevated again. And by what I had seen and observed that day, I perceived, that God had well ordered my lot, in the place where I was, as most meet for me.'²¹⁸

Boston's observations of providence appear as if he is reading providence like a book, and often reading between the lines. During the time when his sermons were under consideration of publication Boston reads into every event either positively or negatively, recalling the steps of providence in the whole affair, the providential transportation of manuscripts, providential conversations about the issue and providential letters too.²¹⁹ Yet despite these apparent steps of favourable providence Boston continues, 'Though these steps of Providence seemed to have something in them, yet I could never get the matter closely laid to heart.'²²⁰ This is followed by his struggle in not knowing whether to print the sermons or not, so that his legs trembled and his heart quaked. This is the most

²¹⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 189.

²¹⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 229.

²¹⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 7.

²¹⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 134.

²¹⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 254.

²²⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 254.

negative aspect of the application of Boston's doctrine of God's will in his own life, his observations of providence (read rightly or wrongly), *could* hinder him from doing his duty, and reduce him to fear. Yet again, the *Memoirs* repeatedly indicate that the observation of providence was a key factor in Boston's life and therefore important for understanding his theological outlook.

2.4 How Boston behaved under his own trials

Given Boston's introspective nature it is no surprise to find that he looks upon his own life in great detail (hence such a large *Memoirs*), managing to recall God's providential dealings with him in the many trials he endured.²²¹ Evidence for this is found from Boston's own pen when he opens period two of his life's account with the following words. 'Between my leaving of the grammar-school, and my entering to the college, two years intervened. And here began more remarkably my bearing of the yoke of trial and affliction, the which laid on my youth, has, in the wise disposal of holy Providence, been from that time unto this day continued, as my ordinary lot; one scene of trial opening after another.'²²² Trials, either large or small, were a constant part of the diet of his life. All that we highlighted so far naturally flows together: Boston had an introspective character that observed providence, alongside a habit of heightening his trials, it is little wonder then that so many of his trials and afflictions were recorded in his *Memoirs*.

Boston goes on to interpret the events surrounding the start of his studies at Edinburgh, in a way which he views as the usual conduct of God's will in his life. He says God brought about the opportunity for his study amid great difficulties and multiple disappointments, to the point where he gave up all hope of starting, only then did God open up the way for him to start his academic life. This bringing Boston quite low before suddenly raising him up, he records as being

²²¹Boston frequently speaks of his trials, see, Boston, *Memoirs*, 25; 26; 27; 28; 30; 34; 70; 86; 113; 158; etc.

²²²Boston, *Memoirs*, 13.

God's normal way with him, especially in important matters.²²³ Regarding his call to Simprin he also notes, 'This way of Providence with me I have so often observed, that I have thought indeed such or such a thing would come to pass, just because I was adverse to it.'²²⁴ That is to say, whenever Boston's heart was not submitting to God's will in a matter, God would always train Boston in that very point. Boston saw the common conduct of God's sovereignty in the lives of his creatures unfolding in a way whereby God brought people very low immediately before raising them up to new heights.²²⁵ He plainly states, 'It is the usual way of Providence with me, that matters of moment come through several iron gates,'²²⁶ a repeated phrase of Boston's.²²⁷ He also says God often casts him down for the very purpose of raising him up with his hand.²²⁸ This is another important theme, that the trials of life are placed upon us by the hand of God himself. Regarding the death of their first child, Boston realized that people often add extra burdens to the person under the refining fires of God. He recalls how at the very time of the infant's death a friend of theirs spoke unjustly of them which increased their grief noticeably. Yet even in this instance Boston clearly sees this added grief as coming from the 'holy sovereign hand' towards them whom 'the Lord wounded.'²²⁹ Boston had no qualms about saying his trials come from the hand of God, or that it is God who afflicts him.²³⁰ We can see that Boston's trials were many, the greatest of which touched on matters concerning his heart not being in submission to God, whereby God would bring him into times of near hopelessness before raising him up by his own mighty hand. This is the cyclical pattern of trials in Boston's experience.

As an example of this cyclical pattern, take the accounts of Boston's different calls to various parishes. Regarding a possible call to Dunse, Boston notes the

²²³Boston, *Memoirs*, 16.

²²⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 89.

²²⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 256.

²²⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 282.

²²⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 291.

²²⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 410.

²²⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 161.

²³⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 162.

tough struggle he had in submitting his heart to God's will, and admits that he desired a submissive heart more than getting his own way.²³¹ Boston's desire to submit to the mighty hand of God in the matter, even though he found it hard, becomes one of Boston's repeated exhortations to his readers in the *Crook in the Lot* when he is an experienced pastor of many years service - the need for submission before God whose will is sovereign. This submission to the will of God appears to be something Boston managed to master in increasing degrees throughout his life.²³² When Boston found out that he was not going to the parish of Dollar to be their minister, even though the elders had applied twice to the presbytery for him, he says, 'After which, providentially falling on Flavel's mystery of providence,²³³ I got my own case seasonably discussed therein. And by the means of resignation there proposed, I endeavoured to bring my heart to that disposition; and so went to prayer with confidence in the Lord.'²³⁴ Boston constantly strives to submit his heart and life to God's will in the knowledge that 'he does all things well.'

He struggled with the initial call to Simprin (of which he would become minister),²³⁵ recognizing his fault of pride and therefore desired to submit to God, saying, 'The will of the Lord be done.'²³⁶ Boston goes on to mention how the Lord further humbled him in the matter until his heart was content, being made 'to wait on the Lord' and 'follow the conduct of His providence.'²³⁷ When Boston was visited by a man from Simprin with the letter of his call, he says he prayed, thought about the call and made sure he was willing to submit to God in the matter, after which he felt strengthened by God to be both patient and trust in God's providence.²³⁸ These few points, contentment, waiting, and following

²³¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 39.

²³²Being subjected to pain though illness as early as 1699, Boston thought his time may soon be up, and said he 'was somewhat submissive to the divine disposal.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 64.

²³³Flavel, *Providence*.

²³⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 76-77.

²³⁵Cf. Woodruff III, 6-7.

²³⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 82.

²³⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 83.

²³⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 85.

providence, prove to be reoccurring themes in Boston's personal application of God's will to his life.

When Boston was later removed from Simprin to Etterick, the same themes of submission, observing providence, and waiting on the Lord, re-emerge. Boston's belief that everything was governed by the ordaining will of God comes out clearly in his own account of his call to Etterick. Every detail of life is encompassed within the all-knowing, all-seeing, eternal will of God, and so in a two page account²³⁹ we read of the 'course of providence,' and God 'sealing His design,' Boston setting himself to 'view the several steps of providence,' and noticing the 'particular design of providence,' concluding that, 'by such a train of providences, the Lord had sealed His design of my not going to Etterick,' and so he was not able to pray about the situation 'seeing the affair as it were already determined.' He says,

At length I came to this conclusion, that seeing all the dispensations seeming to cross the design of Etterick (excepting one) may be in some measure accounted for, and appear not inconsistent with the Lord's design of sending me there, and that the most remarkable of these made plainly for it; seeing that by a train of cross providences, Providence made it grow darker and darker, and then suddenly and unexpectedly made such a turn in it; seeing it hath been brought this length through several difficulties, and the Lord seemed to open two doors for my removal at one time, and then shut one of them again, and with that I designed for the one sent me to the other; seeing the dispensations of Providence²⁴⁰

Boston views his call to Etterick as a trial, he desires to go there and observes providence to that end, but is unsure if all his reasons are pure, so he struggles with submitting his heart to God.²⁴¹ God produces an unpromising picture of the call before installing him in Etterick parish as the minister. So we can see the cyclical pattern mentioned above in action: trying circumstances producing

²³⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 184-85.

²⁴⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 197.

²⁴¹'forasmuch as these dispensations of Providence, as observed and applied, look scripture-like, and this resolution hath not been easily obtained by me, having had many ups and downs in this business; seeing the Lord shewed me on the 9th of January, that he that believeth maketh no haste, and I was content to wait, and was quieted in prayer, and helped to depend on the Lord ...'. Boston, *Memoirs*, 198.

situations where Boston struggles with submitting his heart to God, which bring Boston low as he is caused to wait and observe the dispensations of providence, when at their darkest point God over-rules by his mighty hand to accomplish his will. Boston's observation of providence and submitting his heart to God's will, become two key factors in the success of his pastoral application of the will of God in his ministry, as the popularity of his *Crook in the Lot* bears testament.

2.5 Submission to the will of God

As we have seen emerging from the *Memoirs*, Boston is a strong advocator and an applier, of submission to the will of God. On many occasions within his *Memoirs* we find sentences which talk about resolving such and such situation to providence.²⁴² Alongside Boston's observing of providence, there was the equally central concept of submission to the will of God (they are really two sides of the one coin). In every occasion, great or small,²⁴³ Boston is at pains to get his heart submitted to God's will and to implore others to do the same. A fine example on how Boston viewed the sovereign will of God in his life, and his desire to submit to it, is seen in the incident of the near loss of his eye.

I went out to the garden, and there was a spit sticking in the wall of the house, with the small end of it outmost. I rushed inadvertently my face on it, and the wound I got was about a straw-breadth beneath the eye. I was stupefied with it, and knew not but it had gone into the eyeball. It swelled to a great bigness, and covered a great part of my eye. I was afraid of losing my eye. It sent me to the Lord, confessing my sin, and taking with the punishment of my iniquity; and I got a patient, quiet, submissive, and contented frame under the rod, endeavouring to trust God come what would ... And noticing the way of Providence with me, I kissed this rod, for there was a deal of kindness in it.²⁴⁴

The rod came from God, Boston submits to it, he even sees goodness in it despite the inconvenience, fear and pain, acknowledging his own sinfulness and causing

²⁴²Boston, *Memoirs*, 208.

²⁴³When it looked like his father might die, Boston says he prayed earnestly to the Lord for his recovery and it pleased the Lord to hear him, nevertheless, he continues, 'And still I see the advantage of submission to the will of God.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 142.

²⁴⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 152-53.

him to trust God more. In many ways, all sin is in effect a refusal to submit to the will of God. Whenever Boston failed to get his heart brought to a ‘submission to the will of God’ he recognized he was spiritually, in a dangerous position, and that his ‘willful will was a spectacle of horror’ to him.²⁴⁵ Boston goes on to say that it was his desire to give up his will to the will of God, submitting to the trials that are sent by his hand, noting, ‘short-lived are mercies that fall off the tree of Providence ere they be ripe.’²⁴⁶ God’s timing is perfect, and our submission to that time scale is what is required if we would ever reap the benefits of affliction.

Submission and timing become two of the defining applications of his doctrine of the will of God in his pastoral ministry, stemming from his own experience. The submission of Boston’s will to God’s was clearly one of the great trials of his own life.²⁴⁷

I had met with a temptation that put me out of frame. Afterwards I met with another of the same kind, but sharper; with which I went to God, and it issued in quickening me again. I was turned off the thing that raised my corruptions, and turned in against myself, that I could not get my will to comply with the will of God in this, without fretting, and cheerfully to submit to providence in that particular. It was stinging to think, that whereas I have several evidences for heaven, this one thing is like to blot them all out. I have found a satisfaction in seeing the Lord, by His providence, set me on my trials for my humiliation in other cases; but I think I can never get over this. I wrestled with the Lord to get my will melted down, that at length in this I might be as a weaned child. This cured me in another case, and made me fear the being taken off my trials before some good metal should appear.²⁴⁸

Boston continues his account with the struggle of his own unsubmitive will saying, ‘it lay on me as a giant bearing down a little child.’²⁴⁹ In contrast, there are also times when Boston records receiving help from the Lord to submit to

²⁴⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 237.

²⁴⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 237.

²⁴⁷‘it has pleased my God to make the special continued trial of the most part of my life, which has been the most exquisite one to me ... The point of submitting my lot to Him.’ Boston, *Memoirs*, 432-33.

²⁴⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 240.

²⁴⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 241.

particular trials,²⁵⁰ and the confession that he would rather not have a crown of blessing on a matter if God ordained for him a cross to bear instead.²⁵¹

Boston's continual observations of and desires for submission to 'Providence' could appear to the casual observer to be somewhat deistic. Underlying his belief 'that God ordains everything that comes to pass' however, there is a deep-seated love for Christ and his model for dealing with trials is in reality, an identification with how Christ lived his earthly life - obeying God and submitting to his Father's will, in patience, trust and love.²⁵² He speaks at one point about longing to be free from sin and to love Christ more, desiring and longing for Christ, and that in certain trials which he could not make straight himself or worsened things in trying, Boston recognized the need to submit to Christ, preferring Christ and trial to being burden-less and Christ-less.²⁵³ And regarding his preaching ministry, he speaks about how God taught him to preach Christ, and how the doctrine of Christ helped him understand what it meant to be dead to law.²⁵⁴ Christ is at the centre of Boston's life and religion. Although it appears that Boston refers to 'providence' almost as a force in itself, it must always be remembered that 'Providence' is shorthand for the plans and governing of his heavenly Father,²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 284.

²⁵¹Cf. 'Hereupon I went to God again, and kissed the rod, accepting the trying dispensation, as the way He deals with His own; bringing their matters through many difficulties, and causing them to wait on.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 432.

²⁵²When discussing God's will it is universally spoken of in those terms 'God's will.' Since this study has its focus precisely on that issue it should not be surprising that 'God' is spoken of far more than 'Christ' or the 'Spirit.' The two are not divorced in Boston's mind, for he is a Christ centred preacher of the gospel, he begs people to come to Christ, he was at the fore regarding the debate surrounding the 'free offer' of Christ to sinners. The very idea of a deistic God would have been an abhorrence to Boston, his God is one that is very much involved with his creation, indeed one who entered his creation in order to reconcile us to himself. Boston's observation that providence always drove him to prayer does not mean he resigned himself to 'fate.' Although God ordains everything, Boston was a firm believer in prayer as a means to change circumstances, because God's will is accomplished through the natural means and causes God has established. 'In answer to the former calls of Providence, I spent this day in fasting, prayer, and meditation, with respect to my leaving of the world.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 281. Cf. 'yesterday I gave myself unto prayer, to entreat the Lord for her, and to provide for the worst; and came away with that, namely, That God will do the best.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 288.

²⁵³Boston, *Memoirs*, 246. On page 246 of the *Memoirs*, Boston first uses of the phrase '*The Crook in the Lot*' (2nd October 1710), which he later made famous with the book of the same title.

²⁵⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 168.

²⁵⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, Postscript.

who has revealed himself in Christ. He says, 'I know that nothing can fall out without the supreme management of my Father; and from His hand I take it, as a deep of holy Providence.'²⁵⁶

As Boston aged, he increasingly lived a life of continuous trial, brought about by his failing health and his wife's deteriorating condition. His desire to submit to God's will during his difficulties helped to remove bitterness towards God according to his *Memoirs* entries. Of his own health he says,

On the Friday's night, by reason of the scurvy struck out on me, I slept little; on the Saturday's night none at all; which made me very heavy on Sabbath morning. But I remember my great concern was for the efficacy of the word. God mercifully helped me; so that I minded not my want of sleep during the work, till it was over. Thus my troubles and trials increased; but the hand that laid then on, helped.²⁵⁷

Of his wife's illness, although counting it a trial, he sees many positive things resulting from it. Although as an affliction he admits it was a heavy burden to him, yet his being kept around the house was providential for helping him get so much work done. Besides that blessing, Boston also recalls how God used his wife's illness to justly correct him, train him in humility (especially regarding his work on the Hebrew accents), and to be a benefit to his parishioners in the public work.²⁵⁸ These considerations from the observation of providence helped Boston to submit to the will of God in the incident of his wife's health. Therefore, Boston's main trial of his own life, submitting his will to God's will, seemed to have produced fruit in his maturity. Again, the writing of *The Crook in the Lot* being one evidence of this. For a full understanding and appreciation of Boston's theology it is necessary to acknowledge his self-confessed greatest trial in life was submitting his will to the will of God.

²⁵⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 371.

²⁵⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 369.

²⁵⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 392-93.

2.6 God's will as related to his being and attributes

It appears that Boston's reflex action, when faced with a trial, is to consider the sovereign will of God - it simply governs his thoughts, which is seen in the incident of his daughter's illness below. Secondly, Boston appears to focus on the will of God to the detriment of God's other attributes such as his love or mercy, etc, which may well stem from his intense introspection and tender disposition. Regarding the time Boston's daughter became very sick, he says he rode all night to be with her and was very anxious along the way, but he was resolute that whatever God determined to do in her situation, that would be not only the right thing but also the best thing, and Boston would approve of it.²⁵⁹ A very strong resignation to the will of God comes though in that passage, although again, it led him positively to prayer that the Lord may rebuke the fever. His daughter's illness however degenerated.

Her pox were many, and of a dangerous kind. On the Thursday, the pox being about their height, she fell feverish. Fears of her death came then to an extremity; and while I was thus hardly bestead, awful impressions of the sovereign God sitting on His throne in the heavens, having the matter in His hand wholly, to turn it what way He pleased, were seasonably, by His grace, fixed on my spirit, commanding me silently to wait the issue.²⁶⁰

Again we see that Boston's focus is on the sovereign will of God, and also, there is a submission to that will.

It is certainly the case that some of Boston's calculations regarding the workings of God's will were more than a little misguided. When his son Ebenezer died, he concludes that it was the result of his delight in him the previous week: 'one thing was as plain as the sun to me, that that day eight days before, my heart was excessively led away from God towards the creature; and I had not visited my pillar so often and seriously as I ought to have done.'²⁶¹ That Boston concluded that God killed his son over a moment of his strong loving delight in him certainly

²⁵⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 343.

²⁶⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 344.

²⁶¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 218.

makes God appear capricious and cruel. There is a divorce at this point between God's will and justice from his mercy and love, which is why it is so important to locate the divine will firmly within the perfections of God's being and attributes. This tragic example is thankfully the exception rather than the rule in Boston's application of the divine will, and is perhaps better attributed to being a product of his grief rather than his pastoral and theological skill.

When Boston's second Ebenezer died, we see him again looking for the cause of his death in his own sinfulness but with greater difficulty. He acknowledges he has many sins, only this time he fails to put his finger on any one in particular as a cause for his son's death. Boston even prays to God in this instance to protest his wickedness, after which there immediately comes a resignation to God's will. At that point, in his child-like state of dependence, Boston sought the Lord's presence as his comfort in his loss.²⁶² We see then, when one of his children die he automatically tries to find which one of his own sins led to their death. This is a fearful way of living, if our sins and shortcomings can result directly (and often, soon after), in the death of one's children. Woodruff highlights how Boston related other of his afflictions directly to personal sins.²⁶³ These tragic instances are rare in the overall scheme of Boston's pastoral ministry²⁶⁴ but it just goes to highlight how damaging a strong belief in the sovereign will of God can be if it is divorced from the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Calvin was wise to advise against prying into the divine will and seeking causes for everything that happened - the distinction of God's will as being 'secret' is so called for good reasons. Boston's understanding of the will of God within his theology of the being of God did have major consequences for how Boston lived his life.

²⁶²Boston, *Memoirs*, 225.

²⁶³Woodruff III, 263. For example, Boston, *Memoirs*, 153; 159-60; 351. Again, the case of his daughter being born with a hare-lip because of Boston's identifiable sin, appears to be a case of a tender conscience and introspection trumping a knowledge of God's love and character.

²⁶⁴One could argue that Boston was writing out of grief in this instant, yet his *Memoirs* were often written retrospectively and he never expressed a new perspective on the said passages after many years had lapsed.

2.7 The influence of Flavel's *The Mystery of Providence* on Boston

In this part of the thesis we shall seek to ascertain what influenced Boston to write his *Memoirs* with such an acute focus on the providence of God. It is my belief that John Flavel's book on *The Mystery of Providence* played not a sole but certainly an influential part in Boston's life and theology. The first question to answer is why no-one has ever suggested Flavel's work on providence was of great influence for Boston. Thomson's²⁶⁵ account of Boston's life does not even mention Flavel, neither does Addison²⁶⁶ or McGowan²⁶⁷ in their theses. Ryken does not place any emphasis on Flavel's work on providence but concerning Boston's sources he does note that on other of Flavel's works Boston 'is clearly dependent.'²⁶⁸ Ryken also mentions that in some instances where Boston uses Flavel word for word, there is no mention of Flavel cited by Boston. Compare the two following extracts, the first by Flavel, and the second by Boston:

<p>this assumption of which I speak, is that whereby the second Person in the Godhead did take the human nature into a personal union with himself, by virtue whereof the manhood subsists in the second person, yet without confusion, both making but one person, Θεανθρωπο, or <i>Immanuel</i>, God with us.²⁶⁹ Flavel</p>	<p>this assumption of which I speak is that whereby the second person of the glorious Godhead did take the human nature into a personal union with himself, by virtue whereof the manhood subsists in the second person, yet without confusion, as I shewed already, both making but one person Immanuel, God with us.²⁷⁰ Boston</p>
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²⁶⁵Thomson.

²⁶⁶Addison.

²⁶⁷McGowan.

²⁶⁸Ryken, 308. On the same page Ryken says, 'Several sections of Boston's material on the hypostatic union and prophetic ministry of Christ appear to be taken verbatim from John Flavel's *Fountain of Life Opened* (London, 1673).' 308.

²⁶⁹J. Flavel, *The Fountain of Life. The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 76.

²⁷⁰Boston, *CW*, I.398.

This at least shows that Boston was familiar with Flavel who was almost a contemporary of Boston.²⁷¹ Bruggink suggests that it is impossible to know whether Flavel's work on providence influenced Boston or not,²⁷² the reason being that they both had similar views of providence. This is not altogether true though, they did not just have similar views on providence, they are in fact practically identical in every respect. I would argue that their similarity is a result of Flavel's influence on Boston and not as Bruggink suggests, that Boston was simply confirmed in what he already adhered to. The reason Bruggink suggests this is that Boston's account of his life in the *Memoirs* is the same before and after reading Flavel. Two points need to be made here, firstly, Boston often wrote retrospectively in the *Memoirs*,²⁷³ and secondly, Boston wrote his *Memoirs* over a period of about thirty-six years, starting before he was twenty years old and writing almost up until his death.²⁷⁴ For the vast majority of these years Boston was well acquainted with Flavel, having discovered his work on providence with great delight in 1699, before Boston had even entered the ministry at Simprin, and less than three years after he started to record his life.

Before looking at the content of Flavel's book on providence to see in what ways he influenced Boston, we need to consider an important point. There is evidence to suggest that prior to reading *The Mystery of Providence*, Boston showed little interest in the subject, which we have noted from the *Memoirs* dominated his theology and daily thinking for the vast majority of his life. Some of the evidence

²⁷¹The example given was only a short section of a much wider passage. For other comparisons as identified by Ryken, see from both their first volumes of works, Boston 398-9 with Flavel 75-78 as mentioned; Boston 411-13 with Flavel 119-121, regarding a prophet like Moses; Boston 419-22 with Flavel 124-5, on the revealed will of God; and Boston 432-3 with Flavel 125-8, on the encouragement to weak Christians.

²⁷²Bruggink, 72.

²⁷³A good example of this is when he writes about getting married some 30 years after the event: 'Thus was I by all-wise Providence yoked with my wife, with who I have now [1730], by the mercy of God, lived thirty years complete ...'. Boston, *Memoirs*, 157. Boston recalls getting married within a 'providential' mindset present.

²⁷⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 1. *The Passages of My Life* that went to make up the *Memoirs* were started in 1708 after his induction to Etterick, and were sporadically added to over the duration of Boston's life, see, Boston, *A General Account*, vii.

is irrefutable fact, other things have been deduced from the *Memoirs*, but the reasonableness of the two together make for a compelling argument. We know for certain that Boston did not come across Flavel's work on providence until 19th July 1699,²⁷⁵ and was a great help to him. We also know that Boston borrowed books and later bought those that he liked,²⁷⁶ such as when he borrowed *The Marrow* and later bought it from the owner.²⁷⁷ Boston clearly records that the very first parcel of books he bought was in 1702: 'Most of the books mentioned in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th pages of my catalogue yet *in retentis*, whose prices are set down with them, were purchased in that year, and the following 1703.'²⁷⁸ Why are these dates important? All of Boston's works after 1702 have a major emphasis on providence and those written before that date do not, in fact he scarcely mentions the subject. It is my belief that Boston, having read Flavel's book on providence loved it so much he later acquired it when he started to purchase books in 1702. Boston wrote *The Art of Man-Fishing* in January 1699, six months before reading Flavel and there is nothing about providence in that book. More importantly, Ryken (re)discovered a rare Boston manuscript in Aberdeen University, the vast majority of which was unpublished material not included in Boston's *Complete Works*, it did however, include a hand-written copy of *The Art of Man-Fishing*.²⁷⁹ The comparison between this document and the *Memoirs* or Boston's sermons is striking. The latter refer to providence almost on every page, yet in this 350 page manuscript there are only two references to providence.²⁸⁰ This rare unpublished manuscript was written between 1695-1702, exactly up until the very year Boston started to buy his books.

²⁷⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 76-77.

²⁷⁶'when I was settled in Simprin, I had very few books; which occasioned my borrowing, as I had access ...'. Boston, *A General Account*, 150.

²⁷⁷Boston, *A General Account*, 151.

²⁷⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 169.

²⁷⁹For an overview of the content of this document see, Ryken, 9-12.

²⁸⁰T. Boston, "MSS. Rev. Thomas Boston of Etterick," unpublished manuscript, MS 3245/2 (Department of Special Collections and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen University Library, 1695-1702), 214; 298. There is no special emphasis on providence in these references, merely the passing use of the word.

Someone may question why Flavel did not immediately impact Boston's written works since he read him in July 1699, and I think the reason is twofold. Firstly, as we have suggested, Boston probably did not buy Flavel until 1702, and secondly, between the years 1699-1702 Boston faced a number of pressing issues. Within this time period Boston had entered his ministry at Simprin and was settling in there, having to wait two years until 1702 for his manse to be completed,²⁸¹ a few months after which Boston bought his first books.²⁸² Between these years Boston was married to Katherine Brown on the 17th July 1700,²⁸³ had to contend with the death of his father on the 13th April 1701²⁸⁴ followed immediately by the death of his first child.²⁸⁵ From Boston's writing and the circumstances recorded, it seems that Boston first read Flavel in 1699, purchased a copy in 1702,²⁸⁶ and from that point on was heavily influenced by it.

This hypothesis adequately explains Boston's noticeable emphasis on providence after the year 1702, and if Flavel was not the influence on Boston as I have suggested, from where did his preoccupation with providence derive from 1702 onwards? The other books Boston mentions being of importance to him do not have any emphasis on the observation of providence or the need to submit to God's will, such as Zanchy,²⁸⁷ Luther, Calvin, or the *Marrow*.²⁸⁸ Nor do books like Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*²⁸⁹ which was influential in its day, nor do other Reformed memoirs.²⁹⁰ Whereas there is evidence for Boston being

²⁸¹Addison, 27.

²⁸²Boston, *Memoirs*, 163-64.

²⁸³Boston, *Memoirs*, 146.

²⁸⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 159.

²⁸⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 161.

²⁸⁶It is surely no coincidence that very soon after Boston's father dies and leaves him money that his first parcel of books arrives followed closely by others. Boston, *A General Account*, 137-38.

²⁸⁷Zanchius.

²⁸⁸E. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Glasgow: David Bryce & Son, 1902).

²⁸⁹R. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Basingstoke: Pickering & Inglis, 1983).

²⁹⁰Providence is only mentioned on pages, 12, 37 and 68 in R. R. M'Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains of R. R. M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), and pages 33, 82, and 83 in J. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2000). Andrew Bonar does mention providence far more frequently (17, 22, 28, 31, 33, 34, 37, 43, 44, 45, 46, etc), in A. A. Bonar, *Diary and Letters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894). Bonar however also says, 'Boston's Life has been very interesting to me. I think I may be like him if ever I am brought

influenced by Flavel, Calvin uses the illustration of the sun shining on a corpse to illustrate that the sun is not to blame for the stench of the corpse in the same way God is not to be blamed for mankind's sin.²⁹¹ Flavel uses the same illustration but exchanges the corpse for a dung hill, saying, 'Though he permits, limits, orders, and over-rules many unholy persons and actions; yet in all he works like himself; and his holiness is no more defiled and stained by their impurity, than the sun-beams are by the noisome exhalations of a dung-hill.'²⁹² When Boston comes to speak on the same subject he uses Flavel's dung hill rather than Calvin's corpse, suggesting that he had Flavel's copy of *The Mystery of Providence* to hand. Boston says, 'All the evil that is in sinful actions proceeds and flows from the wicked agent, as the stench of the dunghill does not proceed from the heat of the sun, but from the corrupt matter contained in the dunghill.'²⁹³

Having shown how Boston's *Memoirs* are a record of God's providential dealings in his life and how important the subject is to him, let us now turn to Flavel's work on providence to see what Flavel emphasized. The first thing we have to note is that Flavel stands firmly within the Reformed tradition along with Boston, making references to Calvin and Luther for support.²⁹⁴ More important for our discussion is the very reason Flavel wrote his work on providence, as it was not a doctrinal work *per se*, but a pastoral work with the aim of encouraging others to record God's acts of providence in their lives. He begins by saying,

And, as it is most *honourable to serve*, so you will find it most comfortable to *observe*, the ways of God in his providence: To compose ourselves to think of the *conduct of providence* through all the *stages* of life we have hitherto passed: To note the results of its profound wisdom, the effects of its tender care, the distinguishing fruits of its special bounty: To mark how providences have gone along step by step with the promises, and both with us, until they have now brought us near to our

to the truth. There is something in his mind that I can enter into,' (6). And so Bonar, who was greatly influenced by Boston, also reflects a lot on the providence of God.

²⁹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.5.

²⁹²Flavel, *Providence*, 459.

²⁹³Boston, *CW*, I.191; I.159.

²⁹⁴Flavel, *Providence*, 435.

everlasting rest. Oh! how delectable! how transporting are such meditations as these!²⁹⁵

The idea that the observation of providence is important is as strong in Flavel as it is in Boston, in fact, I cannot think of anyone who comes close to matching the emphasis on observing providence that is found in Flavel and Boston respectively. Flavel's opening declaration of the Epistle reads, 'To the ingenuous READERS, those especially who are the heedful OBSERVERS of the WAYS of PROVIDENCE.'²⁹⁶ It is his express aim to encourage²⁹⁷ his readers to keep a memorial of providence in their lives,²⁹⁸ and the fuller the record the greater the benefit. Flavel says,

*Labour to get as full and thorough recognition of the providences of God about you, from first to last, as you are able. O fill your hearts with the thoughts of him and his ways. If a single act of providence be so ravishing and transporting, what would many such be, if they were presented together to the view of the soul? If one star be so beautiful to behold, what is a constellation! Let your reflections, therefore, upon the acts and workings of providence for you, be full, extensively and intensively.*²⁹⁹

Boston, it appears, took Flavel at his very word and produced precisely what he was encouraged to do, a memoirs packed full of extensive and intensive reflections on the providence of God in his life. Given Boston's tender conscience and introspective character it is no surprise to find him following Flavel's advice, especially in light of the strong language Flavel uses to present his appeal. Flavel categorically says that it is a sin not to record God's providence,³⁰⁰ that it 'is a vile slighting of God'³⁰¹ to neglect recording his

²⁹⁵Flavel, *Providence*, 338.

²⁹⁶Flavel, *Providence*, 339.

²⁹⁷Flavel, *Providence*, 464.

²⁹⁸'In consideration of the great and manifold advantages resulting from an humble and heedful observation or providence, I cannot but judge it the concernment of Christians that have time and ability for such a work to keep written memorials, or *journals*, of providences by them for their own and others use and benefit.' Flavel, *Providence*, 495.

²⁹⁹Flavel, *Providence*, 416.

³⁰⁰'It is plain, that this is our duty, because the neglect of it is every-where in scripture condemned as a sin. To be of a heedless, unobservant temper is very displeasing to God ...'. Flavel, *Providence*, 414.

³⁰¹Flavel, *Providence*, 415.

providence and that a person could not pray appropriately without doing so. Flavel's influence would also explain Boston's retrospective reflections throughout the *Memoirs*,³⁰² and the many times of trial Boston includes.³⁰³ Given the focus Boston has on providence throughout his *Memoirs* and how frequent and detailed his entries on providence are, it appears Boston used Flavel's work on providence as a template for his own work, which was Flavel's self-confessed intent:

I am greatly mistaken if the history of our own lives, if it were well drawn up, and distinctly perused, would not be the pleasantest history that ever we read in our lives ... But, reader, thou only art able to compile the history of Providence for thyself, because the *memorials* that furnish it are only in thine own hands. However, here thou mayest find a pattern, and general rules to direct thee in that great and difficult work which is the very end and design of this *manual*.³⁰⁴

When a completed product matches a set of instructions it clearly indicates the end product was influenced by the instructions. This is the case with Boston's *Memoirs*. The *Memoirs* appear unique in the nature of their biographical account mixed with an intense focus on providence, but they make perfect sense read as a product of Flavel's manual.

In addition to the above, there are so many points made by Flavel which become echoed by Boston, that reinforce the argument that Flavel influenced Boston. Like Boston, Flavel emphasized the need for providence to submit to the word of God,³⁰⁵ he refers to the wheels of Ezekiel that Boston uses as shorthand for providence,³⁰⁶ and his work is accompanied by a host of scriptural references so

³⁰²Let them be as extensively full, as may be; search backward into all the performances of providence, throughout your lives ... Ah sirs, let me tell you, there is not such a pleasant history for you to read in all the world, as the history of your own lives, if you would but sit down and record to yourselves from the beginning hitherto, what God hath been to you, and done for you.' Flavel, *Providence*, 416.

³⁰³Flavel, *Providence*, 413.

³⁰⁴Flavel, *Providence*, 341-42.

³⁰⁵'And this be done, follow providence as far as it agrees with the word, and no further. There is no use to be made of providence against the word, but in subserviency to it.' Flavel, *Providence*, 472. Cf. 340; 419; 425; 469, which all make the same point.

³⁰⁶Flavel, *Providence*, 406. Cf. 456.

that their writings becoming very difficult to distinguish.³⁰⁷ Boston shares with Flavel the view that providence is available to ‘read,’³⁰⁸ and that God’s afflicting providences are for the good of his people.³⁰⁹ Surely it is no coincidence that Flavel’s repeated emphasis on the need for submission to the will of God³¹⁰ is taken up as a primary interest of Boston’s? After coming across Flavel’s work Boston specifically mentions, ‘by the means of resignation there proposed, I endeavoured to win my heart to that disposition, and so went to prayer with confidence in the Lord. I found also spiritual advantage in this case, by reflecting on former experiences; so that I came to be content to follow the Lord implicitly ...’³¹¹ There appears to be a direct correlation of reading Flavel’s work followed by Boston’s interest in and desire to submit to the will of God, after which he records how helpful it then was to start ‘reflecting on former experiences.’ Boston’s declaration that submission to God’s will was his life long trial is similarly and first heard in Flavel who describes it as ‘that great and difficult work.’³¹² There is simply too much evidence to deny that Flavel’s work on providence appears to have been a significant influence on Boston.

2.8 Conclusion

The main points of this chapter have been to show, i. that Boston’s personal characteristics, being introverted and contemplative, especially in the observance of providence, instinctively led him to a deeper understanding of the will of God until it was the leading principal of his natural thought processes. This was seen

³⁰⁷Compare for example, Flavel, *Providence*, 359, with, Boston, *Repentance*, 27.

³⁰⁸‘The instruments employed by providence for you, are of a special consideration; and the finger of God is clearly seen by us when we pursue that meditation.’ Flavel, *Providence*, 418.

³⁰⁹Flavel, *Providence*, 480.

³¹⁰‘In all the sad and afflictive providences that befall you, eye God as the author and orderer of them also ... Set before you the sovereignty of God, eye him as being infinitely superior to you, at whose pleasure you, and all you have is, Psal. cxv. 3. which is the most conclusive reason and argument of submission, Psalm xlvi. 10. For if we and all we have proceeded from his will, how equal is it that we be resigned up to it?’ Flavel, *Providence*, 426. Cf. 474; 476; 492; 493; 494. Cf. J. Flavel, *Preparations for Suffering. The Works of John Flavel* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 23.

³¹¹Boston, *A General Account*, 75.

³¹²Flavel, *Providence*, 493.

most clearly in the vast array of references to God's will unfolding in providence throughout his *Memoirs*, alongside his open declarations of love for the doctrine. Boston's personal experience of trials gave him great insight into the subject as a whole, playing a significant part in his successful pastoral ministry.³¹³ As a result of his personal admissions we found the repeated triad of submission, patience and silence as Boston's preferred medicine for bearing the afflictions which come from the hand of God. His own great trial being his life-long battle with submitting his will to God's. ii. The evidence derived from the content of Flavel's work on providence, coupled with the dates and circumstances revealed in Boston's *Memoirs*, suggests that Flavel was a significant influence on Boston. Providence is therefore a key factor for a full appreciation of Boston's life and theology.

Having inherited such a robust doctrine of providence from the mainstream position of Reformed theology at that time, it is not surprising that it features in his writings in a way that 'tows the party line.' What is surprising is his overwhelming love for and emphasis on providence, which he chooses to express in clear terms throughout his *Memoirs*. He loves it as a subject to discuss, as a topic to preach, as an act to observe, as a tool to be trained by, as an instrument of hope, and as an expression for God himself. Boston departs from Calvin's personal practice of not seeking reasons for every event of life, Calvin's motto for the subject according to Waltke was, 'love God and do what you please,'³¹⁴ whereas Boston's could be summed up as 'observe providence and fall in line with it.' The former stance is very liberating, the latter more prone to produce anxiety, or as in Boston's case, quite often, fear. Although Boston says he does not want to make a Bible out of providence, this shows that he was aware of coming close to doing just that, his own confession betraying his problem. From the human perspective, providence will always be best understood as revealing

³¹³Simprin parish were reluctant to let Boston move to Etterick, and when an unwanted call came for him to move from Etterick to Closeburn, his Etterick parishioners fought successfully to keep him.

³¹⁴Waltke, 89.

God's will retrospectively, the Bible reveals what God's will is for the present, and the future will of God is known only to God himself. Boston had self-assurance in his ability to interpret providence, and had expectations for his flock to do the same. What is clear in all of this is, providence was central to Boston's life and pastoral ministry, having been shaped by it himself he shapes others in his writings, preaching and personal visitations. 'Providence' however, is a narrow focus of the larger subject of the doctrine of the will of God, and it is necessary to understand Boston's doctrine of God's will in its entirety to place the subject of providence within its proper Reformed context.

Chapter 3

Boston's Reformed Context

Boston's theology of providence as part of his doctrine of God's will stood firmly within the Reformed tradition. The Westminster Confession of Faith was a central source in his ministerial career, forming and reconfirming his theological position as a pastor of the Church of Scotland. He was steeped in its theology, never hiding his admiration for its wisely crafted statements. Yet this significant codification of Reformed thought was the product of over a century of Reformed development. It was expressed after numerous Reformed confessions were drafted in Europe, after the continental Reformed orthodox divines had discussed, mellowed and crystallized Reformed thinking, after the debates surrounding Arminianism, Amyraldianism, infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism, had unfolded. The works of those who were involved in these refining processes, Boston engages with and relishes, right back to the period of the Magisterial Reformers and their initial work in establishing that tradition. The works of Calvin and Luther however, were not introducing novel ideas into Christendom; indeed, the origins of their main theology were stated by many who preceded them. They were fighting for the faith once delivered to the saints, not a new version of that faith. We can clearly see then, that Boston's theology comes at the end of a hotly debated process, after initial ideas are thought out and defended to the point where agreement can be stated and codified, which arguably left Boston the easier part of popularizing the fruit of his tradition's labours.

In order, therefore, to set Boston and his doctrine of the will of God in its proper historical and theological context, we shall briefly trace the influences of the main Patristic and Medieval sources on Calvin's theology,³¹⁵ before turning to see

³¹⁵We shall only view sources which Calvin himself interacts with when dealing with the doctrine of God's will. It is necessary to find the influences which determined his written works on the subject (Most notably; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5; 1.14-2.5; 3.21-24, especially; J. Calvin, *The Secret Providence of God*, in *Calvin's Calvinism*, translated by Henry Cole [Grand Rapids: Reformed

Calvin's own doctrine of the will of God. This is important because too often people tackle Calvin's theology without any indication of what preceded him, and then go on to draw conclusions about how Calvin's theology led to certain things.³¹⁶ This shall lead us into an exploration of the WCF's doctrine of God's will. At each stage we shall be establishing the context for Boston's own Reformed credentials and doctrine of God's will. We shall work our way towards Boston's doctrine of the will of God in a chronological fashion.³¹⁷ It is because Boston was unmistakably Reformed that I have chosen Calvin and the WCF as two unmistakably Reformed benchmarks for providing the context for Boston's rich indulgence in providence and his doctrine of God's will.³¹⁸ This context is important for comprehending Boston's varied pastoral applications of providence as part of the will of God. It is only because God ordains all things in his sovereignty that Boston had so much confidence in his providence. Part of understanding Boston in a full and comprehensive way is understanding the rich and complex Reformed tradition in which he laboured and from which his doctrine of God's will was formed. We shall therefore offer some sketches of the historic path and journey that led to Boston's own doctrine of the will of God.

Free Publishing Company, 1950]; Calvin, *CEPG*; J. Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, translated and edited by B. W. Farley [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982]; J. Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will. A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice Against Pighius*, translated by G. I. Davies [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996].

³¹⁶For example, Wright suggests that Calvin's teaching on God's will, 'made it possible for God's presence and activity within the world eventually to be denied.' T. J. Wright, *Providence Made Flesh. Divine Presence as a Framework for a Theology of Providence*, with a foreword by N. G. Wright. Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 56. See also 74. Regardless of the accuracy of this statement, why is it 'Calvin's' theology of God's will that is indicated as the culprit? Why not any of the other early Reformers? Why not Aquinas' or Lombard's? Far too much attention is often paid towards Calvin at the expense of the same doctrines held by his contemporaries and those who preceded him by centuries. (Wright does go on to look at Aquinas' theology but twenty-nine pages later).

³¹⁷I must emphasise at the start that I have had to be brutally selective in my choice for situating Boston within his Reformed context, which is why I have chosen major Reformed markers.

³¹⁸Boston was of course influenced by many Reformers and their writings, but Calvin and the WCF are two sources of influence which held pride of place for Boston.

3.1 Aristotle

On the path towards the context for Boston's doctrine of God's will, two of Aristotle's ideas (384-322 BC) are important,³¹⁹ firstly, his metaphysical deduction of what he termed the 'unmoved mover,' and secondly, his teaching on 'causes.' The argument of the unmoved mover positions God as the First Cause, as 'there must be something which originates motion, and this something must itself be unmoved, and must be eternal, substance, and actuality.'³²⁰ From this 'First Cause,' flow all other causes. 'There are, according to him, four kinds of causes, which were called, respectively, material, formal, efficient, and final.'³²¹ The material cause deals with the matter of what something is made from, i.e., the silver of a ring. The formal cause refers to the form of an object, i.e., the shape of the ring. The efficient cause describes the one who brings about change in the object, i.e., the craftsman of the ring. Lastly, there is the final cause 'the end or purpose for which one does something ... Thus the desired goal may be said to be the cause of an action,'³²² i.e., to make the ring for someone's marriage ceremony. In Aristotle's thinking, the first cause is the end of all other causes, when all other explanations have been explained.³²³ These ideas, that there is a Being from whom all things originate and that things happen in relation to this Being in differing ways sow the seed for the concept of a God who ordains all things. Calvin, as we shall see, adopted Aristotle's fourfold scheme of causation.

³¹⁹There are also anti-Christian aspects to Aristotle's works to, see, F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas. An Introduction to the Life and Work of the Great Medieval Thinker* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 65.

³²⁰B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946), 190.

³²¹Russell, 191.

³²²C. Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 43.

³²³Muller is right to highlight Aristotle's influence on Calvin, Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 176.

3.1.2 *The Early Church Fathers*

Calvin was widely read in the Early Church Fathers, as Lane's detailed research shows.³²⁴ Our main interest here is Augustine who wrote prolifically,³²⁵ and engages with the issues that contribute to Calvin's doctrine of the will of God such as predestination, grace and free choice, the problem of evil, election and providence. Augustine's contribution and influence on Christian thought in general and on Calvin in particular is unparalleled.³²⁶

Augustine's doctrine of the will of God was formed from his doctrine of God.³²⁷ God's will, being one of his attributes, helps to reveal something of God's essence for Augustine, because the will of God is understood in relation to God's essence and exists only in relation to God's other attributes.³²⁸ Therefore, since God is eternal³²⁹ and immutable, so his will.³³⁰ When Augustine speaks of God's essence, will, knowledge and immutability, they are therefore, inseparable.³³¹ Augustine believed that God's will included his foreknowledge of all things,³³² but

³²⁴A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin. Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

³²⁵Augustine, *Enchiridion*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978); Augustine, *CG*; Augustine, *Confessions*, edited by H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, translated by T. Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993); Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, P. Schaff. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Augustine, *A Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

³²⁶Lane, A. N. S., *Student of the Church Fathers*, 55-56. Works on Augustine are legion: G. Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo. Life and Controversies* (London: SCM Press, 1963); B. B. Warfield, *Calvin & Augustine* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1956); M. E. Vanderschaaf, "Predestination and Certainty of Salvation in Augustine and Calvin," *Reformed Review*, no. 30 (1976-77): 1-8; J. B. Mozley, *Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination* (London: John Murray, 1883); etc.

³²⁷However, Augustine regularly discusses his doctrine of the will of God in relation to philosophers such as Plotinus, Augustine, *CG*, 1.10.14. Cf. 1.9.17; 1.10.16; 1.10.23; 1.10.9; 1.10.2. Cf. Plotinus, "Eighth Tractate. On Free-Will and the Will of the One," in *Six Enneads* (2007), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/plotinus/enneads/html> [accessed:1/9/07].

³²⁸A concept pre-dating Plato according to Stead. C. Stead, "The Concept of Mind and the Concept of God in the Christian Fathers," in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christianity*, edited by B. Hebblethwaite (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), 40-41.

³²⁹Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.15.18.

³³⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.31.41.

³³¹Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.16.19.

³³²Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.9.

this did not imply that the world was subject to fate.³³³ This does mean, however, that the fall of mankind³³⁴ and of angels³³⁵ was included in his will, and he views the denial of God's foreknowledge as 'the most obvious madness.'³³⁶ God's immutable will and foreknowledge are one with his knowledge and providential design, but this does not negate human freedom to will freely,³³⁷ rather the opposite, God's foreknowledge and sovereignty ensures our freedom to will.³³⁸

Augustine firmly believed in free will.³³⁹ Augustine simply holds to the two truths: that God has foreknowledge and that mankind has free will.³⁴⁰ Although God directs everything via his providence and humans are completely dependent on God for their existence, God does still provide for humanity 'a certain independence.'³⁴¹ It was through this independence that mankind first sinned, causing the fall.³⁴² 'For it was by the evil use of free will that man destroyed both it and himself.'³⁴³ Although the capacity for 'always' willing good perished at the fall, human free will did not perish.³⁴⁴ He concludes that sin and evil committed by mankind originate in the human will.³⁴⁵ The problem of evil plagued Augustine most of his life.³⁴⁶ Augustine believed that all evil could ultimately

³³³Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.9.

³³⁴Augustine, *CG*, 2.14.11.

³³⁵Augustine, *CG*, 2.22.1.

³³⁶Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.9. A refutation of Cicero's theology, cited by Augustine as, Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.

³³⁷At one point Augustine uses the term 'fixed providential design.' Augustine, *CG*, 2.14.9. Cf. Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.9; Mozley, 242.

³³⁸Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.3.

³³⁹See, Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), Chp 55; Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.3.

³⁴⁰See, Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.10; Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.9. Cf. L. D. Sharp, "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine," *Evangelical Quarterly* 52 (1980): 90.

³⁴¹Augustine, *CG*, 1.7.30.

³⁴²Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 106.

³⁴³Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 30.

³⁴⁴Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, 1.5.

³⁴⁵Augustine, *On Two Souls, Against the Manichaeans*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 10.14; Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.17.

³⁴⁶G. Bonner, *God's Decree and Man's Destiny* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1987), 274.

trace its source back to good,³⁴⁷ because all things that had the capacity to will evil were originally created good, so that pure evil could not really exist, for that would lack any good and be non-existent.³⁴⁸ Evil occurs when a will rejects good by its own choice,³⁴⁹ and in Augustine's thought, evil can only exist as a defect in a good nature.³⁵⁰

Predestination in Augustine's thinking was simply the 'foreknowledge and preparation of God's kindnesses,'³⁵¹ whereby some are chosen and others not. The elect are chosen in Christ their head,³⁵² through God's grace.³⁵³ His theology of predestination changed within his own life time as is noted by Evans, Warfield,³⁵⁴ and himself.³⁵⁵ How God makes his choice without being arbitrary is a mystery according to Augustine;³⁵⁶ why some people are chosen and others are not, is too great to comprehend with our finite minds.³⁵⁷ Augustine limits his views on predestination to the positive side, those who are chosen, scarcely mentioning reprobation.³⁵⁸

Augustine's doctrine of the will of God consists of the following theology. God's will, inclusive with all of God's attributes, cannot be separated from God's essence, for when he wills, it is his essence willing.³⁵⁹ Being therefore eternal, powerful,³⁶⁰ and immutable, it directs the whole of creation in providence. God's

³⁴⁷ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 13.

³⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.12.18. Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 14; Augustine, *CG*, 2.12.3.

³⁴⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 11.

³⁵⁰ Augustine, *CG*, 2.11.17.

³⁵¹ Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), ch. 35.

³⁵² Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, ch. 31.

³⁵³ Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, ch. 19.

³⁵⁴ See, Evans, *Augustine on Evil*, 134; Warfield, 376-80.

³⁵⁵ Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, ch. 7.

³⁵⁶ Mozley, 134.

³⁵⁷ Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, ch. 16.

³⁵⁸ Reprobation became an integral part of Reformed theology. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.12-17.

³⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.16.19.

³⁶⁰ Augustine rarely uses the word 'sovereignty' when describing God or his will, but much prefers the word 'power.' Augustine, *CG*, 1.5.8; 1.5.9; 1.5.10; 1.7.30.

foreknowledge neither strips mankind of free will nor causes mankind to sin, rather in his foreknowledge and by his providence God establishes the existence of free will in humans. God's will predestines some people to everlasting life. Evil is a result of deficient wills which depart from doing good, because the natures needed for evil to take place were originally created good. God is and was fully aware of the evil that would accompany his good creation but restrains its presence, bringing good out of it.³⁶¹ Even those beings that will things contrary to God's will, God uses in his omnipotence to conform to his will.³⁶² The underlying current of all Augustine's theology on the will of God is that God is firmly in control, and being good, he produces good, even out of evil.³⁶³

3.1.3 The influence of the Medieval Church Fathers

Calvin was influenced by various medieval theologians but concerning the doctrine of God's will, few seem to have impacted him as much as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Peter Lombard (1100-59) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/6-1273), who were all sympathetic to Augustinianism. Bernard of Clairvaux³⁶⁴ preceded Calvin and the Reformation by almost four centuries, but his treatise *On Grace and Free Choice*, finds many overlaps with Calvin's Augustinian viewpoint. Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences* were also influential, being the standard text book at the time of the Reformation.³⁶⁵ Thomas Aquinas³⁶⁶ also

³⁶¹Augustine, *CG*, 2.11.17.

³⁶²Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 100.

³⁶³Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 100.

³⁶⁴Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Grace and Free Choice* (Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1988). See also, Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride, in Treatises II*, translated by M. A. Conway. Cistercian Fathers Series (Washington: Cistercian Publications Consortium Press, 1974); Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God, in The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, translated by R. Walton (Washington: Cistercian Publications Consortium Press, 1974); G. R. Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); A. N. S. Lane, *Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996).

³⁶⁵P. Lombard, *The First Book of Sentences*, Quaracchi Edition of 1882, A. Bugnolo (2007), <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/lombardus/opera/Is1-48.html> [accessed: 8/5/07]. Cf. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 180.

³⁶⁶N. Kretzmann, and E. Stump, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

has a part to play in the establishing of the Reformed tradition.³⁶⁷ Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* contains twelve articles devoted to the topic of God's will,³⁶⁸ as well as his *Summa Contra Gentiles*,³⁶⁹ and on providence and predestination.³⁷⁰ Calvin therefore benefited from a rich and informative history. Given Calvin's influence on the Reformed tradition, it is important to recognize that those sources which influenced him have ultimately influenced the history of that tradition, albeit indirectly at times.

3.1.4 Bernard of Clairvaux

It is specifically in the area of free will and God's sovereignty that Bernard helps us understand Calvin.³⁷¹ Bernard is incontrovertibly a firm believer in human free will.³⁷² Free will and free choice, along with voluntary consent³⁷³ (which distinguishes humanity from animals), seem to be used interchangeably by Bernard. He defines voluntary consent as, 'a self-determining habit of the soul. Its action is neither forced nor extorted. It stems from the will and not from necessity, denying or giving itself on no issue except by way of the will ... where you have consent, there also is the will. But where the will is, there is freedom. And this is what I understand by the term "free choice."³⁷⁴ Bernard believes mankind is not forced to will by necessity, for 'necessity's presence means

³⁶⁷B. Davies, *The Thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Copleston; Berkhof, 166. See also, Goris; C. N. Foshee, "The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in the Writings of John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas," MTh (Columbia Theological Seminary: Decatur, 1954).

³⁶⁸T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 5 of *Summa Theologica* (2007), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.toc.html> [accessed 14/5/07].

³⁶⁹T. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, J. Rickaby (2007), <http://www.2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc.htm> [accessed: 22/5/07].

³⁷⁰Aquinas, *Providence and Predestination*. See also, T. Aquinas, *Light of Faith. The Compendium of Theology* (New York: Book-Of-The-Month Club, 1993); C. B. Partee, "Predestination in Aquinas and Calvin," *Reformed Review* 32 (1978-79): 14-22; H. Davies, *The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

³⁷¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.5.

³⁷²Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 1.2.

³⁷³See, Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard*, 92.

³⁷⁴Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 1.2.

freedom's absence.³⁷⁵ He defines both the term 'free choice' and each of the words in that term.³⁷⁶ According to Bernard, although it is legitimate to speak of 'free choice,' the will is not free from its natural sinful condition (Rom.6.20, 22; 8:3)³⁷⁷ but may be restored by grace. He seems to make a distinction between the sinful human nature and the sinful human will.³⁷⁸

Bernard formulates a threefold definition of freedom relating to sin, sorrow and necessity.³⁷⁹ Firstly, freedom from sin can only occur by the renewing grace of God. Secondly, a total freedom from sorrow; this is not experienced now, but in glory. Thirdly, freedom from necessity, which is inherent in our nature being made in the image of God.³⁸⁰ Every rational creature possesses freedom from necessity; this cannot be destroyed by sin. Consequently for Bernard, all sin derives from the rational will, as taught by Augustine.³⁸¹ Bernard is keen to distance himself from the idea that freedom of choice is predetermined, saying 'Thus there can be no salvation nor damnation without the previous consent of the will, lest freedom of choice might appear to be in any way predetermined.'³⁸² He stresses the importance of the consent of the will.

The human will, given the freedom of choice and fashioned in the image of God, yet fallen,³⁸³ procures its end state of misery or glory by its own devising and subsequent execution of action,³⁸⁴ choosing either to co-operate with grace or persist in sin. The human will being free, entered into servitude to sin of its own choice, and therefore it sins because it voluntarily chose to be in bondage to it.

³⁷⁵Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 2.5.

³⁷⁶Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 3.6.

³⁷⁷See, Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard*, 160.

³⁷⁸Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum. Eighty Six Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, vol. IV of *Life and Works of Saint Bernard. Abbot of Clairvaux*, translated and edited by S. J. Eales (London: John Hodges, 1896), LXXXI.7.

³⁷⁹Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 3.6. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 3.7.

³⁸⁰Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 9.28.

³⁸¹Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 7.23.

³⁸²Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 12.41.

³⁸³It appears that Bernard views humanity as being saved out of a 'mass of damnation.' Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum*, LXXVIII.4.

³⁸⁴Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 11.36.

This Bernard calls a ‘strange paradox’ and says it ‘is a slave because it is free.’³⁸⁵ Compared to Augustine, Bernard seems to place greater emphasis on the human capability to choose between good and evil.³⁸⁶

3.1.5 Peter Lombard

Lombard’s theology is also Augustinian, evidenced in many quotations.³⁸⁷ Lombard believed God was simple,³⁸⁸ and that his essence was one with his being, resulting in God’s will being his essence willing.³⁸⁹ Due to God’s eternal, simple nature, his will is the first cause of all things.³⁹⁰ There is no cause behind the cause of God³⁹¹ for nothing exists which is greater than God,³⁹² therefore God’s will can never be defeated.³⁹³ Lombard acknowledges the legitimate use of the word *permission* when applied to God’s will but on the understanding that God’s permission is nothing less than God actively willing to permit, and this includes things good and evil.³⁹⁴ Evil is willed by God according to Lombard but only in the sense that its existence is not contrary to God’s will. He quotes Augustine’s *Enchiridion* in saying that it is good for evil to exist since God has chosen that to happen,³⁹⁵ and reasons with Augustine that evil is essentially non-being.³⁹⁶ As God is pure being, that is, existence itself from whom all other being exists, he does not will that which tends to non-being, such as evil, and since all being is good which God does will (in the ‘final cause’ sense) he cannot in any

³⁸⁵Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum*, LXXXI.9.

³⁸⁶Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum*, LXXXI.6.

³⁸⁷Lombard, 8.1; 8.3; 8.7; 8.8; 38.1; 42.1; 42.2; 45.4; 45.7; 46.3; 46.7; 47.1; 48.1; etc.

³⁸⁸Lombard, 8.3.

³⁸⁹Lombard, 45.1. Cf. Lombard, 45.3.

³⁹⁰Lombard, 45.4.

³⁹¹Much in the same way that God or the unmoved mover is viewed in Aristotle’s ‘final cause’ sense.

³⁹²Lombard, 45.4.

³⁹³Lombard, 46.2.

³⁹⁴Lombard, 45.7.

³⁹⁵Lombard, 46.3.

³⁹⁶Lombard, 46.7.

way will evil (in the 'efficient cause' sense).³⁹⁷ Evil, therefore, exists as a deficiency of good.³⁹⁸ In many ways his theology of evil reflects Augustine's.³⁹⁹

Lombard is clear in his belief that God's will is always efficacious and that it 'is always fulfilled concerning a man, whithersoever he turns himself. For nothing, as (St.) Augustine says, constituted in free will overcomes the Will of God.'⁴⁰⁰ Although mankind has free will, and for what it freely wills it is responsible, yet God over-rides every action of humanity to bring to pass the fulfilment of his will,⁴⁰¹ even in the sinful actions of mankind.⁴⁰² Lombard is also a strong advocate of God's sovereignty in predestination,⁴⁰³ in line with Augustinianism.

3.1.6 Thomas Aquinas

There are many parallels and overlaps between Augustine's and Aquinas' theology on the will of God.⁴⁰⁴ Like Augustine and Lombard,⁴⁰⁵ Aquinas developed a strong theology surrounding the problem of evil.⁴⁰⁶ Unlike Augustine and more in-line with Lombard, Aquinas went much further concerning God and the term 'cause,'⁴⁰⁷ a development which flowed from his

³⁹⁷Lombard, 46.7.

³⁹⁸Lombard, 46.7; 45.7.

³⁹⁹Lombard, 46.3.

⁴⁰⁰Lombard, 47.1.

⁴⁰¹Lombard, 47.1.

⁴⁰²Lombard, 48.2.

⁴⁰³Lombard, 35.4.

⁴⁰⁴Aquinas quotes Augustine frequently throughout his *Summa Theologica* on the subject, eg. 3.7; 6.2; 19.5; 19.6; 19.9; 23.5, etc. See, L. J. Elders, "Thomas Aquinas and the Fathers of the Church," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, vol. 1, edited by I. Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 337-65.

⁴⁰⁵In Cologne, Paris, Aquinas lectured on Lombard's *Sentences* from 1254 to 1256, see, Jean-Pierre Torrell, *The Person and His Work*, vol. 1 of *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Robert Royal (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 39-45. Aquinas also had to write a commentary on the *Sentences* as part of his academic progress. Kretzmann, and Stump, 16.

⁴⁰⁶T. Aquinas, *Creation, Variety and Existence*, vol. 8 of *Summa Theologica*. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), 1.48.3.

⁴⁰⁷Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.6. Notice how Aquinas attributes God as the 'efficient' and 'final' cause of everything here, a possible rejection of Aristotle's clear distinction in relation to causation.

interaction with Aristotelian philosophy.⁴⁰⁸ This was partly due to an Aristotelian renaissance, when his writings were translated into Latin in the thirteenth century.⁴⁰⁹ Aquinas calls God the ‘efficient, exemplary and final cause of everything,’⁴¹⁰ adding, ‘Thus, then, divine goodness is the final cause of all things.’⁴¹¹ Aquinas follows through this theology in application to evil.⁴¹² Evil is a privation,⁴¹³ an absence of good existing in a nature which ought to be good. Aquinas agrees with Augustine and Lombard that being or essence is good, from which evil results; therefore evil cannot exist without good.⁴¹⁴ Again, with Augustine, he saw that it was impossible to go behind the cause of the cause of evil, since evil is rooted in good and evil is an indirect consequence of an absence of good.⁴¹⁵ Aquinas shares Augustine’s view that it is the rational will whereby evil occurs.⁴¹⁶ Yet for all of the evil in creation, God in his power directs all things so that he brings good out of evil, and it was better for God to permit evil than not, since by evil much good is manifest.⁴¹⁷

In Aquinas’ theology, God is the unmoved mover.⁴¹⁸ God is purely *actual*, there is no potential for God to become anything other than he already is,⁴¹⁹ for it is impossible to be more than perfect, and being perfect, it is impossible to be less than perfect.⁴²⁰ Along with Augustine, Bernard and Lombard, Aquinas identifies God with his essence,⁴²¹ so his will is his essence willing and his knowledge is his

⁴⁰⁸For a definition of Aquinas’ metaphysics, see, J. F. Anderson, ed. and trans., *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 1997), xi.

⁴⁰⁹See, C. Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: IVP, 1973), 25. Aquinas went on to write a number of works on Aristotle, see, Torrell, 224-36. For the many similarities between Aquinas and Aristotle, as well as the differences in their teachings, see, Kretzmann, and Stump, 38-40.

⁴¹⁰Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.44.4.

⁴¹¹Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.44.4.

⁴¹²Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.49.3.

⁴¹³Cf. Mozley, 253-56.

⁴¹⁴Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.49.3.

⁴¹⁵Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.49.3.

⁴¹⁶Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.48.6.

⁴¹⁷Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 1.48.3.

⁴¹⁸Cf. Davies, B., 28-29; Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 26.

⁴¹⁹Aquinas defends God’s immutability in, Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.9.1.

⁴²⁰Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.7.

⁴²¹Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.4.

essence knowing, etc, therefore he calls God *simple*.⁴²² There are no causes behind God,⁴²³ nothing sustains God but God.⁴²⁴ The will of God in Aquinas's theology is always fulfilled by nature of the God who wills.⁴²⁵ Aquinas quoting Augustine, therefore, sees God's will as the supreme cause.⁴²⁶ 'We must hold that the will of God is the cause of things; and that He acts by the will, and not, as some have supposed, by a necessity of His nature.'⁴²⁷

Aquinas' belief in the will of God as the supreme cause did not stop him establishing second causes.⁴²⁸ He saw second causes as real causes in which God unfolds his end plan, so that certain things which are attributable to the second causes cannot be attributed to God in the same way, in a similar way that Aristotle's 'final cause' incorporates 'efficient causes.'⁴²⁹ Aquinas quotes Augustine in his defence of secondary causation.⁴³⁰ As the universal cause of all things, God's will is always accomplished even when it appears to deviate from his revealed will.⁴³¹ However, God never wills evil so that good may be done; rather, he wills only good although evil may occur as a consequence and this he permits in the fulfilment of his good plan.⁴³² This good is executed under the providence of God.⁴³³

Aquinas divides providence into 'the reason of order' and 'government'. Everything falls under God's providence.⁴³⁴ The providential plan of God is

⁴²²Davies, B., 68.

⁴²³See, Copleston, 123.

⁴²⁴T. Aquinas, *Existence and Nature of God*, vol. 2 of *Summa Theologica*. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), 1.3.4.

⁴²⁵Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.6; Aquinas, *SCG*, 1.73.2

⁴²⁶Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.5.

⁴²⁷Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.4.

⁴²⁸Goris, 302.

⁴²⁹Anderson shows how Aquinas' metaphysics had two main strands, one focusing on the meaning of 'being,' and the other focusing on the 'First Cause.' Anderson, xii-xiii.

⁴³⁰Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.5.

⁴³¹Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.6.

⁴³²Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.19.9.

⁴³³Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.1.

⁴³⁴Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.2.

immutable being a product of his essence.⁴³⁵ God's providence is executed in accordance with the natures of the rational beings he created.⁴³⁶ In this way, free will still has room to manoeuvre. Like Augustine, Bernard and Lombard, Aquinas has no doubt that God has endowed humanity with free will, but it does not exist outside of God's providence or immutable decree.⁴³⁷ Therefore, whatever God ordains, he does so in a way that is compatible with the nature of the creature he includes within his providential design.⁴³⁸

Predestination and providence go hand in hand in Aquinas' theology.⁴³⁹ He understands predestination as being rooted in God's goodness and love⁴⁴⁰ but agrees with Augustine that we should never search out God's reasons for his choices. Aquinas affirms the doctrine of reprobation from Malachi 1:2-3.⁴⁴¹ Aquinas did not believe providence, predestination or reprobation took away the liberty of choice in rational beings. Aquinas' doctrine of the will of God is therefore, Augustinian.

3.1.7 Summary of Pre-Reformation influences on Calvin's doctrine of God's will

Augustine was an influential pre-Reformation theologian, making a dynamic impact on Bernard, Lombard and Aquinas. There is a unity of thought surrounding God's will in relation to his essence, in that God's will, as one of his attributes is identical with his essence because his essence is simple. As such, God's will is the 'First Cause' of everything which happens, there is no source of reason or cause behind God's will. This being the case, God executes his plan by his providence, electing those to salvation whom he has chosen. God's will is

⁴³⁵ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.4.

⁴³⁶ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.4.

⁴³⁷ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.2.

⁴³⁸ Aquinas, *ST. Vol. 8 CVE*, 2.83.1.

⁴³⁹ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.23.1.

⁴⁴⁰ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.23.5.

⁴⁴¹ Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.22.3. There are differences between predestination and reprobation, see, Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 23.3.

one. The desire to comprehend that single incomprehensible will cannot but result in a definition of multiple parts.

What we have established is that by the end of Aquinas' life in 1274AD, many recurring strands of Augustinian theology on God's will were the accepted norm and remained so until the time of the Reformation. The doctrine of the will of God in relation to God's essence, creation, evil, salvation and providence were consistently re-established by Lombard and Aquinas. Their theology was a foundation on which the Reformers would build. This chapter has shown that Calvin's doctrine of God's will did not materialize in a void but that well established and widely accepted teaching on the subject was rooted in traditional Christian thinking well before Calvin was born. It is important to understand the history of the Reformed doctrine of God's will in order to identify its manifestation in Boston's theology and pastoral practice.

3.2 Calvin's doctrine of God's will

The objective of this part of the chapter is to establish Calvin's doctrine of the will of God as his theology had a significant influence on Boston. This will be achieved by looking at Calvin's theology regarding 'God's attributes,' 'providence,' 'free will and causation,' 'predestination and reprobation,' and 'God's relationship to evil.' There is a double intention to this section; to show that Calvin's theology of God's will is in the Augustinian tradition, and to explore the theology that Thomas Boston later came to inherit. Nowhere in his writings does Calvin have a chapter or treatise specifically on the doctrine of God's will;⁴⁴² neither was it a 'central dogma' in Calvin's theology as has been proposed by some.⁴⁴³ Calvin's theology did, however, develop over the course of his life.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴²There is the *Reply of John Calvin to Article VII., and to the Calumniator's Observations, Statements, &c., &c.*, which does deal quite frequently with the subject of God's will. Calvin, *SPG*, 306-16.

⁴⁴³Muller, *Christ & the Decree*, 17. For an excellent presentation on this point, see also, Muller, "The Myth of 'Decretal Theology'"; Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists," 153. Cf. K. Barth, *The*

Calvin's theology of the will of God can be discerned in his *Institutes*. In other volumes however, he looks at some of the subjects which comprise God's will separately, such as in *The Secret Providence of God*,⁴⁴⁵ *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*,⁴⁴⁶ *On the Bondage and Liberation of the Will*,⁴⁴⁷ and *Articles Concerning Predestination*.⁴⁴⁸ In *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*,⁴⁴⁹ there contains some of Calvin's clearest teaching on providence. Besides these subject specific documents Calvin discloses his doctrine of God's will in his many commentaries, letters, sermons,⁴⁵⁰ and small tracts.⁴⁵¹ Substantial secondary literature has also been written on many aspects

Doctrine of God, vol. 2.2 of *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of God*, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 127-30. If Calvin's life and works are examined together it becomes evident that predestination is not the principle doctrine driving all of his theology. The subject he appears to be most preoccupied with, especially in Geneva, is discipline/order. Everything Calvin seeks to achieve in Geneva is for the sake of bringing order, whether it is order within the Church, or order in the minds of the people he writes for in his *Institutes* and other works. Parker opens his biography of Calvin by saying, 'Our story is of a man of order and peace who was born into a world of conflict ... The order, aristocratic in tendency, which he prized and which he devoted his life to establishing, became one of the platforms for democracy in succeeding centuries.' T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Berkhamsted: Lion Publishing, 1977), ix. See also the biographical accounts in, F. Wendel, *Calvin. The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, translated by P. Mairet (London: Collins, 1976); W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin. A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 86; S. E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory. Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 79; W. Walker, *John Calvin. Revolutionary, Theologian, Pastor* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 340.

⁴⁴⁴The most documented developments within Calvin's theology relate to providence and predestination. See, P. H. Reardon, "Calvin on Providence: The Development of an Insight," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28:6 (1975): 523. As for predestination, see, Davies, H., 96; J. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, vol. 4 of *A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 220-21.

⁴⁴⁵Calvin, *SPG*

⁴⁴⁶Calvin, *CEPG*.

⁴⁴⁷Calvin, *BLW*.

⁴⁴⁸J. Calvin, "Articles Concerning Predestination," in *The Library of Christian Classics. Calvin: Theological Treatises*, translated and edited by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 178-80.

⁴⁴⁹Calvin, *Anabaptists & Libertines*; J. Calvin, "Brief Reply in Refutation of the Calumnies of a Certain Worthless Person (1557)," in *The Library of Christian Classics. Calvin: Theological Treatises*, translated and edited by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 331-43.

⁴⁵⁰J. Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, Facsimile of 1574 ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993).

⁴⁵¹J. Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, edited by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954).

that cover Calvin's doctrine of God's will.⁴⁵² This goes to show the importance of Calvin for understanding the Reformed tradition's theology of God's will.

3.2.1 God's will in relation to his essence and attributes

We shall here try to determine, a) How Calvin understood God's will in relation to his being and attributes, and, b) Whether God's will is one or many? Firstly, for the sake of clarity, there is a legitimate question over how to classify God's will. Should it be called an attribute of God? After all, it is something characteristic of, inherent in, and which belongs to God's being.⁴⁵³ God's will appears to be bound up with God's other attributes, functioning within, or as a part of, or over, other attributes, yet Calvin never speaks of God's will as an

⁴⁵²See the bibliographies in, Lane, A. N. S., *Student of the Church Fathers*; C. Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 148-58; Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin, Expanded Edition. An Introductory Guide*, translated by L. D. Bierma (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 208-15; D. N. Steele, C. C. Thomas, and S. L. Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism. Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 2nd, with a foreword by R. Nicole, with an afterword by J. F. MacArthur (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 78-129; P. W. Fields, "Calvin Biography 2008," *Calvin Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (November 2008): 313-35, for the extent of the written material on Calvin. Also related are, F. L. Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, edited by R. Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *The Journal of Religion* 53:3 (1973): 263-92; B. Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University press, 2009); D. Thomas, *Calvin's Teaching on Job. Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Geanies House: Mentor, 2004); P. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); P. Helm, "Calvin (And Zwingli) On Divine Providence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 388-405; Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists; The Grace of God. The Bondage of the Will. Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism*, vol. 1 of *The Grace of God. The Bondage of the Will*, edited by T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995); Hoitenga; P. C. Potgieter, "The Providence of God in Calvin's Correspondence," in *Calvin Erbe Und Auftrag*, edited by W. Van 't Spijker (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), 85-94; P. Wells, "John Calvin's View of Divine Providence. A Translation from Calvin's French Tracts by Paul Wells," *Banner of Truth* 66 (1969): 36-40; A. D. Kelse, "God Alongside Us: Karl Barth's Reform of John Calvin's Theological Method and the Doctrine of Divine Providence" (PhD: University of Edinburgh, 1993); M. C. Ong, "John Calvin on Providence: The Locus Classicus in Context" (PhD: University of London, 2003); F. Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1961); Rainbow; A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (London: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001); W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, translated by H. Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980); D. Steinmetz, "The Scholastic Calvin," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, edited by C. R. Trueman and R. S. Scott (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 16-30; Strehle, "Calvinism, Augustinianism and the Will of God"; T. Lane, "Recent Calvin Literature: A Review Article," *Themelios* 16 (February 1991): 17-24.

⁴⁵³Later Reformed systematians have classified God's will as an attribute under God's power, Frame, 399, others as a condition of the divine attribute of foreknowledge, Shedd, W. G. T., 313, or under the attribute of the sovereign will of God, Berkhof, 76.

attribute. Neither does he attempt to define or term God's will as a 'something,' the so called 'secret' will of God⁴⁵⁴ is self-defining, it is what it is, God's will is God's will. This approach is different to Calvin's contemporary Luther who clearly labels God's will as an attribute.⁴⁵⁵ Luther was not alone in designating God's will an attribute.⁴⁵⁶ More recent Reformed works include 'God's will' under the headings of 'communicable attributes,'⁴⁵⁷ under the attribute of God's power,⁴⁵⁸ as an attribute,⁴⁵⁹ or as founded in the attribute of wisdom.⁴⁶⁰ I see no reason why God's will should not be labelled as an attribute of God within the Reformed tradition.

Calvin speaks much more of God's attributes than he does his essence,⁴⁶¹ and repeatedly warns against prying into the essence of God.⁴⁶² Calvin agrees with Augustine, Aquinas and Lombard, that God's attributes reveal his essence, but he never goes as far as saying with them that God's attributes 'are' his essence.⁴⁶³ The furthest Calvin goes in that direction is to say that God's attributes are a true revelation of his Being.⁴⁶⁴ God's essence in itself is unknowable but it is possible to know 'what kind of being God is, and what kind of things are agreeable to his nature.'⁴⁶⁵ Calvin openly states that God's essence is 'simple and indivisible,'⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁵⁴Calvin, *SPG*, 269.

⁴⁵⁵M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by H. Cole (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1931), Sect. IX.

⁴⁵⁶Others who call God's will an attribute include, Braun, 59; Sohnius, 61; Polan, 81; Heppe, 82, all found in, H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1950); Zanchius, 675.

⁴⁵⁷Berkhof, 76ff.

⁴⁵⁸Frame, 399.

⁴⁵⁹Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 432ff.

⁴⁶⁰Shedd, W. G. T., 314.

⁴⁶¹There are occasional references made by Calvin directly about God's essence, as Thomas points out from Calvin's sermons on Job (136 Job 35:1-7), Thomas, 99.

⁴⁶²Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9; 1.2.3.

⁴⁶³'Thus what Calvin refers to separately as the 'nature' and the 'essence' of God are linked; and what links them is the immutability of God's essence. His nature cannot but give evidence of his essence.' Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 15. Cf. Augustine, *CG*, 2.11.10; Zanchius, 677.

⁴⁶⁴See, Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 194.

⁴⁶⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.3. This edition of Beveridge's *Institutes* has misprinted '3' where it should read '2,' there being only two sections to chapter two of Book One, and should therefore read 1.2.2, not 1.2.3.

⁴⁶⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

eternal⁴⁶⁷ and self-existent,⁴⁶⁸ showing that some things can be known of God's essence.⁴⁶⁹ All that God wills is necessary precisely because it is God who wills it.⁴⁷⁰ Everything which has, is and will happen, has, is and will occur by necessity because God's will is aligned with his omnipotence, eternal existence and perfect knowledge, and is, therefore, always accomplished⁴⁷¹ and immutable,⁴⁷² and because of his character, also righteous.⁴⁷³

There are distinctions concerning God's attributes but the attributes are not isolated, void of the influence of their counterparts, so that, for example, God's goodness and truth are inseparable.⁴⁷⁴ Following Aquinas and Lombard he refers to God's will as the 'first cause,'⁴⁷⁵ but it is not prior to nor primary over them. There is therefore, both unity and distinction within God's attributes, but everything happens as a result of God's will. Calvin takes issue with those who separate God's attributes, as if, for example, his power can be divorced from his justice.⁴⁷⁶ For Calvin therefore, God's attributes reveal the nature of his will.⁴⁷⁷ We know God through his self-revelation, including his attributes, but we cannot bypass these and presume to expound on his essence.

⁴⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.8; J. Calvin, *Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*, vol. 2 of *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, translated by C. W. Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Ex. 3:14.

⁴⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.6; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.2.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Thomas, 99.

⁴⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.8.

⁴⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.3.

⁴⁷² Calvin, *Anabaptists & Libertines*, 97.

⁴⁷³ Wendel, 281. Cf. M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer. & O. R. Johnston. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1990), Sect. LXXXVIII.

⁴⁷⁴ J. Calvin, *Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*, vol. 3 of *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, translated by C. W. Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Ex. 34:5.

⁴⁷⁵ J. Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, vol. 8 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, translated by R. Mackenzie. Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 9.28. Cf. Aquinas, *ST Vol. 5*, 1.14.8; Lombard, 45.4.

⁴⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.2; Calvin, *SPG*, 248.

⁴⁷⁷ See, Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.15.18; 11.31.41; 13.16.19.

It is important to recognize that Calvin's whole theology incorporated an understanding of God's incomprehensibility⁴⁷⁸ as outlined in Thomas' work on Calvin's sermons on Job.⁴⁷⁹ With regards to God's will specifically, Thomas quotes Harold Dekker, who says, 'The final dimension of God's sovereignty for Calvin was not his revealed will but the unrevealed, and there was hardly a sermon in which this perspective was not present. One of the most distinctive features of Calvin's entire pastoral theology is his accent on the hidden in God, and the final mystery of all His dealings with His children.'⁴⁸⁰ God's incomprehensibility is also seen in the effects and out-working of God's will.⁴⁸¹ Nevertheless, God's revelation of himself in Christ is a true reflection of who God is for Calvin.⁴⁸²

3.2.2 A single or a two-fold will in God?⁴⁸³

Although Calvin describes God's will in terms such as 'secret'⁴⁸⁴ and 'hidden'⁴⁸⁵ or 'revealed,'⁴⁸⁶ he forcibly states that he does not believe in a two-fold will in God.⁴⁸⁷ Calvin must have thought this issue to be of importance as he reiterates it on numerous occasions in his commentaries on Ezekiel, Zephaniah, Matthew and

⁴⁷⁸'On over twenty occasions, particularly in [*Institutes*] Books I and III, Calvin has recourse to the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility.' Thomas, 152. Cf. Bouwsma, 46.

⁴⁷⁹Thomas, 153.

⁴⁸⁰Thomas, 151, from, H. Dekker, *Sermons from Job*, translated by L. Nixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), xxx.

⁴⁸¹Thomas, 157.

⁴⁸²J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), Col. 1:15; Partee, C., *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, 85. Cf. Bell, 163; 203. Bell suggests there is a God behind Christ in Calvin's theology.

⁴⁸³Here we shall discuss God's will in terms of the entire Trinity and not enter into the debate over whether the person of Christ had one or two wills. Calvin rejects monothelitism, J. Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, & Luke, & James & Jude*, vol. 3 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentary*, edited by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, translated by A. W. Morrison. Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), Matt. 26:39.

⁴⁸⁴Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, & Luke, & James & Jude*, 23:37.

⁴⁸⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

⁴⁸⁶Calvin, *SPG*, 307. Regarding the distinction between God's revealed and concealed will, Potgieter says, 'To my mind this kind of distinction serves no good, since it may at least to some extent jeopardize the reliability of God's revelation. Rather one should emphasize the total freedom of God in all his acts. He is only bound to his own will and decree.' Potgieter, 89.

⁴⁸⁷Calvin, *SPG*, 307. Cf. Calvin, *CEPG*, 106.

second Peter, plus in the *Institutes* and his *Secret Providence of God*.⁴⁸⁸ Although at times God appears to have two wills, as when he wills certain wicked men to commit acts which are contrary to his law (Acts 2:23; 2 Sam. 24:1), Calvin maintains that the apparent two-ness is due to God accommodating his ways to our understanding.⁴⁸⁹ Divine accommodation is another important theme for Calvin⁴⁹⁰ as it allows him to explain things which exist within the gulf that spans between the Creator and the created.⁴⁹¹ Calvin certainly applied the idea of Divine accommodation to the subject of God's will, as did his contemporaries and those who followed shortly after him.⁴⁹² Calvin says, 'while in himself the will is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though after a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing.'⁴⁹³ There is for Calvin therefore no two-fold will of God and no duplicity in his willing.

3.2.3 Calvin's doctrine of providence

Providence, simply put, is God's will in action.⁴⁹⁴ Having discussed what God's will 'is,' in and of itself within the being of God, that must always correlate with

⁴⁸⁸J. Calvin, *Ezekiel 13-20 & Daniel 1-6*, vol. 12 of *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, translated by T. Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Ezek.18:23; Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, & Luke, & James & Jude*, Matt. 23:37; J. Calvin, *Hebrews & 1 & 2 Peter*, vol. 12 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, edited by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, translated by W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 2 Pet. 3:9; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.3; Cf. Calvin, *SPG*, 307.

⁴⁸⁹J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 15, translated by J. Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Zeph. 3:6-7. Cf. Niesel, 76.

⁴⁹⁰J. Balserak, *Divinity Compromised. A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*, monograph. Studies in Early Modern Religious Reforms. Vol. 5 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 33. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1. I question the picture painted of Calvin's 'accommodating God' in Balserak's study, Balserak, 135-36. Intentionally or not, Balserak appears to be describing the God of Open Theism.

⁴⁹¹J. Calvin, *Isaiah 1-32*, vol. 7 of *Calvin's Commentaries*, translated by W. Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 30:25, 30:33, 26:8. Battles, 117-37.

⁴⁹²F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1*, edited by J. T. Dennison, translated by G. M. Giger (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 212. Cf. J. C. McClelland, "The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8, no. 03 (1955): 269-70; Rainbow, 71; Zanchius, 676.

⁴⁹³Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.3. Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Ch. 100, to which Calvin refers.

⁴⁹⁴c'Doubtless, Calvin deals with creation before providence because things must exist before they can be governed and nurtured. However, while the exposition of creation occupies the most pages,

‘how’ his will unfolds and operates within his creation. If what is stated about the intrinsic nature of God’s will differs from the biblical revelation of how that will functions, then something is wrong. Since the Reformed doctrine of the divine will is vigorous and robust one should expect the Reformed doctrine of providence to mirror those characteristics. The divine will preserves and governs,⁴⁹⁵ and that government is God’s providence,⁴⁹⁶ illuminating the finer details of the practical unfolding of the eternal, immutable will of God.⁴⁹⁷

Calvin says, ‘God is deemed omnipotent, not because he can act though he may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct, he continues the order of nature previously appointed; but because, governing heaven or earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel.’⁴⁹⁸ Calvin’s doctrine of providence rests in his belief that God’s will is omnipotent.⁴⁹⁹ He instructs his readers to be aware that ‘there is no random power, or agency, or motion in the creatures, who are so governed by the secret counsel of God, that nothing happens but what he has knowingly and willingly decreed.’⁵⁰⁰ God’s providence rules out chance,⁵⁰¹ fate,⁵⁰² or fortune,⁵⁰³ and instead establishes God’s

providence receives the greatest passion. The conviction of God’s encompassing providence is very close to the heart of Calvin’s theology.’ C. Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 69. Cf. Étienne de Peyer, "Calvin’s Doctrine of Divine Providence," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (15th January 1938): 30-44.

⁴⁹⁵Wright highlights the three-fold distinction of ‘preservation,’ ‘concurrence,’ and ‘government,’ in providence but adds that historically the ‘concurrence’ aspect has been included in the other two, not overlooked or rejected. Wright, 6. Wright helpfully reminds us that these aspects are not separate divine actions but distinctions of a single divine work.

⁴⁹⁶Niesel, 70.

⁴⁹⁷Wright argues that Calvin’s emphasis on God as primary cause, in reality, conflates secondary causes rendering them impotent. Wright, 78. I would argue that Calvin believed both primary and secondary causes worked in a way that ensured their ‘distinctness’ whilst maintaining their ‘relation.’ See, Calvin, *CEPG*, 181. Perhaps more important are the words of Parker, ‘From the outset it becomes clear that Calvin’s concept of Providence is intended to be drawn from Scripture. He is not interested in metaphysical problems of the relationship between Divine cause and earthly effect.’ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin. An Introduction to His Thought*. Outstanding Christian Thinkers (London: Continuum, 2002), 43.

⁴⁹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.3.

⁴⁹⁹Calvin, *SPG*, 281, 266. Cf. Wells, 37.

⁵⁰⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.3. Cf. Wells, 36. Translation of Ch. 14 of *Contra la Secte phanastique et furieuse des Libertins. Qui se nomment spirituels*. (1545). In *Opera Omnia VII*, 145-248.

⁵⁰¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.8.

⁵⁰²Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.3. Cf. Turretin, 495ff, who believes ‘fate’ can be used in a Christian sense.

care and control over creation,⁵⁰⁴ humanity,⁵⁰⁵ and nature,⁵⁰⁶ and works both in a general and a particular manner;⁵⁰⁷ his special providence being reserved for his people.⁵⁰⁸ Although Calvin rejects the existence of fortune, nevertheless, he exhorts his readers to live as if everything were fortuitous, since what God ordains to happen is not known by his creatures.⁵⁰⁹ Calvin says, ‘Wherefore, with reference to the time future, since the events of things are, as yet, hidden and unknown, everyone ought to be as intent upon the performance of his duty as if nothing whatever had been decreed concerning the issue in each particular case.’⁵¹⁰ Things appear to be contingent from the human perspective and happen by ‘chance,’⁵¹¹ however, Calvin’s doctrine of providence is that God’s control is universal in scope, absolute in fulfilment, and executed by an omnipotent, all-powerful and eternal will.⁵¹²

3.2.4 Calvin’s terminology for discussing God’s will

There is a difference in terminology which needs to be understood between God’s will, decree or ordaining, and God’s desire, ‘wish’ or precept.⁵¹³ The difference is more than merely terminological, for Scripture tends to use the former words for describing what God does and the latter words for what humanity ought to do.

⁵⁰³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.2; 1.16.4.

⁵⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.1.

⁵⁰⁵ Calvin, *SPG*, 243-44.

⁵⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.7.

⁵⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.7.

⁵⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.4; 1.16.6.

⁵⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.9.

⁵¹⁰ Calvin, *SPG*, 236. Luther says something similar, Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, Sect. IX.

⁵¹¹ J. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 1 of *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, translated by J. King (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), Gen. 18:18. Cf. ‘to take contingency out of the world altogether would be absurd.’ Calvin, *SPG*, 234. This contradicts Kinlaw’s whole essay who repeatedly tries to assert Calvin denied contingency. C. J. Kinlaw, "Determinism and the Hiddenness of God," *Religious Studies* 24.4 (1988): 499-501.

⁵¹² There has been much discussion over the progression of thought in Calvin’s doctrine of providence and over the final placement of ‘providence’ within his *Institutes*. Neither issue appears to me to make any major or significant difference to what Calvin actually says on providence, as he speaks clearly and often on the subject. See, Ong; Pelikan, 221; Davies, H., 96; P. Helm, "Calvin, the ‘Two Issues,’ and the Structure of the *Institutes*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42, no. 2 (November 2007): 341-48.

⁵¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.4.

God's precept says it is wrong to murder (Ex. 20:13), God's decree incorporates certain individuals' desire to murder (Acts 7:52-53). Those who murdered Christ did not do it in the knowledge that they were obeying God's secret will but out of their own hate-filled envious⁵¹⁴ wills with no regard for obeying God.⁵¹⁵ There is then, a consistent pattern, from theologians pre-Calvin to the Reformed Orthodox who followed him, that recognized the need for distinctions for meaningful discussion of God's will.⁵¹⁶

3.2.5 God's will in relationship to means and causes

For Calvin, God's providence is not executed as a tyrant in a world void of freedom and real relationships but in a way that respects the order, freedom and natures, of his creatures.⁵¹⁷ Calvin says that God works sometimes with, sometimes without and sometimes against means, but in his use of causes he always overrules all things. Calvin sometimes refers to these causes as 'proximate' and 'remote' which he believes separates sin from God,⁵¹⁸ and with the Augustinian tradition he adopts Aristotelian categories of causality as had Aquinas,⁵¹⁹ which has been well documented.⁵²⁰ Calvin adopts them in his commentaries on Romans (3:23-25), Acts (22:16), and in the *Institutes* (3.14.17).⁵²¹ Aristotle's scheme of causation helped Calvin explain God's will in its parts whilst maintaining its singular nature. Important to the discussion of causation in the unfolding of providence is the distinction that exists between God and mankind. What is sinful for mankind to commit is not necessarily unjust for God to do, such as the taking of life, hence Calvin says, 'He is His own law – a

⁵¹⁴Mark 15:10.

⁵¹⁵See other examples given by Calvin in, Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.4. See also, Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 115.

⁵¹⁶Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 432-33.

⁵¹⁷'man, though acted upon by God, at the same time also acts.' Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.2.

⁵¹⁸Calvin, *CEPG*, 181.

⁵¹⁹Muller, *Christ & the Decree*, 121.

⁵²⁰Muller, *Christ & the Decree*, 24; Rainbow, 89.

⁵²¹Cf. Rainbow, 92-93.

law unto Himself! And His will is the highest rule of the highest equity.⁵²² God is no tyrant because his sovereignty, omnipotence and power, can never be divorced from his nature, which is righteous, holy, and just. In this sense, Calvin denies God has *potentia absoluta*,⁵²³ as if his power and what he ordains could ever be separated from his other attributes.⁵²⁴

Following in the Augustinian tradition, Calvin believed that God's will is the first cause⁵²⁵ of all secondary causes, and his will is singular.⁵²⁶ The second causes which exist are real⁵²⁷ but can never be separated from the first cause.⁵²⁸ Calvin never tries to indicate the precise relationship between primary and secondary causation, he only offers it as a way of understanding the relationship between God's will and genuine human action. God is certainly the first cause of everything, but not the sole cause.⁵²⁹ Calvin outright denies that anything goes beyond, behind, or above, God's will. In connection with this Calvin discussed

⁵²²Thomas, in *Calvin's teaching on Job*, quotes the *Institutes* (Battles edition) in order to show the opposite of this stated quote, that God is no tyrant with *potentia absoluta*. The Battles translation of *Inst.* 3.23.2 says, 'And we do not advocate the fiction of "absolute might"; because this is profane, it ought rightly to be hateful to us. We fancy no lawless god who is a law unto himself.' Thomas, 114. In direct contrast is Beveridge's translation of the *Institutes* which says, 'We, however, give no countenance to the fiction of absolute power, which, as it is heathenish, so it ought justly to be held in detestation by us. We do not imagine God to be lawless. He is a law to himself; ...'. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.2. This second translation matches what Calvin says in *The Secret Providence of God*, where Calvin clearly affirms God is a law unto himself: 'He is His own law – a law unto Himself! And His will is the highest rule of the highest equity.' Calvin, *SPG*, 283. Nevertheless, the Battles edition of the *Institutes* affirms what Calvin says in his sermons on Job, Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, Sermon 88, (Job 23:1-7). It appears Calvin both affirms and denies the same thing when it aids his argument.

⁵²³Cf. Schreiner, 34.

⁵²⁴D. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 48.

⁵²⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.8; Calvin, *CEPG*, 181; Calvin, *SPG*, 247. For a critique of Calvin's understanding of primary and secondary causation, see, Wright. In Wright's discussions of Calvin's doctrine of God's will, I think he under emphasizes Calvin's theology of accommodation and completely neglects his theology of God's incomprehensibility. Wright then dissects Calvin's theology of causation and draws conclusions where Calvin chose to submit to God's incomprehensibility. Hence statements such as, 'Calvin's emphasis on the divine will certainly suggests that the actual accomplishment of salvation through Christ's cross and resurrection is somewhat unnecessary' (46).

⁵²⁶Pelikan, 221-22.

⁵²⁷Partee states that Calvin denies secondary causation in the light of his comprehensive view of God's sovereignty, Partee, C., *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, 76, which is repeated by Kinlaw, Kinlaw, 498-500. Calvin, however, affirms secondary causation because of his doctrine of God's sovereignty, see, Calvin, *SPG*, 235.

⁵²⁸Calvin, *SPG*, 235. Cf. Bouwsma, 164.

⁵²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.2.

the term ‘permission,’ repeatedly stating⁵³⁰ that it is nothing less than God’s active willing.⁵³¹ This is the same position held by Zanchius, who notes how Augustine, Luther and Bucer, all taught the same idea.⁵³²

3.2.6 Evil and the will of God

Calvin has no chapter in his *Institutes* dedicated to the subject of evil,⁵³³ preferring to discuss sin, which perhaps reveals his intention to write about mankind’s relationship with and knowledge of God.⁵³⁴ Calvin does mention that although the devil was created by God, ‘we must remember that this malice which we attribute to his nature is not from creation, but from depravation,’⁵³⁵ again echoing the thoughts of Augustine, Lombard and Aquinas, that evil originates from something that was created good.⁵³⁶ Although Satan sets himself in opposition to God’s will, actively opposing God in whatever way possible, he is constrained by God’s will and power, being dependent upon the ‘permission of God.’⁵³⁷ That evil and Satan exist, and the fall occurred, in no way suggests a defect in the divine will.⁵³⁸ Calvin firmly held that the fall occurred by the decree of God⁵³⁹ and that the source of sin is in the rational will.⁵⁴⁰ God fulfils his plan not despite human wickedness, but through their wickedness, as is seen repeatedly in various passages of Scripture (Acts 2:22-23).⁵⁴¹ How God can decree and ordain the lives of each individual without being the author of their evil deeds remained a mystery

⁵³⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1; 1.18.3; 3.23.8.

⁵³¹Calvin, *SPG*, 244. Cf. Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists," 134; Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 109.

⁵³²Zanchius, 679.

⁵³³He does, however, tackle the subject in relation to other topics, such as creation. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.16-17.

⁵³⁴Partee, C., *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, 29.

⁵³⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.16.

⁵³⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.3.

⁵³⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.17.

⁵³⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.7.

⁵³⁹Calvin, *SPG*, 267; Warfield, 298.

⁵⁴⁰Calvin, *CEPG*, 121-22. Cf. Calvin also calls evil’s origin the corrupt human ‘nature.’ Calvin, *CEPG*, 116.

⁵⁴¹Calvin, *SPG*, 230; Calvin, *CEPG*, 67; Calvin, *SPG*, 242.

to Calvin,⁵⁴² although he argues against those who deny that this is true.⁵⁴³ In his argument, Calvin uses the terms ‘free will’ and ‘permitting’ but he elsewhere advises against it.⁵⁴⁴ Calvin placed strict definitions on both these words but was not shy in using them as appropriate descriptions of God’s will when it best conveyed Scripture’s understanding of God’s relationship to evil and sin.

Calvin rejects Augustine’s belief that evil is non-being.⁵⁴⁵ Calvin firmly believed ‘God who created all things foreknew that evil would arise out of this good creation. But He also knew how to make good out of this evil.’⁵⁴⁶ In another place Calvin elaborates on the issue of how God uses evil for producing good, saying, ‘God is an *avenger*, from which we are fully assured that He is not an *approver*.’⁵⁴⁷ God uses evil like a tool, wielding it to produce good without incurring any stain of sin,⁵⁴⁸ as the Spirit through Scripture testifies,⁵⁴⁹ working good within his creation, whereas Satan seeks to abuse all that is good to create evil. It would be impossible for God to author any sin due to his divine nature.⁵⁵⁰ Unlike Augustine, Calvin has no announcements that he had satisfactorily solved the problem of evil, he rather dared not tread where revelation had not shone.⁵⁵¹

3.2.7 How are election and reprobation related to God’s will in Calvin’s theology?

If providence is the unfolding of God’s will, then election is providence in action.⁵⁵² Election is possibly the one subject in popular opinion most closely

⁵⁴²Calvin, *CEPG*, 124. Cf. J. Murray, "Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster on Predestination - A Comparative Study," in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 4 of *Collected Writings of John Murray*. *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 200-01.

⁵⁴³Calvin, "Worthless Person," 333.

⁵⁴⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.8.

⁵⁴⁵Cf. Davies, H., 113.

⁵⁴⁶Calvin, *CEPG*, 124.

⁵⁴⁷Calvin, *SPG*, 255.

⁵⁴⁸Calvin, *CEPG*, 181.

⁵⁴⁹Calvin, "Worthless Person," 334.

⁵⁵⁰Calvin, *CEPG*, 181.

⁵⁵¹Calvin, *CEPG*, 123. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.12.18; Evans, *Augustine on Evil*, 170.

⁵⁵²Zanchius, 667.

associated with Calvin's theology,⁵⁵³ despite its established status long before Calvin's day.⁵⁵⁴ Calvin's position regarding election is clearly presented in his

Institutes:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends,⁵⁵⁵ we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.

We shall look at, 1) Calvin's approach to election, 2) Christ as the head of election, and, 3) reprobation and God's will.

3.2.8 Calvin's approach to election

Calvin's approach to election can be summarized in two words, 'cautious' and 'Scriptural.'⁵⁵⁶ Caution is needed since election involves a 'penetrating into the recesses of the divine wisdom.'⁵⁵⁷ Calvin, opposing Pighius, warns against trying to penetrate things too wonderful for him lest 'a great deep swallow him up.'⁵⁵⁸ We must also be careful not to attribute ideas to Calvin that he did not personally express, an example being Cottret's statement, 'Calvin produced the most radical version of this doctrine by insisting on "double predestination," to damnation and to salvation,'⁵⁵⁹ when in fact Calvin never uses that term. Although God's eternal election ought to be approached cautiously, we have scriptural warrant to approach it (Deut. 29:29). Only Scripture sheds light on the subject,⁵⁶⁰ but he also uses Aristotelian categories of causation to describe how predestination unfolds

⁵⁵³'Election' is sometimes used synonymously with 'predestination,' the former dealing with God's actual choice of individuals and the latter referring to the assured 'being chosen' by God.

⁵⁵⁴Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists," 155.

⁵⁵⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.5. Cf. Turretin's broader definition, Turretin, 332.

⁵⁵⁶Cf. J. Greenburg, "Calvin's Understanding of Predestination," *Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 121-34.

⁵⁵⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1.

⁵⁵⁸Calvin, *CEPG*, 118. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1.

⁵⁵⁹B. Cottret, *Calvin. A Biography*, translated by M. W. McDonald (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 321.

⁵⁶⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.2.

under the divine decree.⁵⁶¹ Calvin disagrees with Origen, Jerome, Aquinas,⁵⁶² and even Augustine's early theology, which viewed God's election as dependent on his prescience, rather believing with Augustine's mature theology that the destiny of individuals lies with God's sovereign choice and decree.⁵⁶³ God has the sovereign right to eternally decree who would and would not be among his elect and this results from no other cause but his will.⁵⁶⁴ Therefore, the end result of predestination in God's will is for his own glory. The context for Calvin's teaching on election is salvation, appearing at the end of book III of his *Institutes* (1559).

3.2.9 Christ, the head of election

Those who were elected by God before creation were elected into Christ (Col. 1:12; Eph. 1:4-5; 1 Tim. 2:9)⁵⁶⁵ and not only that, but Christ himself is the author of that election.⁵⁶⁶ Election and predestination within Calvin's doctrine of God's will are therefore inseparable from God the Redeemer,⁵⁶⁷ for what happens in time is never unrelated to the person of Christ.⁵⁶⁸ Election in Christ leaves salvation unassociated with any concept of merit or God's foresight.⁵⁶⁹ 'Hence, those whom God has adopted as sons, he is said to have elected ... in Christ Jesus (Eph. i. 4); because he could love them only in him ... But if we are elected in him, we

⁵⁶¹J. Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, vol. 11 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), Eph. 1:5. Cf. Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 124; Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 203; Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.1-7.

⁵⁶²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.8.

⁵⁶³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.8.

⁵⁶⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.11. Cf. Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 9.11.

⁵⁶⁵Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, Ch. 31.

⁵⁶⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.7.

⁵⁶⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.1. Bullinger's view was the same, see, C. P. Venema, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination. Author of "the Other Reformed Faith"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 49. Cf. Muller, *Christ & the Decree*, 20-21.

⁵⁶⁸J. Calvin, *John 1-10*, vol. 4 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, edited by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, translated by T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 6:40; 10:16; Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, Rom. 11:34; Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, Eph. 3:11.

⁵⁶⁹Calvin, "Predestination," 179; Calvin, *CEPG*, 68-70. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.2. Calvin also rejects the concept that mankind co-operates with God's grace within salvation. Calvin, *Hebrews & 1 & 2 Peter*, 2 Pet. 1:7; Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 1 Thess. 5:23.

cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we look at him apart from the Son.⁵⁷⁰ Election and Christ the Saviour are inseparable in Calvin's theology.

Calvin quotes Augustine in saying nothing higher or greater exists than the will of God,⁵⁷¹ which is the reason why some are chosen and not others.⁵⁷² This being too great for mankind to comprehend, Calvin says, 'Let us not be ashamed to be ignorant in a matter in which ignorance is learning.'⁵⁷³ It appears that the elect are taken out from a 'corrupt mass,'⁵⁷⁴ although as Benedict points out, 'Calvin never explored the precise relation of the decrees concerning Adam's fall and those concerning individual election.'⁵⁷⁵ Calvin also says, 'The decree, I admit, is dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew, because he had so ordained by his decree.'⁵⁷⁶ There is a mutual, coherent working out of God's decree from all eternity and the Spirit's application of salvation in time. On predestination Calvin stands shoulder to shoulder with Augustine,⁵⁷⁷ in affirming reprobation he also stands alongside Aquinas.⁵⁷⁸

3.2.10 *The dreadful decree*⁵⁷⁹

The extent of the agreement between Calvin's and Augustine's understanding of reprobation has been a matter of debate.⁵⁸⁰ There is no doubt Calvin strongly

⁵⁷⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5; Wendel, 275.

⁵⁷¹Calvin, *CEPG*, 120.

⁵⁷²Calvin, *CEPG*, 85. See also, Partee, C., *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, 138.

⁵⁷³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.2. Cf. Calvin, *CEPG*, 124; Augustine, *Predestination of Saints*, Ch. 16.

⁵⁷⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.3; 3.24.11.

⁵⁷⁵P. Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed. A Social History of Calvinism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002), 302.

⁵⁷⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.7.

⁵⁷⁷Cf. Sharp, 95; Reardon, 517.

⁵⁷⁸Calvin also makes a reference to Bernard as an example of those who uphold election but deny reprobation to save God from looking unjust. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.1. Bernard, however, does state reprobation. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum*, XXXV.7.

⁵⁷⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.7.

⁵⁸⁰Sharp; Pelikan, 224-25; Davies, H., 112.

affirms the doctrine of reprobation,⁵⁸¹ whereas Augustine preferred to affirm only the positive side of election.⁵⁸² However, to wedge too great a difference between Calvin and Augustine regarding reprobation, is to an extent, to force an unmerited divorce. They may speak on the subject with different emphases or stress, but what is expressly stated by Calvin is often logically implied by Augustine, if not stated in similar terms.⁵⁸³

How God decrees who should be reprobate we have no answer than the secret will of God.⁵⁸⁴ When objections arise concerning reprobation Calvin uses Rom. 9:20-21 as a defence, reminding his readers that the divine will, justice and knowledge, are simply beyond mankind's full comprehension.⁵⁸⁵ Calvin states his case for reprobation plainly, even when it makes uncomfortable reading, such is his dedication to the Scriptures over speculation.⁵⁸⁶ 'Now, since the arrangement of all things is in the hand of God, since to him belongs the disposal of life and death, he arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death, and are to glorify him by their destruction.'⁵⁸⁷ Even those decreed to 'doom from the womb' in the eternal will of God do not go to hell but on account of their own wickedness,⁵⁸⁸ although the line between God's sovereign election and mankind's sin is not always clearly drawn by Calvin and he occasionally comes close to attributing the reprobate's end to the divine decree apart from sin.⁵⁸⁹ Elsewhere in

⁵⁸¹ Calvin, "Predestination," 180.

⁵⁸² Cf. Sharp, 90.

⁵⁸³ Reprobation has been approached differently by various influential Reformers, see. Venema, 55ff.

⁵⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.2.

⁵⁸⁵ For Calvin's comments on reprobation from Rom. 9:20, see, Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 208. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.4; Calvin, *CEPG*, 86.

⁵⁸⁶ Partee, C., *Theology of Calvin*, 241.

⁵⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.6; 3.24.14.

⁵⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.9. Cf. Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 200, Rom. 9:11. Forbes wrongly accuses Calvin of saying that reprobation is purely down to the decree of God rather than the sinfulness of the reprobate. J. Forbes, *Predestination and Freewill and the Westminster Confession of Faith: With Explanation of Romans IX* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1878 (Legacy Reprint Series)), 53.

⁵⁸⁹ Calvin, *CEPG*, 94.

his *Institutes*, Calvin clearly places the ‘cause’ of sin in the will of rational beings and not directly in God’s will.⁵⁹⁰

Not everyone is saved because God wills otherwise.⁵⁹¹ The sum of the matter is this: every individual’s end is decreed by God in eternity past, some to eternal life, others to eternal death, the works of the latter bringing judgment upon themselves, the former being saved by the free grace of God,⁵⁹² and so just as providence is bound up with creation and God as Creator, so predestination is bound with redemption and to God as Redeemer. Creation, providence, predestination and redemption, are vivid, active, revelations of the God who dwells in Trinity, speaking of a single, purposeful, and victorious will.

3.2.11 Free will and the will of God

Before we venture into the area of human free will it is necessary to remind ourselves that God’s will is the freest of all wills. Although God wills some things necessarily, like himself or his glory, these things are still never willed but positively and willingly by God because they are things necessary to a perfect Being.⁵⁹³ God is not constrained to being perfect against his will. Everything outside of himself he wills freely since nothing necessarily exists in relation to him, God need not have created a single atom. All things are dependent on God; God is independent of all things. All possibilities were in God’s power before he decreed anything to come to pass, and he could have decreed something different than what he has.⁵⁹⁴ Therefore, just as there is nothing more powerful than God, so there is nothing in existence freer than God - the Creator of human freedom.

⁵⁹⁰Calvin, *CEPG*, 121-22. Cf. Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 436-37; Martyr, in McClelland, 260.

⁵⁹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.13.

⁵⁹²Calvin shows how predestination differs from the fate of the Stoics, in, Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.8. See also, Pelikan, 227-28; Reardon, 533.

⁵⁹³Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 455.

⁵⁹⁴Cf. Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 454.

3.2.12 Calvin and *Liberum arbitrium*

Given that we have shown Calvin's doctrine of God's providence to be universal in scope, absolute in fulfilment, and executed by an omnipotent, all-powerful and eternal will, the obvious question to ask is, what type of freedom does that leave humanity? Free will is a complex issue still under debate.⁵⁹⁵ This is partly due to the terminology used in reference to the subject.⁵⁹⁶ Nevertheless, God's will, in its operation and existence, is understood more fully when Calvin's theology of 'free will' is grasped.⁵⁹⁷

Calvin begins his exploration of free will within the context of the creation of mankind in the image of God.⁵⁹⁸ Calvin believed the soul to be constituted of two parts, the will and the intellect; 'the office of the intellect being to distinguish between objects, according as they seem deserving of being approved or disapproved; and the office of the will, to choose and follow what the intellect declares to be good, to reject what it declares to be bad ...'.⁵⁹⁹ Having been created this way Calvin says, 'God has provided the soul of man with intellect, by which he may discern good from evil, just from unjust, and might know what to follow or what to shun, reason going before her with her lamp ... To this he has enjoined the will, to which choice belongs,'⁶⁰⁰ for the will is governed by the intellect. It logically proceeds from this that humans do nothing which they have not themselves chosen.⁶⁰¹ Calvin believed both that Adam's fall occurred by his own will, and 'although Adam destroyed both himself and all his offspring, yet the corruption and the guilt of that Fall of one man must necessarily be ascribed to

⁵⁹⁵Hoitenga.

⁵⁹⁶Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 160.

⁵⁹⁷It is worth reminding ourselves of Partee's words, 'the English translation of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* contains more than fifteen hundred pages, but only fourteen of them are devoted to human nature as created. The point is that Calvin is expounding theology, not anthropology.' Partee, C., *Theology of Calvin*, 82.

⁵⁹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.1-4.

⁵⁹⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.7.

⁶⁰⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.8.

⁶⁰¹Cf. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.3. We shall deal with mankind's freedom in its present fallen state, not its pre-fall existence.

the secret counsel and decree of God!⁶⁰² The human will chooses voluntarily, it knows good from evil but naturally chooses that which originates from its sinful nature so that the unregenerate can never do anything morally right or good.⁶⁰³ He strongly opposes the Libertines however, who equate the will of man with a stone because they view God as the direct cause of everything either good or bad.⁶⁰⁴

Calvin finds fault with the early Father's teachings on free will, including Augustine's,⁶⁰⁵ aligning his position on the subject most closely to Bernard's in *On Grace and Free Choice*, but not without redefining some terminology. Calvin gives positive affirmation for the theology of the schools and their three kinds of freedom,⁶⁰⁶ with a reference to Lombard.⁶⁰⁷ What is surprising here is Calvin's silence with reference to Bernard's doctrine of free will when he mentions the 'schools,'⁶⁰⁸ as Calvin wanted to distance himself from the Schoolmen⁶⁰⁹ while he was fond of Bernard.⁶¹⁰ There is an issue between the use of 'necessity' and 'compulsion' in their respective definitions of free will. Bernard thought the use of the term 'necessity' would deny the essential truth that humans consent to the sin they commit, Calvin thought humanity necessarily sins on account of its fallen nature. Calvin and Bernard both believed that mankind was so affected by the fall that the will was under the yoke of sin and could do no good apart from grace.⁶¹¹ A clarification of terms leads to an agreement of their theology on this issue.⁶¹²

⁶⁰²Calvin, *SPG*, 269.

⁶⁰³Cf. Hoitenga.

⁶⁰⁴Calvin, *Anabaptists & Libertines*, 238.

⁶⁰⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.4. On other issues Calvin speaks highly of Chrysostom whose *Homilies* he had intended to translate into French. Wendel, 124.

⁶⁰⁶See, Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, Ch. 3.6.

⁶⁰⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.5-6.

⁶⁰⁸Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, 3.6-7. Cf. V. Brümmer, "Calvin, Bernard, and the Freedom of the Will," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 438; Lane, A. N. S., *Calvin and Bernard*, xiv.

⁶⁰⁹'that the reader may see how far I differ from the sounder of the Schoolmen.' Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.6. See also, Steinmetz, "The Scholastic Calvin," 16-17.

⁶¹⁰W. S. Reid, "Bernard of Clairvaux in the Thought of John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1979): 129.

⁶¹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.5. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *GFC*, Ch. 6.16, and, Lane, A. N. S., *Calvin and Bernard*, 42-43.

⁶¹²See, Lane, A. N. S., *Calvin and Bernard*, 36.

Helm makes the important observation that Calvin stresses the difference between freedom and compulsion, but sees no contradiction between freedom and causation.⁶¹³ That is to say, humans are not compelled or forced to do anything but they are determined to act necessarily from the natures they possess, and therefore fallen mankind is determined to sin necessarily but is not compelled to sin, for this it does voluntarily in accordance with its nature. Calvin concludes, 'In this way, then, man is said to have free will, not because he has choice of good and evil, but because he acts voluntarily, and not by compulsion. This is perfectly true; but why should so small a matter have been dignified with so proud a title?'⁶¹⁴ In effect, Calvin says free will exists, but so what? The important issue facing humanity has little to do with its ability to voluntarily act but its being in bondage to sin.⁶¹⁵

3.2.13 Summary of Calvin's doctrine of God's will

Calvin's doctrine of the will of God consists of the following theology. Firstly, we have seen that we can only know of God what he has decided to reveal to us but from his word we find an omnipotent God whose will ordains and decrees everything that happens. God's will operates in unison with all of his attributes and although these are a true revelation of God's being they are not equated in their entirety with God's essence. All that God decrees is wise and holy and just, and whereas it remains incomprehensible to human finite understanding, his reasons are known to him, there being no cause or higher reason than the will of God. Therefore, Calvin speaks about the 'secret will of God' and the 'revealed will of God,' but in essence, God's will is one, single and simple.

⁶¹³P. Helm, "Calvin and Bernard on Freedom and Necessity: A Reply to Brümmer," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 462.

⁶¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.7.

⁶¹⁵See, Calvin, *BLW*, 69. Also, Calvin, *SPG*, 304; He speaks in similar terms in, Calvin, *CEPG*, 116. Calvin's theology of free will has courted controversy, see especially, Reid, W. S.; Brümmer, "Calvin, Bernard, and the Freedom of the Will"; Helm, "A Reply to Brümmer"; V. Brümmer, "On not Confusing Necessity with Compulsion: A Reply to Paul Helm," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 105-09; Hoitenga. For a reply to Hoitenga's position, see, Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 144-46.

Secondly, we have seen how Calvin holds the whole of creation to be governed by God's providence so that nothing occurs which is not part of his eternal decree so that even his permission is a part of his active willing.

Thirdly, as the first cause of all things he brings to fulfilment his eternal plan by the use of means and second causes working in human beings according to their created natures. He explains the interrelation between human accountability and freedom in the light of God's will using Aristotle's four-fold scheme of causation but advocates the use of term 'free will' should cease.

Fourthly, we have seen that by God's eternal decree he deemed it just to create a world he knew would fall into sin and from which he would show mercy to those he would chose to elect and to ordain to destruction those he saw fit to leave in their state of sin. Despite the contemporary connotations attached to the word 'cause' and the misunderstandings that can be applied to the word 'permission,' in practice, when Calvin attempts to explain the unfolding of God's will it appears that at times he was caused to use the term 'permission' and permitted himself to use the term 'cause.'

Fifthly, God has allowed the existence of evil from which he deemed it appropriate to bring forth good. Unlike Augustine, Calvin refuses to speculate on the nature of evil. On all other matters, Calvin remains steadfastly Augustinian in his doctrine of God's will. In sum, 'God, therefore, ordained that which should come to pass, because nothing could have been done had He not willed it to be done.'⁶¹⁶

We can therefore see that Boston's belief in an all-encompassing and directing divine will was an established part of his theological tradition's heritage. It is

⁶¹⁶Calvin, *SPG*, 281; Calvin, *Anabaptists & Libertines*, 242.

important to grasp the Reformed position regarding God's will in order to see how Boston was enabled to pastorally apply it within his ministry.

3.3 The WCF's doctrine of the Will of God

One of the most significant developments for Boston within the history of Reformed theology was the formulation of the Westminster Confession.⁶¹⁷ The final construct of the WCF was drafted in the year 1646, taking five and a half years to form.⁶¹⁸ It has remained an integral part of the Reformed identity⁶¹⁹ having been adopted as the official confession of numerous Reformed denominations.⁶²⁰ It differs from the majority of Reformed confessions in that it was compiled by an assembly rather than a few individuals, and is the result of the development of over a century and a half of Reformed theology into a single document. The WCF has for many, become a standard for measuring Reformed orthodoxy, especially within my own nation of Scotland.⁶²¹

The importance of the confession for a Reformed viewpoint of the will of God is found in its classic statement in chapter three on *The Order of the Decrees*.⁶²² Ferguson says of this chapter, 'the Confession is clearly dependent upon the tradition of Augustine and Calvin.'⁶²³ Other chapters of great importance for understanding a full concept of God's will, include chapters (V) on Providence, (VI) the Fall of mankind, (IX) on free will,⁶²⁴ and (X) effectual calling. Overall,

⁶¹⁷Shedd argues (in 1893) against any revision of the WCF calling it a 'sufficiently broad and liberal creed' (6) for Calvinists. Shedd, G. T. W., 1ff.

⁶¹⁸R. Shaw, *An Exposition of The Westminster Confession of Faith*, with an introduction by S. B. Ferguson (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1992), xxvii.

⁶¹⁹J. H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster. Reformed Theology in the Making* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973); J. Murray, *The Theology of the Westminster Faith. Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982).

⁶²⁰A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 21.

⁶²¹Bell, 124.

⁶²²Possibly the most controversial chapter too, Shedd, G. T. W., 30. Shedd also argues it is one of the most useful for Christian living (31).

⁶²³S. B. Ferguson, "The Teaching of the Confession," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, edited by A. I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrew's Press, 1982), 31.

⁶²⁴Note, Forbes, who misunderstands some of Calvin's theology (53ff).

the WCF is a vital document for comprehending the development of Reformed thought on God's will from the time of Calvin, it is also responsible for shaping Reformed theology in the years that followed,⁶²⁵ and Boston in particular.

3.3.1 How does the WCF define God's will?

The third chapter of the WCF states, 'God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.'⁶²⁶ It goes on to say that God does not will things because he sees them as future but establishes the future by eternally willing it (III.II). Chapter VI mentions that God ordains all the means for whatever he wills to bring about, and chapter III.III-VIII speaks of election and predestination within God's decree. This is a superb brief and articulate statement of how God's will functions - but the question regarding what God's will is, still remains.

We notice from chapter three that the terms 'will' and 'decree' are used interchangeably. Secondly, whatever God wills or decrees is the result of his most wise and holy counsel which suggests that God's will is inseparable from these attributes. Thirdly, God's will is free from any sin or evil (III.II). Fourthly, we notice that God's will is immutable as what he decreed is 'unchangeably designed' (III.IV-V). Fifthly, God's will works according to his 'secret counsel' and 'good pleasure' (III.V). Sixthly, God's will is both eternal and most free (III.VI). Seventhly, God's will is unsearchable in its counsel but always 'works to the praise of his glorious justice' (III.VII). Lastly we note that God's will, as a doctrine, is revealed in God's word (III.VIII). We can see that God's will is overwhelmingly defined by God's other attributes.

⁶²⁵L. Quigley, (ed.) *Reformed Theology in Contemporary Perspective*. Westminster: Yesterday, Today - and Tomorrow? (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006).

⁶²⁶WCF, III.I.

In its definition of God, the confession runs through a list of attributes of what God 'is' before coming to speak of God's will which it explains in terms of what God 'does.' 'There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory ...' (II.I). God's will is therefore defined by his other attributes in relation to how it functions, whilst the nearest we get to a definition is that God's will is his own counsel: 'Q.12. *What are the decrees of God?* A. God's decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time.'⁶²⁷ I would therefore suggest this possible definition: God's will is one of his attributes whereby God according to his own counsel, knows, plans, and executes all things.

The WCF's doctrine of God's will is thoroughly in-line with Calvin's doctrine. Firstly, similarly to Calvin, 'God's incomprehensibility, with regards to his Being, is placed in the Confession before God's will and his almightiness,'⁶²⁸ (II.I). The confession's notions that God has sovereignty over all his creation, willing not according to his foreknowledge but by his own counsel and power (III.II), that predestination of individuals finds its root cause in God's will (III.III), that God's will is immutable (III.IV), that those predestined to life are chosen in Christ purely according to God's own counsel and mercy, (III.V), that God foreordains all the means for all that he seeks to accomplish (III.VI), that God withholds his mercy as he pleases from some people (III.VII), and that the doctrine of predestination should be handled with great care (III.VIII), all squarely fit within Calvin's doctrinal framework.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁷WCF, Larger Catechism, Q.12.

⁶²⁸Shaw, 23.

⁶²⁹Cf. J. B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, edited by A. I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrew's

3.3.2 *Providence in the WCF*

It is the continuous logical coherent unity of the WCF that makes it so attractive for so many. Having begun in chapter one with the Scripture that reveals God, it continues in chapter two with who God is, which flows into the reason for all other things, in chapter three. From the statement of how God's will functions, we move to the fourth chapter where we view the initial results of that will in creation. Only then do we move onto chapter five's doctrine of providence, which can only unfold within the established creation. The most noticeable aspect of the confession's statement on providence is how similar its emphases are to chapter three on the eternal decree. Like God's will, his providence is 'most holy' and 'most wise,' being 'according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his will.'⁶³⁰ His providence operates in accordance with second causes (V.II), by the use of means and according to his pleasure (V.III); all events are encompassed under it, including the Fall⁶³¹ and sin, and 'not by a bare permission' (V.IV). The purposeful wording at the beginning of chapter five wonderfully links together God, creation, God's will and providence, in a way that expresses their unity. 'God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will ...'.⁶³² Only when the confession deals with providence do we get the direct confirmation that God's decree is 'first cause,' which assumes that God is the first cause since it is

Press, 1982), 40-53; Torrance, T. F.; Kendall; Bell, who all believe the WCF departs from Calvin's theology regarding the divine decree.

⁶³⁰WCF, V.I.

⁶³¹In a letter to Calvin, Bullinger departed from Calvin regarding God ordaining the Fall, Venema, 63. At the time of the WCF therefore, there were differing views to choose from within Reformed theology on this issue, the Assembly followed the viewpoint shared by Calvin.

⁶³²WCF, V.I.

defining his will.⁶³³ As for God's use of means as a way to execute his providential care, the wording of the WCF⁶³⁴ and Calvin⁶³⁵ are very similar.

The WCF's chapter on providence reveals the totality of the dependence of all creation upon God and his willing of their existence.⁶³⁶ Since secondary causes exist, they too are under the direction of the one who created them. Hodge comments, 'Since God created all second causes and endowed them with their properties, and continues to uphold them in being, that they might be the instruments of his will, all their efficiency is derived from him, and he must be able to do directly without them what he does with them, and limit, modify, or supersede them, at his pleasure.'⁶³⁷ God's decree does not, therefore, destroy the reality of the past, the present, or the future; rather, God's ordaining them to exist ensures their reality and existence, moment by moment. God is over and present in the world, governing and sustaining, a God who cares, who is active, ceaselessly working with his creation, ordaining whatsoever comes to pass and ever present to operationalize those plans. Calvin and the Westminster Assembly understood this, and their doctrine of providence helps ground creation in a fuller reality.⁶³⁸

One could argue, I guess, that the WCF's teaching on God's decree did in part, produce a dominant doctrine of the decrees in the life of Boston. However, Boston appears more preoccupied with providence than the decrees proper, which I do believe reflects his introspective disposition in the practical day by day situations he faced, and providence certainly does not claim any centrality within the Westminster Confession. It may well be possible that the intentions of the Westminster divines did not quite match the result of the Confession. By this I mean, that the Westminster divines may not have set out in any way to make the

⁶³³Cf. WCF, V.II.

⁶³⁴WCF, V.III. Cf. Shaw, 68.

⁶³⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.1.

⁶³⁶Hodge, 91.

⁶³⁷Hodge, 98. See also, Muller, "The Myth of 'Decretal Theology'," 165

⁶³⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.1.

doctrine of the decrees a dominant theme (after all, the Assembly included Arminians), yet it has been interpreted thus, simply from its initial placement within the Confession, and in subsequent years, from the attention it has received out of proportion to the Confession as a whole. One wonders whether there would be any fuss at all over chapter three's *God's Eternal Decrees* if it were placed as the last chapter of the Confession, signifying that everything that has happened has been ordained by God. From this position it could not be viewed as starting point for formulating the rest of the Confession, but an acknowledgement that all that has and will happen, from creation until the end of time, has been in the hands of God the Almighty Creator.

3.3.3 The WCF's terminology for discussing God's will

In the intervening years between Calvin and the WCF a number of distinctions had arisen within Reformed orthodoxy related to God's will. There may be small differences of theology between the doctrine of God's will in the *Institutes* and the WCF, in fact there ought to be, Calvin was after all, one man, the WCF was compiled by an assembly, and the Westminster divines had no set agenda to reflect Calvin's theology. Yet the similarities that exist are quite striking. Apart from the *voluntas arcana* and *voluntas revelata* previously mentioned, there were terms such as *voluntas signi* and *voluntas beneplaciti*,⁶³⁹ the revealed will and the will that remains secret to God, the will of his good pleasure.⁶⁴⁰ The academic discussions surrounding God's will in the Reformed tradition, however, were seemingly consistent.⁶⁴¹ Certain distinctions have stood the test of time.⁶⁴² Distinctions are necessary for understanding the divine will but too many distinctions can make God's will appear fragmented and detract from its singleness, when the very purpose of distinctions is to uphold the oneness of the

⁶³⁹See, Turretin, 223.

⁶⁴⁰For a detailed account of the distinctions and their particulars, see, Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 453ff. The distinctions of God's 'secret' and 'revealed' will are most commonly used.

⁶⁴¹Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 473.

⁶⁴²'The first and principal distinction is that of the decretive and preceptive will.' Turretin, 220.

divine will. The Westminster Confession speaks of the ‘secret counsel and good pleasure of his will’ (III.V).

The language of the WCF regarding the divine will, uses the terms ‘ordains’ and ‘decrees’ to mean the same thing. Yet the term ‘will’ seems to be prior to them, in the sense that what God decrees and ordains proceeds from his will. It is from his will that he ordains everything that comes to pass (III.I; III.VII). God also foreordains according to his will (III.VI). In more than one place God’s will is spoken of as being regulated by his own counsel (II.I; III.I; V.I), so we see that whatever pleases God according to his counsel he wills to happen, and in order for it to happen, he ordains or decrees for it to come to pass. The counsel of God is labelled ‘unsearchable’ (III.VII), reflecting a reoccurring theme in Scripture (Rom. 9:20; Prov. 25:2; Job 38-41), and an emphasis on God’s incomprehensibility in Calvin’s doctrine of God’s will.

Where we do find a noticeable terminological difference between Calvin and the WCF is in the area of reprobation. This is simply because the word ‘reprobation’ is absent from the Westminster document,⁶⁴³ whereas Calvin pushed the term to emphasize that reprobation is the undeniable reverse of election and meaning of ‘passing by,’⁶⁴⁴ the precise wording used by the confession. The confession is, however, quite clear that God’s passing by of some is ordained by him. I think the Assembly wiser in not using a word that has such negative connotations. The confession at this point reflects Augustine better than Calvin. Shaw highlights a further qualification when dealing with terminology in this area, saying,

the Westminster Divines did not understand the meaning of the terms *predestination* and *foreordination* to be identical, and therefore never used these words as synonymous. By predestination they meant *a positive decree determining to confer everlasting life*; and this they regarded as the basis of the whole *doctrines of free grace*, arising from nothing in man, but having for its divine origin the character and sovereignty of

⁶⁴³Cf. Shaw, xix; Murray, "Calvin, Dordt and Westminster," 210.

⁶⁴⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.1.

God. By *foreordination*, on the other hand, they meant a *decree of order, or arrangement, determining that the guilty should be condemned to everlasting death*; and this they regarded as the basis of *judicial procedure*, according to which God “ordains men to dishonour and wrath for their sin,” and having respect to man’s own character and conduct.⁶⁴⁵

There is then, a clear differentiation between the way God elects some and passes by others in the WCF. The WCF’s term ‘permission,’ in relation to God’s will, shares its meaning with Calvin’s usage of the word,⁶⁴⁶ denying a bare permission (V.IV). ‘Permission’ is used to describe things God ordains to happen which go against his revealed law. An example of this is found in chapter six, speaking of the Fall. ‘This their sin God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory’ (VI.I). Notice that the permission of God is wedged between his ‘wise and holy counsel’ and ‘purpose to order,’ signifying that when God permits anything, it is nothing less than the result of his counsel and will. It is no surprise then, to find that chapter three on the divine decree, purposely refrains from mentioning ‘permission.’ The Westminster Assembly was not opposed to the use of the term permission, within the above context. It is a helpful distinction. To simply say ‘God wills everything’ without qualification or distinction, can make God the author of sin and the arbitrary tyrant of anti-Reformed caricatures.⁶⁴⁷

Given the distinctions expressed in the confession regarding God’s ordaining and permission, it is no surprise to find that God’s will ‘establishes second causes’ (III.I). What is absent from the Confession is any hint of the Aristotelian scheme of causation repeatedly used by Calvin to explain causation. The idea that God relates to his creation via different ‘causes’ in different ways, is nevertheless,

⁶⁴⁵Shaw, xviii-xix.

⁶⁴⁶Not only Calvin, but other Reformers like Peter Martyr took the same stance. See, McClelland, 259.

⁶⁴⁷As in, S. Fisk, *Calvinistic Paths Retraced* (Tennessee: Biblical Evangelical Press, 1985); Cf. W. L. Craig, in J. K. Beilby, and P. R. Eddy, *Divine Foreknowledge. Four Views* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 135; Sanders, 212.

behind the theology of the confession according to Hodge.⁶⁴⁸ It is only by God's will that creation exists, and by that same will is sustained. To then speak of mankind's 'freedom' as if it could be altogether autonomous from God's sovereign will is nonsensical.

3.3.4 The place of evil within the WCF

The WCF is well known for confessing God's sovereignty, yet it is equally insistent in confessing that God is not the author of sin (III.I), governing all things 'yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin' (V.IV).⁶⁴⁹ These two Reformed tenets were believed in by Calvin and confessed by Westminster. The entrance of sin into the unfallen world appears to be via the temptations of Satan (VI.I). God was pleased to permit the Fall (VI.I). God's permission proceeds from his 'holy counsel,' the same source as his will, highlighting the important distinction that is trying to be related within the one will of God in how he is said to 'ordain' some things and 'permit' others.⁶⁵⁰ When the Assembly were confronted with God's relationship to sin⁶⁵¹ and human freedom,⁶⁵² they used the 'permission' distinction.

The WCF has one, often over-looked phrase, found tucked away in the Larger Catechism regarding human freedom. It states in question twenty one that 'Our first parents *being left to the freedom of their own will*, through the temptation of

⁶⁴⁸Hodge, 65-66.

⁶⁴⁹Cf. Hodge, 100.

⁶⁵⁰On this distinction, Shedd says, 'For sufficient reasons, a man may decide in a particular case to do by a volition something entirely contrary to his uniform and abiding inclination. He is uniformly averse and disinclined to physical pain, but he may decide to have his leg amputated. This is his "decree," and is no index of what he is pleased with.' Shedd, G. T. W., 52.

⁶⁵¹Hodge, 107ff.

⁶⁵²See, A. König, "Providence, Sin and Human Freedom. On Different Concepts of Human Freedom," in *Studies in Reformed Theology 1. Freedom*, edited by A. van Egmond and D. van Keulen (Schoten: Uitgeverij Callenbach, 1996), 181-94, for a first class contribution to the Reformed view on human freedom.

Satan, transgressed the commandment of God ...'.⁶⁵³ This cannot of course, mean that their wills were left totally unconnected with God's, since that very freedom has been both ordained and continuously sustained by God's will, so what does the 'being left' refer to? Given the overall tenor of strength proscribed to the will of God in the confession, I read the above sentence to mean that a genuine freedom has been given to humanity, which although operating under the sovereign will of God, is a freedom as real and meaningful as human existence itself. This statement in the WCF helps reinforce the truth that we will of our own volition, not because of divine compulsion.

3.3.5 Election in the WCF

Similarly to Calvin, the confession clearly teaches the election of some people to heaven and the foreordination of others to damnation (III.III). The confession, like Scripture, never states the reasons for God's choice.⁶⁵⁴ The confession also follows Calvin's theology in two further regards, that is, the elect are elected 'in Christ' and not according to God's foreknowledge but his will (III.V). Calvin's admonition to proceed with caution into the subject of election is repeated by the Westminster confession (III.VIII). In fact, the continuity of thought surrounding these issues from Augustine through Bernard, Lombard, Aquinas, and Calvin, up to the WCF, bears testimony to a common understanding of Scripture's teaching. The WCF reflects accurately the language of Scripture. Election is often spoken of as originating from God but reprobation is the situation produced by sinful creatures. Hell itself was prepared for the devil and his angels, not mankind (Matt. 25:34ff), it is the 'wages of sin' that result in death, but the 'free gift' of God that leads to life (Rom.6:23). Forbes makes a significant point: 'We find the Election of believers, but never the Reprobation of the unbeliever, referred to the ... "good pleasure" [*voluntas beneplaciti*] of God's will, Eph. i.5, 9; Phil. ii. 13; 2

⁶⁵³WCF, Q.21 (Italics mine). Neither Williamson nor Hodge, make mention of this sentence in their commentaries on the WCF.

⁶⁵⁴Shaw, 43.

Thess. i. 11.⁶⁵⁵ There is clearly a difference in the way God ordains some to eternal life and ordains to pass by others, leaving them in their state of self originating sinfulness.⁶⁵⁶ The most obvious difference between Calvin and the WCF is the context for dealing with election, although one wonders what significance can be drawn from this placement given that the two documents were different in genre, written over a hundred years apart, and compiled by an individual and an assembly respectively.⁶⁵⁷ The content of the actual teaching on election contained within these documents is of more importance than their placements within those documents, however suggestive those placements may seem.

3.3.6 The WCF and free will

The most interesting thing to notice about the confession's chapter on free will is that although the chapter is entitled 'Of Free Will,' the five points that speak to the subject avoid the use of the term! Secondly, only the first two sentences speak of the freedom of the will in its general function, the last three points are all concerned with the abilities, or lack thereof, regarding the freedom of the will in conversion. What it does say in its first two sentences is very important. It states the human will has been endowed by God with a liberty that is not forced nor determined to good or evil (IX.I). In other words, it does what it wants in accordance with the nature and desire to which it is inseparably bound. God never forces the human will to do anything other than that what it also desires to do itself, this is the way God decreed things should be. God's 'decrees exert no

⁶⁵⁵Forbes, 7.

⁶⁵⁶See, Forbes, 5. Cf. 'When God gives special regenerating grace to only one of two persons, he does not work upon the other to prevent him from believing and repenting under the operation of the common grace which he has bestowed upon both alike. He merely leaves the other to his own free will to decide the matter ...'. Shedd, G. T. W., 58-59.

⁶⁵⁷Partee makes the point that election is dealt with in article 3 of the WCF and the person of Christ not until article 8. He says, 'At Westminster predestination is developed before the doctrines of creation, redemption, faith, and so on. In Calvin, eternal election is properly an attempt from the believer's perspective to understand God's love for those whom God chooses. According to Westminster the doctrine is an attempt, from God's perspective, to explain the eternal choice of those whom God will love.' Partee, C., *Theology of Calvin*, 243.

control [in the sense of compulsion] over man's free will, since we cannot for a moment suppose that God omitted to include in His decrees whatever is necessary for the free exercise of the responsibility of the creatures whom He was about to bring into existence.'⁶⁵⁸

Williamson makes a good point, concerning the misunderstandings that often occur with the Reformed view of free will, saying, people 'speak of man being free to do good or evil when they really mean to say that men are able to do good or evil.'⁶⁵⁹ The confession teaches 'Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation' (IX.III), in other words, mankind can freely decide to do good, that option exists, but is unable because of the inherent sinful nature within which the will resides.⁶⁶⁰ One man may have the ability to walk around the world but because he is in prison he does not have the freedom to do it, another man may have the freedom to walk around the world, but being crippled he does not have the ability. The WCF says humans have the freedom to will what they like but being crippled by sin, they only have the ability to do what comes naturally, act sinfully. The freedom of the will is constantly maintained throughout all points on that chapter.⁶⁶¹ Rational beings act freely and are responsible for their actions, but God ordains everything that happens.⁶⁶²

3.4 Summary of Boston's Reformed context regarding the doctrine of God's will

We can say with certainty that the Reformed world view inherited by Boston was well established when Boston became a minister. It proclaimed consistent biblical teaching from Augustine onwards. Yes, there were developments of thought and

⁶⁵⁸Forbes, 11. Cf. Turretin, 511.

⁶⁵⁹Williamson, 85.

⁶⁶⁰Cf. Williamson, 86.

⁶⁶¹See, Hodge, 161-62.

⁶⁶²See Isa. 10:5-17 and God's use of the Assyrians. It is little wonder that some of the leading Open Theist books fail to make any mention this passage, G. A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000). Even when dealing with 'problem passages' related to the biblical support for the openness view, Rice fails to discuss Isaiah 10, in, Pinnock, 46-57.

differences of terminology as the passage of time passed but the term ‘originality’ cannot be applied to the theology of Calvin or the WCF to any great extent. Historically, Boston’s theological position stands in a tradition, which having been refined over centuries before Calvin, is collectively expressed by Calvin, and continuously developed to the point where it is comprehensively expressed in a confessional form by the divines at Westminster.

The doctrine of God’s will has undergone varied discussions during those periods and faced many a critic but a number of points are uniformly re-established each time the debate arises. These are as follows: God’s will is one; it is an attribute inseparable from his being and divine perfection, revealed in a way that incorporates distinctions. It is the pleasure of God’s counsel, who being all powerful and all-knowing, ordains all things to his glory. The activation of God’s ordination is executed via providence, establishing legitimate human freedom and second causes. God permits sin and evil in his good creation, prohibiting it and punishing it, in accordance with his glorious justice. It is eternal and incomprehensible in its entirety, with no reason higher, or cause behind God’s will. This is the doctrine of the will of God that was mandated and taught by the Reformed tradition before Boston inherits and formulates his own theology. It is this doctrine that so influenced Boston in every sphere of his private and professional life as we have established from his *Memoirs*. Boston’s own comprehensive doctrine of the will of God is our next subject but it was necessary to highlight what stood behind and influenced Boston’s doctrine of the will of God so that his pastoral application of that doctrine and the influence of it in his own life can be fully appreciated and understood. For example, Boston’s belief in God’s sovereign will is not Stoic in nature because of his belief in means and causes. Now that some of the history of the doctrine that influenced Boston has been established we can begin to comprehend how God’s will has become essential for attaining to a full understanding of Boston’s life and ministry.

Chapter 4

The Doctrine of the Will of God in the Theology of Thomas Boston

Boston enters the scene when the WCF was well established, accepted and warmly welcomed.⁶⁶³ The Reformation of Calvin's day was a distant memory, Knox was a name from history, and the turbulent times which secured Scotland as a 'Reformed' nation were settling down.⁶⁶⁴ It was this era, with this set of ecclesiastical circumstances that enabled Boston to flourish as an author of Reformed theological writings. Unlike Calvin, Boston did not have to write copious defences or apologetics to ward off opponents,⁶⁶⁵ and unlike the Westminster Assembly, Boston did not have to carefully craft precise definitions of doctrine. Boston was free to popularize and apply an already established doctrine, to make known to his parishioners the Reformed faith in ways they could understand. This is why Boston's doctrine of the will of God is important. It is delivered to the masses in intelligible terms, a making known of established complex doctrines. Boston emphasized the will of God and his providence in daily life and gave the people a doctrine they could grasp, and the people loved him for it. We shall here try to understand Boston's doctrine of the will of God, and to do that most effectively, we shall let Boston speak for himself, describing his doctrine with extensive quotations. The nature of Boston's *Memoirs* only really make sense once his doctrine of God's will is known, and this doctrine became the backbone for his outlook on life and an essential tool for his pastoral ministry.

⁶⁶³Boston states there had been religious peace in Scotland for twenty-two years (1712). Boston, *CW*, IX.163 Those wishing to participate in communion had to profess they believed the doctrine of the Shorter Catechism before their belief in God, and only thirdly, Christ as he is offered in the Gospel! Boston, *Memoirs*, 488. As disturbing as this is it does show the importance of the WCF and its catechisms in Boston's and the Church of Scotland's life in those days.

⁶⁶⁴Cf. Bruggink, 1.

⁶⁶⁵Cf. Bruggink, 343.

4.1 God's will in relation to his being and attributes

How does Boston define God's will?⁶⁶⁶ Boston deals specifically with God's decree in volume one of his works,⁶⁶⁷ but this is further developed and expounded throughout his doctrinal works and sermons, providing a more comprehensive understanding of his doctrine. To understand God's will it is necessary to understand Boston's theology of the being of God as that from which it proceeds. He takes a traditional Reformed view of God, whereby God is eternal, immutable, sovereign, powerful, righteous, holy and just; his God is the God described in the Westminster Confession (II.I), inherited from the Reformers who were passing on the Augustinian tradition. But how does Boston, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, as a Scottish minister and country pastor, choose to explain the divine will in its existence and act? To answer this question we shall look at, a) God's will in relation to his being and attributes, b) the definition and extent of God's will, c) and Boston's own category of the properties of God's decree.

Boston, like Calvin, shared a deep appreciation of God's incomprehensibility⁶⁶⁸ and the mystery that surrounds the Almighty's being and ways.⁶⁶⁹ He is quite clear that there are things about God we simply do not and cannot understand: 'No creature can fully comprehend what God is: Job xi.7.'⁶⁷⁰ We cannot know God as God knows himself, that is, in his essence, neither can we understand all of his ways or the workings of his decree but God has revealed what we both can and need to know concerning himself from Scripture.⁶⁷¹ When he speaks of the spiritual nature of the Divine Being he says it is utterly incomprehensible by men

⁶⁶⁶Although Boston says 'God's decree is an act of his will,' he appears to use the terms 'decree' and 'will' synonymously. Boston, *CW*, I.149.

⁶⁶⁷Boston, *CW*, I.149-67. Boston's works were collected together posthumously and therefore the volume order does not necessarily reflect the age of the works it contains. A chronological order can be found in, Bruggink, 353ff.

⁶⁶⁸'The incomprehensibleness of him to any creature. He is a miracle past their reach, the reach of their knowledge as well as their power ... Whatever the saints know of it, the half is known, there is still more behind.' Boston, *CW*, X.220.

⁶⁶⁹Boston, *CW*, X.433; X.462.

⁶⁷⁰Boston, *CW*, VII.12. Boston continues by describing God's simplicity but without using that specific term.

⁶⁷¹Boston, *CW*, I.77.

or angels.⁶⁷² This shared appreciation of God's incomprehensibility in Boston and Calvin is often over-looked in people's evaluation of their works, where the theological systems construed from their writings are explained detached from any underlying idea of mystery and God's incomprehensibility. However, both were actually happy to let the tensions that exist concerning God's will stand if they could be upheld by Scriptural truth, such as God's total sovereignty and mankind's responsibility.

Since God is unknowable in his essence, he manifests himself to humanity via his attributes, through the means of Scripture, creation and providence.⁶⁷³ Even then, however, his sovereign judgments often remain unsearchable.⁶⁷⁴ One way of bridging the gap between God's transcendence and our need to know him is found in his revelation in Scripture, where Boston points out the need for God to accommodate himself to us in the language used. When discussing God's wrath, for example, Boston says, 'It is little that we know of the infinite God; but, condescending to our weakness, he is pleased to speak of himself to us after the manner of men. Let us therefore notice man's wrath, but remove every thing in our consideration of the wrath of God, that implies imperfection; and so we may attain to some view of it however scanty.'⁶⁷⁵ Boston recognizes along with Calvin God's need to accommodate his ways and revelation of himself to his creatures.

What God has made known of himself in his attributes has been divided by Boston into two categories. Boston describes God's attributes with the common Reformed terminology of 'communicable' and 'incommunicable.'⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷²Boston, *CW*, I.77. Cf. 'God is incomprehensible, and his essence infinite and unbounded.' Boston, *CW*, I.83.

⁶⁷³Boston, *CW*, I.149.

⁶⁷⁴Boston, *CW*, XI.247.

⁶⁷⁵Boston, *CW*, VIII.101.

⁶⁷⁶Sometimes the idea of incommunicable attributes is described without the use of the terminology, see, Boston, *CW*, X.251.

Terminologically, he also equates ‘the attributes of God’ with the ‘perfections of the divine nature.’⁶⁷⁷

That we may know what sort of a spirit God is, we must consider his attributes, which we gather from his word and works, and that two ways: 1. By denying of, and removing from God, in our minds, all imperfection which is in the creatures, Acts, xvii. 29. And thus we come to the knowledge of his incommunicable attributes, so called because there is no shadow or vestige of them in the creatures, such as infinity, eternity, unchangeableness. 2. By attributing unto him, by way of eminency, whatever is excellent in the creatures, seeing he is the fountain of all perfection in them, Psal. xciv. 9. And thus we have his communicable attributes, whereof there are some vestiges and small scantlings in the creature, as being, wisdom, power, etc, amongst which his spirituality is to be reckoned.⁶⁷⁸

Boston’s idea of denying and removing from God, in the human mind, all the imperfections which are in the creatures to arrive at a knowledge of God’s incommunicable attributes, and attributing to God whatever is excellent in creatures to understand God’s communicable attributes, is an unusual way of explaining them. Boston does not look at God’s revelation of himself and conclude what attributes we have a faint share in and those in which we have no experience at all which seems the more logical approach. In another place however, where Boston again explains what he means by ‘communicable attributes,’ he does appear to understand them from the direction of the divine to the human. Boston talks about there being ‘faint scantlings’ of God’s communicable attributes in his creatures but with one over-riding consideration, that the attributes created creatures can show signs of possessing in part, God possesses in relation to his whole being. The attributes of God are therefore all eternal, immutable and infinite in God, becoming the divine perfection and name (Exod. 3:14).⁶⁷⁹

Boston believed that God’s attributes are in fact God himself and not merely expressions of his being. God’s aseity for example, is inseparable from his

⁶⁷⁷Boston, *CW*, VII.12-13.

⁶⁷⁸Boston, *CW*, I.79-80.

⁶⁷⁹Boston, *CW*, VII.13.

essence.⁶⁸⁰ Boston does not say God is merely the sum of his attributes, but he does say that they cannot be separated from his being without denying God's perfection.

Now, both these sorts of attributes in God are not qualities in him distinct from himself, but they are God himself. God's infinity is God himself, his wisdom is himself; he is wisdom, he is goodness, 1 John i. 5. Neither are these attributes so many different things in God; but they are each of them God himself: for God swears by himself, Heb. vi. 13; yet he swears by his holiness, Amos iv. 2, Rom. i. 20. Therefore God's attributes are God himself. Neither are these attributes separable from one another; for though we, through weakness, must think and speak of them separately, yet they are truly but the one infinite perfection of the divine nature, which cannot be separated therefrom, without denying that he is an infinitely perfect being.⁶⁸¹

What does seem strange, and I disagree with Boston on this point, is that in the light of all he has written on God's attributes he singles out 'holiness' as being the attribute *par excellence*, saying 'It is an universal attribute which runs through all the other.'⁶⁸² Elsewhere he says of Christ, 'He is the self-same numerical essence or nature with the Father; all the attributes of God, and particularly his holiness, are in him, Exod. xxiii. 21.'⁶⁸³ This kind of talk suggests that God in his being could be essentially more one attribute than another, or suggest that God is definitively holy above being good, eternal, wise, etc. Does not God's 'eternity' also run through all the other attributes? Does not his 'sovereignty'? Boston has previously affirmed this is so, and on occasions he speaks about the attributes in ways which clearly portray their unity within God.⁶⁸⁴ I do not think it is wise to say that one attribute of God is the glory of the others, as this suggests that his

⁶⁸⁰Boston, *CW*, I.384.

⁶⁸¹Boston, *CW*, I.80.

⁶⁸²'Because God's holiness is his glory in a peculiar manner, Exod. xv. 11. – "Glorious in holiness." It is the glory of all his other attributes; it is the beauty of them all, and of every one of them. It is an universal attribute which runs through all the other. It is that vein of infinite purity, that goes through the several letters of his name, and makes them shine in glory. Wherein lies the glory of God's wisdom, power, mercy, &c.' Boston, *CW*, II.567. Cf. Bell says of the WCF, 'The imposition of the Federal scheme upon the biblical data had produced a God whose essential attribute is justice.' Bell, 183, which is interesting given the fact that Boston was a Federal theologian greatly influenced by the Westminster Confession.

⁶⁸³Boston, *CW*, VI.541.

⁶⁸⁴Boston, *Fourfold State*, 146.

other attributes are somehow ‘less’ than the one identified which raises serious and difficult questions regarding God’s perfection. Besides, if God’s attributes are inseparable from his being and his being is perfect,⁶⁸⁵ then every attribute which exists within God’s being must be of equal worth with its counterparts. All must be perfect. At one point Boston speaks of God’s sovereignty (which usually includes his will) along with the attributes of justice, holiness, and goodness, under the category of ‘divine perfections’. This would suggest that all of God’s attributes are perfect, none with greater prominence than another, and it also provides another instance of God’s will spoken of as if it were an attribute.⁶⁸⁶ God’s will being part of the perfection of his being is therefore perfect in Boston’s view. This is important for Boston’s pastoral application of God’s will because he can say with absolute confidence that everything we face in this life, good or bad, is in God’s control and is part of his perfect plan for his people - including their suffering.

4.1.2 The definition and extent of God’s will

Boston does not call God’s will an attribute but like many Reformed theologians, he speaks of it as if it were. In this sense, he follows squarely within Calvin’s footsteps. There is a complex relationship between God’s will and his attributes within Reformed theology.⁶⁸⁷ Boston speaks of God’s decree being inseparable from his being in a similar fashion to how his attributes exist, and speaks of God’s decree actually being God himself as his attributes are God himself. God is not something other than what he is in himself; all that is in God belongs to the being of God. Boston argues that if God’s attributes are somehow connected to God but

⁶⁸⁵Boston, *CW*, III.313.

⁶⁸⁶Boston, *CW*, VII.528. Cf. Although Calvin highlights three attributes which are the most necessary for mankind to know, he does not place any one of God’s attributes above another within God’s being. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.2.

⁶⁸⁷‘despite the obvious importance of the doctrine of the divine will, the Reformed orthodox never make it the basic category for understanding the essence and attributes of God and insist on understanding the doctrine of God’s will as an integral part of the larger doctrine of the attributes - indeed, as a connecting link in the chain or circle of attributes that, together in their unity, provide us with an understanding of what God is and of the way that God relates to his world.’ Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, 433.

are not actually what God is, then God is a ‘compound being,’ and could not be the first cause of all things.⁶⁸⁸ To separate God’s will from his being is the same as to separate God’s attributes from his being, the result of which is to deny God’s infinite perfection. Therefore, God’s will functions and exists in an identical way to the relationship between God’s attributes and his being but is always referred to as something distinct. Boston does provide a succinct description of God’s will.

For God to decree is to purpose and fore-ordain, to will and appoint that a thing shall be or not be. And such decrees must needs be granted, seeing God is absolutely perfect, and therefore nothing can come to pass without his will; seeing there is an absolute and necessary dependence of all things and persons on God as the first cause. But there is a vast difference betwixt the decrees of God and men; whereof this is the principal: Men’s purposes or decrees are distinct from themselves, but the decrees of God are not distinct from himself. God’s decrees are nothing else than God himself, who is one simple act; and they are many only in respect to their objects, not as they are in God; even as the one heat of the sun melts wax and hardens clay. To say otherwise is to derogate from the absolute simplicity of God, and to make him a compound being. It is also to derogate from his infinite perfection ...⁶⁸⁹

We can see from this description of God’s will, just how deeply rooted Boston’s theology is in the Augustinian tradition, and how many ideas are comparable to Calvin’s. We see that ‘nothing can come to pass without God’s will,’ that all things are dependent on God’s will, that God is the first cause of all things, and that God’s decrees are part of God himself because of his simplicity. Alongside this description of God’s will Boston also provides an account of how it functions, and much like the WCF it is the nearest we come to arriving at a definition of the divine decree;

The manner how God works. The plan and scheme according to which his works are framed, is *the counsel of his will*. His will is his decree and intention; and it is called *the counsel of his will*, to denote the wisdom of his decrees, his most wise and free determination therein. As God’s decree is an act of his will, and so most free, considered in relation to the creatures; so his decree and will are never without counsel; he willeth or decreeth

⁶⁸⁸Boston, *CW*, VIII.65.

⁶⁸⁹Boston, *CW*, I.150. In another passage expounding the WCF (Question 7) he similarly says, ‘By the decrees of God is meant his purpose foreordaining what should come to pass. God hath foreordained in his decrees, whatsoever comes to pass ... Even the most free acts of the creature, and the most causal things, are foreordained of God.’ Boston, *CW*, VII.16.

things to be done with the greatest reason and judgment, most wisely as well as freely.⁶⁹⁰

Note that Boston says ‘God’s will is his decree’ and ‘God’s decree is an act of his will,’ showing that the counsel of God and what he causes to happen are one. God’s decree is an expression of his will and his will is perfectly displayed in his action.⁶⁹¹ God’s will is defined as being his decree, intention, plan and scheme which is always most free, most wise, and along with the WCF, Boston believed that God’s will is the product of his own eternal counsel.⁶⁹²

Boston follows Calvin and the WCF in understanding the decree of God to be universal in its extent,⁶⁹³ irresistible,⁶⁹⁴ with both small and great things being included in its reach,⁶⁹⁵ and he provides the following texts as evidence: Prov. xx. 1; Exod. xxi. 12, 13; Deut. xix. 3; Matt. x. 29, 30.⁶⁹⁶ According to his exposition of Eph. 1:11, everything occurs according to the doctrine of God’s decree and Boston quotes the Westminster Confession for support, saying, ‘God hath fore-ordained, according to the counsel of his own will, whatsoever comes to pass.’ God’s will is therefore, God himself, along with the divine perfections, it is his own counsel under which all things live and move and have their being (Acts 17:28).

⁶⁹⁰Boston, *CW*, I.149. Cf. Boston, *CW*, X.212; X.237, where Boston highlights God’s infinity, counsel, government, eternity and immutability in doing his will.

⁶⁹¹‘The way he decreed all things is according to the counsel of his own will, Eph. i.11. His decrees are said to be according to his own counsel, as being all laid in the depth of wisdom, which among men is the result of counsel ... But taking counsel, even in himself, is not competent to God, in a proper sense; because his infinite understanding comprehends all things perfectly at once.’ Boston, *CW*, VII.17.

⁶⁹²Boston, *CW*, II.345.

⁶⁹³Boston expounds on this issue. ‘We may consider the extent of the eternal decree under the three following heads. 1. God has decreed the creation of all things that have a being. 2. He has decreed to rule and govern the creatures which he was to make. 3. He has decreed the eternal state of all his rational creatures.’ Boston, *CW*, I.150.

⁶⁹⁴Boston, *CW*, III.524.

⁶⁹⁵Boston, *CW*, I.152.

⁶⁹⁶See also, Boston, *CW*, V.560.

4.1.3 The properties of God's decree

Boston considers the 'properties' of God's decree which he says are; 1. eternal. 2. most wise. 3. most free. 4. unchangeable. 5. most holy and pure, and, 6. effectual.⁶⁹⁷ Regarding their eternal property, he makes the point that God's foreknowledge is 'founded on the decree. If the divine decrees were not eternal, God would not be most perfect and unchangeable, but, like weak man, should take new counsels, and would be unable to tell every thing that were to come to pass.'⁶⁹⁸ Boston seems to stress the gulf that exists between divine and human willing, noting that whereas mankind can deliberate and take counsel, God properly speaking cannot, he is omniscient. God views all things in an 'eternal now' decreeing with perfect judgment with the result that everything that unfolds from his decree is the best thing to happen.⁶⁹⁹

If God's will is eternal and can only decree what is most wise,⁷⁰⁰ in what sense is his will free? Firstly, in relation to creation God was free not to decree its existence at all. Secondly, he is free from dependence upon his creatures in that he does not decree in reaction to his creation or as a result of foreknowledge, a point repeatedly stressed by Calvin. Thirdly, he is therefore free from temporal conditions, his decree being eternal. Boston strongly emphasizes God's independence from the creature in relation to his decree,⁷⁰¹ but would God be free to sin or stop existing since these things are not dependent upon his creation? God would not be 'free' to do these things as they would entail a lack of perfection within his being and discord within his nature since God's attributes are God himself. To be able to do these things would not make God any freer, but as Boston has repeatedly said, it would simply derogate his infinite perfection.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁷Boston, *CW*, I.158-59.

⁶⁹⁸Boston, *CW*, I.158.

⁶⁹⁹Boston, *CW*, I.158.

⁷⁰⁰'Consider God's will is the product of infinite wisdom, and may we not trust that infinite wisdom that contrived the world with the guiding of it?' Boston, *CW*, IV.104.

⁷⁰¹Boston, *CW*, I.158-59.

⁷⁰²Boston, *CW*, I.80; 150.

The only so called restriction on God's freedom is therefore, that he cannot will to be anything less than infinitely perfect. Yet this is not a restriction in a strict sense since he wills to be holy, eternal, unchangeable, infinite, and exist as the God he is, was and will be, because everything he wills is '*according to the counsel of his will*'; depending on no other, but flowing from the mere pleasure of his own will, Rom. xi. 34.'⁷⁰³

God's decree is unchangeable and will forever be constant because nothing can be added to God's knowledge which itself is eternal and omniscient,⁷⁰⁴ and therefore all that he has decreed was and remains the best that could have been decreed.⁷⁰⁵ Boston, following Calvin, interprets the passages which speak of God 'repenting' as being figurative, as has been mentioned, these are divine things spoken of in human terms 'in condescension to our weakness,'⁷⁰⁶ adding, 'without any change of his own nature, mind, or will, he changeth his dispensations towards the creatures, and makes changes on them: Gen. vi. 7.'⁷⁰⁷ The argument for a figurative interpretation of God repenting is interesting, for verses exist which explicitly say God does not repent (1 Sam. 15:29), while others say he does (Gen.6:6; Ex. 32:14; 1 Sam. 15:35). What categories do Reformed theologians use to determine whether an expressive act of God is literal (how God actually acts) or figurative (how God accommodates to human weakness by speaking to us in human terms of divine mysteries)? Take the word predestination (or predestined), which is only used four times in the Bible (Rom. 8:29 & 30; Eph. 1:5 & 11), could this not be a term God has used in accommodation to our human weakness and not a literal expression of how God acts? I think the whole notion of divine accommodation within Reformed theology needs to be explored at

⁷⁰³Boston, *CW*, I.158.

⁷⁰⁴Boston, *CW*, III.433.

⁷⁰⁵'As the least change in God's understanding, so as to know more or less than that hid from eternity, would be an instance of imperfection; the same must be said with respect to his holy will, which can not be susceptible of new determinations. Though there are many changes in the external dispensations of his providence, which are the result of his will, as well as the effects of his power; yet there is no shadow of change in his purpose.' Boston, *CW*, I.307.

⁷⁰⁶Boston, *CW*, I.78.

⁷⁰⁷Boston, *CW*, VII.13.

greater depth.⁷⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Boston's position on divine accommodation is clear and wholeheartedly follows Calvin's lead,

Though he alters his dispensations, yet not his nature; but, by one pure and constant act of his will and power, effects what changes he pleases. He is the same in all his perfections, constant to his intentions, steady to his purpose, unchangeably fixed and persevering in all his decrees and resolutions. When God is said to repent in Scripture, Gen. vi. 6; 1 Sam. xv. 11, it denotes only a change of his outward conduct according to his infallible foresight and immutable will. He changes the way of his providential dealings according to the carriage and deportment of his creature, without changing his will, which is the rule of his providence.⁷⁰⁹

God's decree is holy and effectual because of his nature and power which means his decree will infallibly occur without ever being tainted with sin. Boston's affinity to Calvin's theology and the broader Reformed tradition was the substance from which his practical pastoral ministry was sustained.

In an interesting passage dealing with Christ's kingly office but not included in his section on God's decree, Boston briefly raises the issue of whether God is governed by any laws. Although Boston does not engage with the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* debate which was well known by Reformed scholars,⁷¹⁰ he clearly believed God had the power to do whatever he wanted.⁷¹¹ Boston, along with Calvin, held that God does not do all the things he could do and so holds to a form of the *potentia absoluta* distinction without a direct

⁷⁰⁸Balserak's study moves in the right direction in this regard with his study into divine accommodation, by which I mean he is trying to understand the influence and nature of accommodation. See, Balserak, 62-63. If some terms are not accommodated speech what about symbolical speech? Bavinck says of Calvin, he 'interprets the descriptions given by Scripture of the state of the lost as symbolical: darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth, unquenchable fire, the worm that dies not ...'. H. Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace," in *Calvin and the Reformation: Four Studies (1909)* (New York: Kessinger Publishing's Rare Reprints of Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909 Reprint), 117.

⁷⁰⁹Boston, *CW*, I.83. Cf. Boston, *Fourfold State*, 445.

⁷¹⁰Boston does mention the distinction in passing but in the context of whether unrepented sins make the elect liable to eternal wrath, and not within the context of God's power as a subject in itself. Boston, *CW*, VI.26.

⁷¹¹'The next communicable perfection of God is power, whereby he can do whatever he pleases, and whatever is not repugnant to his nature, Jer. xxxii, 17 ... He is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his power ...'. Boston, *CW*, I.89.

discussion of it.⁷¹² He says that although God only does what he actually decreed to do, he could have done things differently, and can do all things that are possible,⁷¹³ which are not repugnant to his divine perfection. Boston echoes Calvin's words in stating that God is bound by no laws other than his own will.⁷¹⁴

He is an absolute king, who makes laws for his subjects, but is not bound by any himself. His will is his law, and he does without controul whatever seems good to himself in heaven and in earth. Yea, so uncontrollable is his government, that none may oblige him to render a reason for his actions. 'Who may say unto him, What dost thou?' But though Christ is an absolute monarch, yet his government is no way tyrannical, but managed according to the eternal rules of righteousness, justice and holiness.⁷¹⁵

Even here, where God's will is his own law, his will is still inseparable from his being and attributes, remaining eternally righteous, holy and just, and so Boston aligns himself with Calvin's position.⁷¹⁶ Boston appears to believe that God is absolute in terms of his ability to do whatever he likes but always in accordance with his being and attributes, and always viewed through the lens of Christ.⁷¹⁷ 'An absolute God is a terrible, but God in Christ is a refreshing sight.'⁷¹⁸ God's eternal plan and will is now made known in Christ.⁷¹⁹

Boston therefore views God as being identical with his attributes and with his will. Each of God's attributes impacts the others and they in turn are impacted by and impact his will, even though Boston refrains from referring to the divine will as an attribute. God's decree is defined as being his plan, intention, decree and scheme which is most holy and free, operating and existing within God's being in a similar fashion to his attributes. Boston tells us of its universal extent and the

⁷¹²Cf. Turretin, 245.

⁷¹³Boston, *CW*, I.96.

⁷¹⁴Calvin, *SPG*, 283.

⁷¹⁵Boston, *CW*, I.484. Boston later describes the fear of God as a 'reverence of his absolute, his unlimited authority and power.' IX.67; 'Look not always on an absolute God, for surely that can produce no fear of God but a slavish one ...' IX.81; 'I desire to have nothing to do with an absolute God, nor to converse with God but only through Christ.' XII.216; IX.89.

⁷¹⁶Cf. P. Helm, *Calvin. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 13.

⁷¹⁷Boston, *CW*, X.102; X.109; X.165; X.148; X.436.

⁷¹⁸Boston, *CW*, IX.234.

⁷¹⁹Cf. Wright, 14-15.

properties inherent in it, whereby we can grasp some comprehensible knowledge of how the divine will exists and functions within God's incomprehensibility.⁷²⁰

4.1.4 Summary of God's will, being and attributes

There are several ideas which repeatedly pervade our understanding of God's will in the theologies of Calvin, the WCF, and Boston. These are as follows:

- a) God's will is described and defined by all three of our Reformed sources and Scripture (Eph. 1:11), as being the 'counsel' of God - usually worded as 'the counsel of his will.' It is the counsel of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is impossible within the Godhead that the Father's will be at variance with the Son's.
- b) The counsel of God's will is one with his Being and his other attributes.
- c) God's Being is, in and of itself, incomprehensible, yet made known to us through God's attributes, in a way accommodated to finite human understanding.
- d) God's will is one, singular, and simple, within God, but not everything known to God is made known to humanity, hence the distinction within the one will of God, of God's secret and revealed will, which are never at variance with each other.
- e) God's will is the 'first cause'⁷²¹ or 'high cause' of all that happens, and being bound by no laws, whatever God wills is right simply because it is he who wills it, as everything he wills is the product of his Divine perfection.

These points are stated clearly, and repeatedly, by Calvin, the WCF, and Boston, and are necessary for understanding not only a Reformed view of God's will, but a Reformed view of God, and how he works within his creation. It is also important to notice that the theology of these five points is consistent with the pre-Reformation influences on Calvin's theology. There are no radical departures

⁷²⁰Boston alludes to God's will as being 'single' but does not say so directly. 'The will of God's commands, is exceeding comprehensive, Psal. cxix. 96. 'Thy commandment is exceeding broad.' It is but one will of God; but the objects of it, the things willed are many ...'. Boston, *CW*, II.587.

⁷²¹*WCF*, V.II.

from the Augustinian tradition, or the thoughts of Aquinas or Lombard concerning the Being of God and how his will functions as part of his Being.

4.2 Boston's doctrine of providence⁷²²

We have already established that providence plays a major part in the theology of Thomas Boston, and is a frequent topic within his *Memoirs*⁷²³ and sermons,⁷²⁴ not only as a subject in and of itself but because he sees it relating to all areas of the Christian faith. We are now going to look at providence specifically as a doctrine. This dominant theme refutes any notion that a strong belief in God's providence and his ordaining everything leads to an inactive life resigned to a form of fate.⁷²⁵ Both Calvin and Boston filled their lives with an exceptional level of productivity in both their preaching and writing ministries. Boston's *Memoirs* express his delight in even discussing providence,⁷²⁶ and revealing how animated he became when thinking on that subject.⁷²⁷

4.2.1 The centrality of Boston's doctrine of providence

Boston's doctrine of providence impacts everything; nothing is left untouched by its influence.⁷²⁸ The centrality of its importance is seen by a number of things he

⁷²²In one place Boston calls God's providence an attribute, which so far as I can tell is unique within Reformed theology. Boston, *CW*, VII.413.

⁷²³Boston, *CW*, XII.14; 15; 17 (4 times); 18; 20; 21; 24; 25; 27; 28; 30; 31; 32; 34; 35; 36; 37; etc. Indeed, it is rare to find more than a few consecutive pages without providence being mentioned.

⁷²⁴For example, Boston, *CW*, III. Sermon XXIII, and his more famous work, *The Crook in the Lot* (III.497-590), repeatedly refers to providence. Cf. XII.184; XII.188.

⁷²⁵Pinnock says, 'It would be irrational to worry about anything in the Calvinist's universe. Just submit to the deterministic will of God! If God wants to save, he will certainly do so, and without your lifting a finger to help him.' Basinger, and Basinger, 59.

⁷²⁶'The evening exercise, on the question concerning the providence of God, was sweet to me; and in converse after it, it was a pleasure to think and speak of the saints' grounds of encouragement from that head, under trouble, particularly, how it is their God that guides the world; and nothing do they meet with but what comes through their Lord's fingers; how he weighs their troubles to the least grain, and no more falls to their share than they need; and how they have a covenant right to chastisements, to the Lord's dealing with them as with sons, to be rightly educated, not as servants, whom the master will not strike, but put away at the term.' Boston, *CW*, XII.98.

⁷²⁷Boston, *CW*, XII.181; XII.339.

⁷²⁸Boston, *CW*, I.187.

says, at one point he highlights four essential things that Scripture teaches mankind ought to believe, the first two relate to the being of God and the Trinity, the remaining two deal with God's decrees and their execution through providence.⁷²⁹ Why is such a weight of importance attached to providence in Boston's theology? Simply because the end result of all the acts of God's providence occur for his own glory,⁷³⁰ and by providence Scripture is preserved and mankind is left without excuse for its unbelief.⁷³¹ Like Scripture and creation,⁷³² providence is one of God's great teaching aids in making himself known,⁷³³ and as we have seen, Boston frequently calls upon his audience to observe it⁷³⁴ and learn from it,⁷³⁵ as was his own practice.⁷³⁶

4.2.2 The extent and influence of providence

Boston's doctrine of providence includes its universal influence⁷³⁷ on everything either great or small, Acts 17:28; Eph. 1:11; Gen. 22:14; Gen. 28; Ezek. 1.⁷³⁸ God's providence is his decree in action taking effect according to his own good pleasure.⁷³⁹ Boston says God 'decreed the government of all his creatures. He preserves and upholds them in their beings, and he guides and governs them in all their motions and actions. He is not only the general spring and origin of all the

⁷²⁹Boston, *CW*, I.43. The works of creation and providence often function in the same way in Boston's view, in that both teach mankind about God if they are properly observed, IX.89; X.502.

⁷³⁰Boston, *CW*, IV.332. Cf. VII.17.

⁷³¹Boston, *CW*, I.24. Boston closely relates God's Word and his providence on more than one occasion, and it appears that providence is as clear a revelation of God for speaking to mankind as Scripture. Cf. III.249; V.343; X.249.

⁷³²Boston calls creation 'a silent preacher of his will.' Boston, *CW*, IV.97.

⁷³³Boston, *CW*, III.572. Although providence is subservient to God's Word, IV.85, Boston repeatedly links the two together suggesting that they share a similar function and should not be separated from each other, cf, V.249.

⁷³⁴Boston, *CW*, V.556; X.248; XI.354; Boston, *Fourfold State*, 335.

⁷³⁵Boston, *CW*, III.573-74. Along with 'Christ,' our 'hearts,' and the 'Word,' 'providence' is one of the four 'books' most necessary for God's people to study. IV.75-76.

⁷³⁶'The affair of Etterick having occasioned various thoughts of heart to me at several times, I set myself to view the several steps of providence in it on both sides.' Boston, *CW*, XII.169; XII.234.

⁷³⁷Boston, *CW*, I.81.

⁷³⁸Boston, *CW*, I.186.

⁷³⁹'By his governing providence he directs all the actions and motions of his creatures, and powerfully determines them which way soever he pleases.' Boston, *CW*, I.90. It is Christ who commands providence, Boston, *CW*, VIII.553.

motions and actions of the creatures, but he appoints and orders them all immediately.⁷⁴⁰ This leaves no room for things to occur by chance from God’s perspective, nothing happens in the world which comes as a shock to God, that could spoil his plans, on the contrary, the very least detail of every event in life is governed by his hand. Randomness is not a part of God’s decree, to the extent that only the bullet with that person’s name on it could ever hit its target, all others would miss.⁷⁴¹ Boston’s doctrinal belief was certainly well reflected in his everyday life, in his reading of providence he took every turn of events as a warning, chastisement, a confirmation, or some other message from God. Although providence can be clearly seen working in the lives of mankind, its design often appears mysterious,⁷⁴² being frequently misinterpreted,⁷⁴³ but is best understood retrospectively.⁷⁴⁴ Boston also recognizes that reconciling God’s providence with his being and attributes can at times be difficult for people to grasp, making special mention in one of his sermons of providence as it is portrayed in the book of Ecclesiastes.⁷⁴⁵ Nevertheless, whatever our circumstances, we can rest assured that God is both our Creator and Governor.

4.2.3 Providence as preservation and government

Boston takes a common Reformed approach to providence insisting it consists of two major components; preservation, sometimes called ‘conservation,’ and government.⁷⁴⁶ Regarding preservation he says that providence is so necessary, that without its constant presence everything would cease to exist,⁷⁴⁷ and in

⁷⁴⁰Boston, *CW*, I.151. Cf. I.86.

⁷⁴¹Boston, *CW*, V.219.

⁷⁴²Boston, *CW*, VI.357. Cf. VI.646; IX.62.

⁷⁴³Boston, *CW*, III.292. Cf. ‘Inure yourselves silently to admit mysteries in the conduct of providence towards you, which you are not able to comprehend, but will adore ... That was the first word God said to Job, chap. xxxviii. 2. “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?”’ III.563.

⁷⁴⁴Boston, *CW*, IX.63.

⁷⁴⁵Boston, *Repentance*, 163. Cf. Boston, *Repentance*, 206.

⁷⁴⁶Boston, *CW*, VII.23.

⁷⁴⁷Boston, *CW*, I.188. Cf. ‘He is your preserver (Heb. 1:3; Acts 17:28). You live on his earth, feed on his good creatures, breathe in his air, and will you not hearken to his voice? Who was it that preserved you in the womb, that brought you out of it, so that it was not made your grave?’

another place he speaks of God's conservation as a continued act of creation. 'Conservation is a positive act, i.e. An effect, or continued creation; though not a bringing of the creatures out of nothing, yet a keeping them every moment from running back into the womb of nothing ... This I find was the doctrine of the schoolmen: and both Scripture and reason prove it.'⁷⁴⁸ Boston opposes philosophers, including the Epicureans⁷⁴⁹ and their misapprehensions of God's providence, reminding his readers that providence is an action resulting from the perfection of God's being.⁷⁵⁰ Therefore, nothing comes to pass which does not fall under the compass of divine providence which in turn is an act of the divine decree. This does not destroy the liberty given to mankind to act according to its own will, quite the opposite. The unfolding of the divine decree in providence, both by its preservation in that it enables mankind to exist and function as rational beings and in its government in that it enables those rational beings to act, ensures and establishes a world that contains the conditions necessary for mankind to act freely.⁷⁵¹

4.2.4 The properties of providence

One gets the impression that Boston, like Calvin, was one of life's organizers. Throughout his doctrinal writing and sermons, he is very fond of using sub-sections to compartmentalize his theology into ways which best communicate the lessons he wishes to express. This practice is I believe, one of the reasons for his popularity, as it makes his writing or sermons easy to follow. At one point he

Who has kept the brittle thread of your life from being broken hitherto, and fed you all your life long? Is it not the Lord?' Boston, *Repentance*, 106.

⁷⁴⁸Boston, *CW*, VI.226-27.

⁷⁴⁹Boston, *CW*, III.190. Here Boston rejects the notion that God is an idle spectator in heaven of what happens on earth.

⁷⁵⁰'For the true notion of God signifies a being infinite, independent, the universal Creator and powerful Preserver of heaven and earth, and the Absolute director of all events; that his providence superintends and takes notice of all the motions and actions of his creatures'. Boston, *CW*, I.429-30.

⁷⁵¹'The most free acts of the creature's will are governed by superintending providence.' Boston's evidence: Jn. 15:5; Acts 4:27-28; Gen. 45:7. Boston, *CW*, I.188.

groups his teaching together under the heading of ‘properties of providence.’⁷⁵² He lists the properties of providence as being ‘most holy,’ ‘most wise,’ and ‘most powerful.’ His basic premise for providence being holy is again, a direct result of God’s will and being; because God is holy, his act of providence will naturally follow as an expression of his character reflecting his holiness. The same is true regarding providence being most wise, even if it appears to us as being confused or nonsensical, providence is always a product crafted and drawn from the deep of the divine counsel.⁷⁵³ There is no surprise that Boston also views providence as being most powerful because it also issues from God’s decree. ‘Who can resist his will which is almighty? He can never fail of his end, but all things fall out according to his decree, which is efficacious and irresistible.’⁷⁵⁴ We find the properties of providence to consist of a reflection of the attributes of God. The question of why Boston limits the properties of providence to these three without including reflections of God’s other attributes such as ‘goodness’ or ‘righteousness’ remains unanswered. It makes no sense to highlight these three properties in particular over others, just as it makes no sense to hold God’s attribute of holiness over his other attributes.

4.2.5 Boston’s favourite providence motif

Boston repeatedly refers to the turning wheels of Ezekiel 1 in reference to providence and how it operates.⁷⁵⁵ He says, ‘The wheel of providence is a wheel within a wheel, and sometimes it runs upon the one side, and sometimes on the other. Observe the change of the sides. For providence to our view has many turnings and windings, and yet really it is going straight forward, Zech. xiv. 7.’⁷⁵⁶ On speaking of the harmony of providence he refers to the wheels’ likeness to each other, and the fact that they are full of eyes represents the wisdom of God

⁷⁵²Boston, *CW*, I.191ff.

⁷⁵³Boston, *CW*, I.191.

⁷⁵⁴Boston, *CW*, I.192.

⁷⁵⁵Boston, *CW*, III.295. Cf. VI.346; VI.363; X.206; X.241; VIII.554.

⁷⁵⁶Boston, *CW*, I.212. See also, 217, 218, 220, 221, 224; III.362; IX.167, 298, etc.

within providence.⁷⁵⁷ It is the Spirit of the wheels of providence that guides the prayers of God's people as the wheels are under the management of the Spirit.⁷⁵⁸ He says of atheists, 'In all the turns of their life and lot, they never seriously look to the wheel within the wheel,'⁷⁵⁹ that is, they never acknowledge the will of God and his providential dealings in the world. Boston uses the wheels as a way of explaining the mystery that exists within providence:

There are mysteries of providence. Kings of the earth have their secrets of government, kept up from the body of their people. The king of Zion has his secrets of government too, vastly more beyond the reach of the spectators of the conduct. This providence was represented to Ezekiel, chap. i., under the emblem of a wheel, going on its four sides, the rings so high as they were dreadful, and full of eyes.⁷⁶⁰

As we have already seen, Boston recommends that people observe providence and learn from it, and it is no different when he speaks of the wheels of Ezekiel. 'The wheels' become shorthand for saying 'providence.' On the subject of prayer Boston appeals to the observation of the wheels as a way to avoid formality so that the believer may approach the throne of grace earnestly.⁷⁶¹ Interestingly, when Boston discusses the exodus of Israel from Egypt, he says, 'What was it that set the wheel of providence in motion, to stop the wicked career the Egyptians were in, Exod. ii. 24? Why, God heard the groaning of the children of Israel.'⁷⁶² It was not the direct decree of God which set providence in motion but the secondary cause of the prayers of God's people that are, nevertheless, governed by the divine decree.

The biblical image of the wheels in Ezekiel left an indelible impression upon Boston's theology of providence.⁷⁶³ He is certainly not unique in identifying the

⁷⁵⁷Cf. Boston, *CW*, III.184.

⁷⁵⁸Boston, *CW*, XI.37.

⁷⁵⁹Boston, *CW*, I.224.

⁷⁶⁰Boston, *CW*, IV.222.

⁷⁶¹Boston, *CW*, XI.72.

⁷⁶²Boston, *CW*, XI.75.

⁷⁶³'We have an admirable scheme of divine providence in Ezek. i. There you may see how all the wheels, i.e. motions and revolutions here in this inferior world, are guided and directed by the Spirit that is in them; and in verse 26. it is all run up into the supreme cause: there you find one

wheels full of eyes with God's providence;⁷⁶⁴ Calvin in his commentary on Ezekiel frequently makes the connection between the two. Calvin says,

For the sea is subject to opposite winds, and hence storms are excited, so also since there is nothing firm or calm in the world, its condition is a perpetual change like the turning of a wheel. *The wheels stood near the angels*, because the world is governed by the secret inspiration of God. When all things seem to roll round by a blind and rash chance, yet God has his servants who regulate all their motions, so that nothing is confused, nothing discomposed.⁷⁶⁵

Despite the frequency of Calvin's association of the wheels with providence in his commentary on Ezekiel, he rarely transfers this imagery to his discussions of providence outside of the commentary. Boston does not reveal what it was about the wheels that grabbed his attention but whatever it was seems to have been lost on Calvin, who rarely mentions the wheels in connection with the bulk of his writing on providence.

4.2.6 Summary of Boston's doctrine of providence

Boston's doctrine of providence is as complete, detailed, and far-reaching as Calvin's. I would argue that providence was at the forefront of Boston's mind and took a more central role in his everyday life than it did in Calvin's.⁷⁶⁶ Boston's *Memoirs* in line with Flavel's recommendations display this truth repeatedly.⁷⁶⁷ It is important that providence is looked at in seeking to understand how the will of God has worked, because as Boston points out, 'The rule of the

like the Son of Man, which is Jesus Christ, sitting upon the throne, and giving forth orders for the government of all.' Boston, *CW*, I.479.

⁷⁶⁴Turretin, 491.

⁷⁶⁵J. Calvin, *Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel*, vol. 11 of *Calvin's Commentaries*, translated and edited by J. Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), Ezek. 1:15. Cf. 'Now, therefore, when he says, that the wheels proceeded from a higher movement than their own, it follows that nothing happens by chance in the world, but that God, by his own incomprehensible wisdom, so directs all things that nothing happens except by that secret instinct which is imperceptible to us ... let us perceive that God governs all things, but in a secret manner which surpasses our senses.' Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Ezek. 1:19. Cf. Ezek. 1:18; 1:21.

⁷⁶⁶There is certainly a stronger case for providence being a central dogma of Boston's rather than Calvin's, if indeed, a central dogma exists at all, as evidenced in his *Memoirs*. Boston, *Memoirs*.

⁷⁶⁷'All passed off well, and the sensitive, if over-apprehensive observer of providences had his reward.' Addison, 47.

works of providence, is the decree of God; whereof they, and the works of creation, are an exact accomplishment.⁷⁶⁸ Boston's life time struggle to submit to the will of God is another way of saying he wanted to accept whatever God by his providence governed for his life, because Boston trusted that God in his counsel would always work for his good. 'Observing providence' and 'submitting to the will of God' are therefore parts of the same objective for Boston - having a willing spirit to be led and guided by God into fullness of life.

The doctrine of providence in Boston and the Reformed sources we have studied tells us the following. Providence is viewed as the unfolding of God's sovereign will in his creation; it is universal in scope and definite in fulfilment, an actualization of the eternal counsel of God. Providence encapsulates the dual management of God in his government and preservation of his creation, ensuring the existence and reality of his rational creatures and their God-given freedom. Above all, the Reformed doctrine of providence teaches a God who is present, active and involved with his creation.

4.3 Boston's terminology for discussing God's will

Boston follows in the tradition of Augustine, Lombard, Aquinas, Calvin and other Reformed theologians in referring to God as being the 'first cause.' By metaphysical deduction, Boston arrives at this conclusion in more than one place in his works.⁷⁶⁹ In his section on 'God's unity' and the existence of 'being,' he says,

As these things have a being, it leads us to the being of a God: for these things cannot be eternal; for then their being would be a necessary being, and so not capable of alteration or destruction. If they had a beginning, they had it from one another: then that must either have had it from itself, or from another: then that either have had it from itself, or another, and so on till we come to the first cause, which is God.⁷⁷⁰

⁷⁶⁸Boston, *CW*, VII.24.

⁷⁶⁹Boston, *CW*, I.133; I.135-136; I.186; IV.133; Muller, *PRRD*, Vol. 3, VII.568.

⁷⁷⁰Boston, *CW*, I.133.

Although in this instance Boston's reference to God as 'first cause' is in the lower case,⁷⁷¹ he elsewhere attributes the term to God as a title, making the point that only one self-existent First Cause can exist, which in turn all else depends, only one such as this could govern the world in providence.⁷⁷² However, unlike Aquinas and Calvin who concluded God was the 'first cause' from their reading of Aristotle and readily used his fourfold scheme of causation, Boston does not mention Aristotle or his fourfold category of causation in relation to God's decree. Boston does use the term 'efficient cause,' one of Aristotle's categories of causation, but not in relation to God's decree or his being First Cause but when dealing with Christ's priestly office and sacrifice⁷⁷³ and union with Christ.⁷⁷⁴ Nevertheless Boston's use of the term 'first cause' is important as it reveals the total dependence of all creation on God.⁷⁷⁵

4.3.1 *God's secret decree*

Another terminological interest in Boston's main section of the doctrine of God's will is found in the few references to the two common terms for describing it, that of God's 'secret' and 'revealed' will,⁷⁷⁶ a distinction that is pastorally beneficial.⁷⁷⁷ It is of interest because outside of his section on God's will Boston uses the terms freely, saying,

His will is our supreme law. Not the secret will of God; for that which God never revealed to man, cannot be his rule; but the revealed will of God, Deut. xxix. 29 ... Men may fulfil the secret will of God, and determination of his providence, and be deeply guilty, as we see the Jews did in crucifying the Lord of glory, Acts ii. 23, under the guilt of which heinous sin that

⁷⁷¹Cf. Boston, *CW*, V.381; III.498.

⁷⁷²Boston, *CW*, I.135-36. Cf. 'As God is first cause, so he is the chief end of all things; Rom. xi.' XI.134.

⁷⁷³Boston, *CW*, I.449.

⁷⁷⁴Boston, *CW*, I.548; Boston, *Covenant of Grace*, 107. For his use of an 'impulsive cause,' see, Boston, *CW*, I.529.

⁷⁷⁵Boston, *CW*, VII.22.

⁷⁷⁶Boston does occasionally use the term God's 'revealed will' to indicate 'the duty which God requires of men.' Boston, *CW*, II.52. Cf. V.115; X.380.

⁷⁷⁷Keepers, 87.

people groan to this day. But conformity to God's revealed will is our duty. Whatever is revealed in the sacred scriptures as the will of God ... is to be performed and done ...⁷⁷⁸

Boston also refers to God's 'secret purposes' and 'hidden counsels' which are from eternity, but when he is dealing with God's perfections, not God's decree,⁷⁷⁹ and again when he discusses answers to prayer.⁷⁸⁰ Boston does infrequently use the common Reformed category of 'preceptive will'⁷⁸¹ as denoting our due obedience to God but also the rather unique category of God's 'providential will',⁷⁸² which seems in many ways to correlate with God's secret will.⁷⁸³ This again highlights that sometimes Boston used 'providence' and 'God's will' as two ways of speaking about the same thing. Yet again, these references occur in a section dealing with the duties of man regarding the Ten Commandments rather than God's decree. He rarely uses the word 'ordains' in his discussion of the divine decree.⁷⁸⁴

4.3.2 God's will and permission

Boston does speak about God's 'permissive decree' more frequently and in more detail. He says that God's decree can be correctly understood as being either 'effective' or 'permissive.'⁷⁸⁵ Boston uses the distinction to try and distance God from sin so that under God's 'effective decree' is included all the good that comes to pass whether moral or natural. Whereas God's 'permissive decree' 'doth only respect the irregularity and pravity that is in sinful actions.'⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁷⁸Boston, *CW*, II.53. Cf. VI.187; XI.140.

⁷⁷⁹Boston, *CW*, I.87.

⁷⁸⁰'A thing may be very agreeable to the command of God, to be prayed for, which may yet be otherwise ordered in the holy wise providence of God. It is one thing what he requires of us by his revealed will, another what in his secret will he minds to do, Deut. xxix.' Boston, *CW*, XI.106.

⁷⁸¹Boston, *CW*, X.366; VIII.148.

⁷⁸²Cf. Boston, *CW*, II.589; IV.101; IV.243; V.563.

⁷⁸³Boston, *CW*, II.337. 'The will of his commandments must determine your practice; the will of his providence, your lot.' IX.454. Boston certainly sets up God's preceptive will and his providential will as two distinct categories, VIII.159.

⁷⁸⁴Boston, *CW*, X.12.

⁷⁸⁵Boston, *CW*, I.160.

⁷⁸⁶Boston, *CW*, I.160.

Boston, like Calvin, certainly recognizes that acts resulting from God's permissive decree are determined by him to occur. Just because God decrees that sin should occur, does not mean that God is morally culpable for it, in the sense that he determines sinful creatures to do things that are wrong because they themselves want to do them. Boston expresses it in these terms,

God doth nothing in time, but what he did from eternity decree to do. So that the futurition of sin is from the decree of God. God determined that it should be. He did not decree to have any efficiency in sin, considered as such; but he willed that it should be done, himself permitting it. The counsel of God did not determine to do it, but that it should be done.⁷⁸⁷

God never determines that creatures should sin against their own volition but he does determine that they have the freedom to sin against his law.

Boston's use of terminology for describing God's will is unexpected in light of the Reformed writers he had read on the subject. He does not adopt Aristotle's fourfold categories of causation as an aid to explain God's will yet chooses to speak of God as First Cause. He uses the terms 'permissive' and 'effective' to distinguish the way God's decree works rather than terms such as God's 'decretive' and 'preceptive' will which are commonly used among Reformed scholars. He repeatedly uses the term 'decree' and not the more common 'ordain,' and yet when speaking about God's attributes he does adopt the most common distinction of 'communicable' and 'incommunicable.' These differences are of interest because they show that Boston felt no need to slavishly follow the standard Reformed terminology at all times whilst remaining steadfastly within that tradition.

⁷⁸⁷Boston, *CW*, I.160.

4.4 Boston's understanding of evil within the will of God

Let us use the topics of human sin and the Fall to see how Boston understands their occurrence within God's decree, and what causes and means were involved. There are occasions when Boston hints that the Fall occurred as a result of God's heavenly decree,⁷⁸⁸ and yet we have to take seriously when he says, 'Adam's Fall was perfectly voluntary; his own will was the sole cause of it ...'.⁷⁸⁹ Boston then continues by giving three paragraphs of reasons as to why his statement is true. Namely, while Adam was innocent he had sufficient power to remain without sin, that the devil only allured Adam to sin and did not force him, and lastly, Adam's disobedience was a result of his own choice. Elsewhere, repeating the words of the Larger Catechism, he says,

God left man to the freedom of his own will in this matter. He was not the cause of his fall; he moved him not, nor could he move him to it ... Such is the holiness of his nature. He gave him a power to stand if he would, and he took not away from him any grace given; but, for his trial, left him to his freedom of will, with which he was created. God made him good and righteous, and the natural set of his will was to good only, Eccl. vii. 26. But it was liable to change, yet only to change by himself; he could only be made evil or sinful by his own choice.⁷⁹⁰

Is it logically possible or helpful to say that God is the First Cause of all things while mankind can be the 'sole cause' of others? Boston also says the Fall of man 'is the first cause and original spring of all our misery and woe,'⁷⁹¹ and 'by their being left to the freedom of their will,⁷⁹² we are to understand God's with-holding of that further grace (which he was no wise bound to give them) that would have infallibly prevented their falling into sin. God only permitted this fall.'⁷⁹³ We

⁷⁸⁸Boston, *CW*, I.500.

⁷⁸⁹Boston, *CW*, I.248.

⁷⁹⁰Boston, *CW*, XI.229.

⁷⁹¹Boston, *CW*, I.425.

⁷⁹²Boston uses almost the exact wording of the WCF at this point. *WCF*, LC, Q.21.

⁷⁹³Boston, *CW*, I.247. Cf. 'A purpose of permitting man to fall, to leave him to the freedom of his own will, and not to hinder his falling away. God was not the cause of man's fall ... But had he not permitted, or willed not to hinder his fall, it could not have happened ... This permission taking place in time, was then decreed from eternity.' X.436, and, 'It is evident from the spotless holiness of God, and the nature of the thing, that the divine permission was not the cause of man's

end up with God as the first cause of everything but not the cause of the fall, and Adam as the sole, true and proper cause of his falling.⁷⁹⁴ This seems to be a confusing way of stating how the will of God functions. Would it not be better to say that God ordained the Fall and sin was the result of a self-originating action in Adam?

4.4.1 God's will and sin

As Boston expounds on the WCF and the section on the decree he says that all actions, whether good or wicked are included in the divine will but the wicked acts are only permitted by God. This is a logical conclusion to his belief that God ordains 'everything' that comes to pass, yet at the same time Boston is adamant that mankind is responsible for its sin since it is a product of free choice. Nobody acts in direct response to the divine decree as it is unknown to all but God.⁷⁹⁵ How then, does Boston understand sin? Boston talks plainly about God's permission being part of his decree reaffirming Calvin's position and the WCF regarding 'permission' and God's will.⁷⁹⁶

It is true, God decreed not the effecting of sin, for then he should have been the author of it, but he decreed the permission of sin. And though sin in itself is evil, yet God's permitting it is good, seeing he can bring good out of it; and it is just in him to permit it, where he is not bound to hinder it. Yet this is not a naked permission, whereby the thing may come to pass or not, but such as infers a certainty of the event, so that in respect of the event the sin can not but come to pass.⁷⁹⁷

fall; and from the necessary dependence of the creature upon the Creator, that without it, he could not have fallen. But the sovereign Lord of the creatures, permitted the fall of man for his own holy ends, purposing to bring about good from it.' VIII.387. Boston believed that man was made without any imperfections which means that mankind's ability to fall from sinlessness was not an imperfection within God's creation. VIII.10.

⁷⁹⁴'He [Adam] only himself was the true and proper cause of his own falling; not God, for he can never be the author of sin; not the devil, nor Eve, for they could only tempt and entice, but not force him. It was his own choice, he did it freely without co-action or compulsion; and he could have stood if he would.' Boston, *CW*, XI.230.

⁷⁹⁵Boston, *CW*, VII.17.

⁷⁹⁶Calvin, *SPG*, 244.

⁷⁹⁷Boston, *CW*, I.151.

Again, Boston affirms that not only sin but all evil falls under the umbrella of God's decree. He makes the point that evils of punishment are in fact good, like when God punished his people for their idolatry (Ex. 32:15ff), God does claim to be the author of such evils as is testified by Scripture (Amos 3:6). Even the evils of sin, however, appear from Scripture to be included in the sovereign plan, such as the murder of Christ.⁷⁹⁸ Boston goes on to quote Acts 4:27-28, Ex. 14:4, and Gen. 45:8, as further evidence for his position. He is adamant that sinful actions fall under the divine decree, even though people directly sin against the commands of God, their ability to do so is made possible by the divine decree. The very fact that sin exists means that God in his wisdom has ordained it for purposes known to him.⁷⁹⁹ If God decrees the permission of sin, having determined it to occur from all eternity, how does that relate to mankind and its ability to will freely? Boston addresses this point head on:

The decree of God about the permission of sin does not infringe the liberty of man's will. For sin doth not follow the decree by a necessity of co-action or compulsion, which indeed would destroy human liberty; but by a necessity of infallibility, which is very consistent with it. It is sufficient unto human liberty, or the freedom of man's will, that a man act without all constraint, and out of choice. Now, this is not taken away by the decree. Men sin as freely as if there were no decree, and yet infallibly as if there were no liberty. And men sin, not to fulfil God's decree, which is hid from them,⁸⁰⁰ but to serve and gratify their vile lusts and corrupt affections.

God's eternal decree secures the certainty of sinful actions to take place (i.e. the crucifixion of Christ) but does not take away the freedom of any individual to act as they choose. For humanity does not act because it knows God's secret decree but in acting freely fulfils it. God does know how people will freely act, he gives them existence, being and life, in order for them to act. He created them, he knows them, and he never forces them to do anything which they do not also freely choose of their own accord. God decrees sinful acts to occur but it is fallen

⁷⁹⁸Boston, *CW*, I.151. Cf. III.507.

⁷⁹⁹Boston, *CW*, I.160.

⁸⁰⁰Boston, *CW*, I.161. Cf. 'Though he has by a permissive decree allowed moral evil to be in the world, yet that has no influence on the sinner to commit it. For it is not the fulfilling of God's decree, which is an absolute secret to every mortal, but the gratification of their own lusts and perverse inclinations, that men intend and mind in the commission of sin.' Boston, *CW*, I.192.

rational creatures that will to do the sin, making them and not God sin's author.⁸⁰¹ Therefore, God's permission of sin can in no way be equated with God's condoning of sin or inability to restrain it.⁸⁰² God did not create sin to exist in and of itself; sin is the result of self-originating actions from rational creatures and their freedom to will.⁸⁰³ Boston remarks how the devil is the father of sin, and the original cause of sin in the world. Evil entered God's good creation as a result of the devil's fall from innocence.⁸⁰⁴

4.4.2 Summary of sin and the Fall in Boston's theology

There are two terminological problems with Boston's explanation of the Fall. Firstly, if one speaks of God as being First Cause and hold that nothing comes to pass outside of God's will,⁸⁰⁵ then to speak of created beings as 'sole causes' appears contradictory. God can be the 'sole cause' of things, i.e. creation, being, life, because he is the First Cause but not so with mankind. Secondly, he says of the Fall that God 'only permitted it' when it is clear in his discussion on sin that God's permission is always inseparable from his decree, making the term 'only' void of any meaning. It appears that what Boston writes about the divine decree does not neatly fit with his account of the Fall if one purely bases the evidence on his use of terminology to describe both things. I do not think Boston's theology

⁸⁰¹ 'Whereas the decree is an immanent act of God, and so can have no influence, physical or moral upon the wills of men, but leaves them to the liberty and free choice of their own hearts; and what sinners do, they do most freely and of choice. It is a horrid and detestable wickedness to cast the blame of your sin upon God's decree. This is to charge your villainy upon him, as if he were the author of it.' Boston, *CW*, I.166. Cf. Boston, *CW*, I.190.

⁸⁰² Boston, *CW*, I.189. Cf. 'The reason why the Lord did not create him [Adam] immutable, was because he would be obeyed out of judgment and free choice and not by fatal necessity and absolute determination ... It was his choice to create him how he pleased. But why he did not uphold him with strength of steadfast continuance; that resteth hidden in God's secret counsel.' (From the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*), VII.176.

⁸⁰³ 'The evil of sin is no positive being, it being but a defect or want, and therefore is not reckoned among the things that God made, but owes its existence to the will of fallen angels and men. Devils being angels, are God's creatures; but God did not make them evil, or devils, but they made themselves so.' Boston, *CW*, I.171.

⁸⁰⁴ Boston, *CW*, V.328.

⁸⁰⁵ 'He has decreed all their motions and actions ... This is clear from God's knowing all things before they come to pass; which knowledge of them must needs be in the decree, upon which the coming of all things to pass depends.' Boston, *CW*, I.151.

regarding the Fall and sin is contradictory, I think he merely chose to express his ideas on the Fall poorly. In saying ‘God only permitted the Fall’ Boston was, I believe, stressing that he did not force Adam to sin. In saying that rational creatures are the ‘sole cause’ of sin, Boston’s desire is to distance God from the act of sinning, which still leaves room to maintain God is the decreer of the sinful event.

I have shown that the theologies of Calvin, the WCF and Boston, regarding the place and existence of sin within the divine decree, are consistent. We can safely say of God’s will and its relationship to sin in Reformed theology that, a) God being holy and righteous is entirely free from sin, as the prohibitor of it by law, the disapprover of it by nature, and the punisher of it in judgment. b) Sin and the Fall were ordained by God, him being the first cause of it but not the sole cause. c) Sin and evil are self-originating corruptions in rational creatures created good by God but free to rebel. d) God, for reasons known only to his wise and holy counsel, permitted the existence of sin and evil, bringing forth good from it.

4.5 Boston’s theology of election as part of the divine will

Boston firmly believes in an eternal election of particular people to either a state of glory or damnation.⁸⁰⁶ He shares Calvin’s concerns about prying into things which are not mankind’s business to know,⁸⁰⁷ saying, ‘And check your own heart for meddling with God’s secrets, and prying into his hidden counsel, and go no more beyond your bounds, as you have done, in this point: for election and reprobation is a secret ...’⁸⁰⁸ Boston, also in-line with the WCF,⁸⁰⁹ understood

⁸⁰⁶Boston, *Fourfold State*, 369-70.

⁸⁰⁷‘That God’s decree of election is a great secret, which we ought not to pry into.’ Boston, *CW*, I.162. Cf. V.48.

⁸⁰⁸Boston, *CW*, VII.268.

⁸⁰⁹McGowan, 87.

election as being according to God's good pleasure and will,⁸¹⁰ and that election is always 'in Christ,'⁸¹¹ Christ being the head of the elect.⁸¹²

4.5.1 Election and reprobation

Election is not dependent upon anything a person is, does, or does not do, neither is it based on God's foreknowledge; rather, 'It is altogether free, without any moving cause, but God's mere good pleasure. No reason can be found for this but only in the bosom of God ... His choice is antecedent to ours.'⁸¹³ Those God has elected have been chosen from all eternity since God's will is eternal, his decree is irreversible⁸¹⁴ and immutable,⁸¹⁵ and shall therefore infallibly come to pass. It is lawful for God to do with his creation as he chooses.⁸¹⁶ It appears Boston formulates his doctrine of election not simply from Scripture, but from his doctrine of God. It is because God is omniscient that he never learns new things, it is because he is eternal that his plans are also, and therefore his plan to elect some people to eternal life must also be part of an eternal plan.⁸¹⁷ Although election is not dependent upon anything a person does, it is also not unrelated to what a person does. By this I mean, that an elect person is not saved regardless of whether or not they come to Christ and a reprobate person is damned even if they wanted to come to Christ. Salvation unfolds with the use of means, and if a person comes to Christ they will be saved in the same way that a person who eats will not die of starvation.

⁸¹⁰'That which moved him to elect them, according to the good pleasure of his will; that is, his mere good pleasure, so he would do it; and there was nothing without himself to move him thereto.' Boston, *CW*, I.302. Cf. VIII.404.

⁸¹¹'Through whom his decree is to be executed, *in him*; that is, Christ, whom the Father chose to be the head of the elect, through whom he would save them.' Boston, *CW*, I.302. Bruggink's suggestion that later "Calvinism" spoke of election in isolation from Christ is certainly not true for Boston, and as a generality, I doubt if it is true at all. Bruggink, 113.

⁸¹²Boston, *CW*, X.438; VIII.410.

⁸¹³Boston, *CW*, I.304; I.306.

⁸¹⁴Boston, *CW*, I.155.

⁸¹⁵'To prepare mansions of glory for all his followers, John xiv. 2. These were indeed prepared for them from all eternity, in the immutable purpose and decree of God, and from the foundation of the world by his creative power.' Boston, *CW*, I.515.

⁸¹⁶Boston, *CW*, III.140-41.

⁸¹⁷Boston, *CW*, I.306-07.

If this is so, is reprobation also eternal? At times Boston speaks about the reprobate simply as those whom God has passed by, nevertheless according to what God has ordained. In a Westminster tone, he says, ‘God hath passed by the rest of mankind, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, and hath ordained them to dishonour and wrath for their sins, to the praise of his glorious justice.’⁸¹⁸ At other times Boston speaks openly of the reprobate⁸¹⁹ but carefully highlights sin as the cause of their reprobation and not *vice versa*.⁸²⁰ At the last judgment, when everyone stands before the throne of God, God will pronounce his judgment according to men’s works (Rev. 20:12-13).⁸²¹ Ultimately, the only thing that stops anyone attaining salvation is unbelief.⁸²² What reason does God decree to permit his creatures to sin, in accordance with their freedom? Boston says that God decreed human sinful actions as part of his over-all plan, for holy and wise ends, with the express intention of not only bringing good out of evil, but bringing about a good incomparably greater than the evil he permitted.⁸²³ Nevertheless, he calls the passing by of the reprobate ‘an awful mystery.’⁸²⁴

⁸¹⁸Boston, *CW*, I.155. Cf. ‘God’s sovereign power and absolute dominion, which he will have the world to understand: ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?’ (Matt. 20:15).’ Boston, *Repentance*, 25.

⁸¹⁹Boston, *CW*, V.421ff; VI.14.

⁸²⁰Boston, *CW*, I.161.

⁸²¹Boston, *CW*, V.120; Boston, *Fourfold State*, 389.

⁸²²‘Nothing on Christ’s part, nothing on God’s part, stands between you and all this [salvation]: nothing can make you come short of it but unbelief.’ Boston, *CW*, VIII.545. This of course goes hand in hand with Boston’s strong principle that the gospel message should be proclaimed to all. Cf. ‘God excludes none from the benefits of the gospel that will not exclude themselves; it is free to all.’ Boston, *The Art of Man-Fishing*, 39.

⁸²³Boston, *CW*, I.161.

⁸²⁴Boston, *CW*, X.438.

4.5.2 Boston's order of the decrees

Boston appears to be infralapsarian in his order of the decrees,⁸²⁵ repeatedly saying God chooses the elect out from a mass of sinful humanity,⁸²⁶ albeit, in eternity. Bruggink suggests Boston may have taken the supralapsarian view and quotes Boston speaking about the covenants,⁸²⁷ but Boston is only talking about the eternal nature of the decree and not its order *per se*, Bruggink does however mention that some of Boston's statements appear infralapsarian too.⁸²⁸ God elects some; the others are left to perish in their sins, suggesting that election took place after God's decree for mankind to fall into sin.⁸²⁹ Elsewhere he says that God was well within his rights to condemn the whole of humanity to hell for their sin, and yet God also has the right to save whoever he desires out of that 'common mass' heading for judgment, a choice that belongs to God's secret, sovereign will.⁸³⁰ None of the elect commend themselves to God, the choice initiates from God's own counsel. When Boston speaks of election considered under the covenant of grace, he draws together a number of the themes we have already touched upon, the incomprehensible nature of the divine decree, divine accommodation, the singularity of the divine plan and its eternal origins:

And here we find ourselves at the fountain-head of the salvation of lost sinners, the origin and rise of the glorious plan, laid from all eternity in the secret council of the ever-blessed Trinity, for remedy of man's misery. And this is a manifold mystery, the several folds of which we are not able fully to discover. With God it was all one piece, if I may so phrase it; for with him all things are together and at once; and not one thing before, and

⁸²⁵Again, we are faced with the dilemma of whether to speak of the 'order of the decree' or the 'decrees.' When Reformed scholars have tackled the subject of how we understand the unfolding plan of salvation in the divine mind, it has been spoken of in the plural, that is, 'order of the decrees.' The emphasis here is placed on the different parts of the decree as understood by mankind, hence 'decrees' in the plural, and not how they exist within the divine will itself.

⁸²⁶'In respect of their being broken off from that corrupt mass, and become a part of a new lump.' Boston, *CW*, V.304. Cf. X.127. 'And nothing being future, but all present to him, he saw and considered the whole race of mankind as lost, sunk as sinners into a gulph of misery, irremediable by any created hand whatsoever. This was the ground on which the mystery of God was raised; this gave occasion to the mystery and plan of the eternal counsel.' X.436; X.510; VIII.387; VIII.403.

⁸²⁷Boston, *CW*, VIII.380.

⁸²⁸Bruggink, 173.

⁸²⁹Boston, *CW*, I.301; X.438.

⁸³⁰Boston, *CW*, I.311. Cf. I.615.

another after, as with us. Howbeit, we cannot conceive of it but in parcels; first one piece of the mystery and then another; and that because of the weakness of our capacity, as we are creatures; and much more, as we are creatures under much spiritual darkness. Wherefore we must of necessity address ourselves to the consideration of it in parcels; but still remembering, we are in the eternal mystery, transacted in the eternal decree of the holy Trinity all at once, by one eternal act of the divine will; in which, nevertheless, we are allowed to conceive a certain order, since otherwise we cannot take up the mystery.⁸³¹

God's elect are his church, the objects of his 'special providence,'⁸³² by which Boston means God orders the world in such a way that serves his purposes for his people, and is contrasted with 'common providence' which falls upon all mankind alike.

4.5.3 Summary of election and reprobation

In what way then, does the Reformed doctrine of election help us understand the will of God? I think Boston makes the most important point above when he reminds us that although we by necessity view the unfolding of God's will in stages or phases, for God, 'all things are together and at once; and not one thing before, and another after.' It is tempting sometimes to think that if God has eternally ordained X for Lewis, then X must occur necessarily as a consequence, and it does not matter what Lewis decides or chooses because God sees to it that X is going to happen to Lewis regardless, over-riding his own will. When really, although God eternally ordains X for Lewis, he ordains it knowing Lewis perfectly, ordaining X to come to pass in the knowledge that Lewis, of his own volition and without any force, also chooses X to occur in its own time.

In summary, election of some to eternal life and others to eternal damnation is according to God's good pleasure and a result of his eternal, wise, sovereign, and

⁸³¹Boston, *Covenant of Grace*, 36.

⁸³²Boston, *CW*, IV.449. Boston states clearly that Christ did not die for all but for the elect only. VIII.404.

powerful will for the glory of his justice and praise. He elects his people according to his sovereign grace, condemning all others according to their sins. There are important differences between election and reprobation, for they are not comparable in every way. Election is primarily a work of grace, reprobation a work of justice, election occurs as a result of God's mercy, reprobation as a result of sin. If providence is God's will in action, as we have previously asserted, then election is a particular element of that action. It is a golden thread in the tapestry of providence, having been planned before the picture was created, and it will be revealed as a most glorious part of the Creator's finished product.⁸³³

4.6 Boston's theology of free will

Boston is clear on a number of issues concerning free will. Firstly, that free will exists and in direct contrast to Calvin, he is not reluctant to use that term in describing mankind's ability to make choices; 'Freedom of will is a liberty in the will, whereby of its own accord, freely and spontaneously, without any force upon it, it chuses or refuses what is proposed to it by the understanding. And this freedom of will man hath in whatever state he be.'⁸³⁴ Secondly, salvation is not dependent upon the way a person exercises their free will but on God's sovereign choice of those he has elected, this does not mean however that the two are completely unconnected.⁸³⁵ Thirdly, he is utterly opposed to the exalting of free will which robs God of his glory,⁸³⁶ as do Arminians in his opinion.⁸³⁷ Lastly, Boston identifies the different ways mankind's free will has operated depending on its state. For example, before the Fall mankind 'had a freedom of will both to good and evil; and so had a power wholly to chuse good, or wholly to chuse evil:

⁸³³'The web of providence, concerning the church, and all men whatever, will then be cut out, and laid before the eyes of the saints: and it will appear a most beautiful mixture; so as they shall all say together, on the view of it, "He hath done all things well".' Boston, *Fourfold State*, 417.

⁸³⁴Boston, *CW*, I.246. Cf. VII.27. Sanders is therefore wrong to say Packer and Carson teach contradictions when they state mankind is responsible for its actions and God ordains everything - this is not a contradiction, as is clearly portrayed in Isaiah. See, Sanders, 36.

⁸³⁵Boston, *CW*, I.535; I.562. Cf. II.396.

⁸³⁶Boston, *CW*, I.18.

⁸³⁷Boston, *CW*, IV.246. He also singles out the Papists and the Socinians, when on most other subjects he neither refers to groups nor individuals by name.

which differences it from the freedom of will in the state of grace.’⁸³⁸ In the post-Fall state, Boston explains the power of free will in the unregenerate and regenerate,

man has a free will only to evil, Gen. vi. 5 ... ‘He is dead in trespasses and sins.’ He freely chuseth evil without any force on his will; and he cannot do otherwise, being under the bondage of sin. In the state of grace man has a free will, partly to good and partly to evil ... In this state the will sometimes chuses that which is good, and sometimes that which is evil. This freedom of will is in all regenerate persons who have in some measure recovered the image of God. They chuse good freely by virtue of a principle of grace wrought in them by the sanctifying operations of the Divine Spirit; yet through the remainders of corruption that abides in them, their wills are sometimes inclined to that which is evil. In the state of glory, man has a free will to good only. In this state the blessed chuse good freely; and being confirmed in a holy state, they cannot sin.⁸³⁹

Two important things are noted here. Firstly, humanity is not compelled or forced to act contrary to the will with which it has been endowed,⁸⁴⁰ it is a slave to its state but chooses its state nonetheless. Secondly, people in the unregenerate state ‘may attain to a shadow of holiness, but can never be truly sanctified. And those that hear the gospel, but neglect the great duty of believing and uniting with Christ, can do no duty aright, their obedience at best is but a hypocritical obedience, Tit. i. 15, 16.’⁸⁴¹ The person who is separated from Christ can do nothing good or right in God’s sight.⁸⁴² Boston does not refer to God’s ‘common

⁸³⁸Boston, *CW*, I.246; I.182.

⁸³⁹Boston, *CW*, I.246.

⁸⁴⁰‘Thus the power of God infallibly determines their wills; yet not blindly, but so as they see what most reasonably should turn the balance of their choice. For in every step God deals with them as rational creatures, giving them a peculiar illumination to proceed.’ Boston, *CW*, IV.14. Boston’s occasional references to the world being a stage, theatre or play, could be regarded as unhelpful choices of expression if the implication is humans are like actors, or worse, puppets. Cf. VI.651; VII.557.

⁸⁴¹Boston, *CW*, II.13. Cf. ‘There is a weakness in their will, they cannot will what is spiritually good and acceptable to God. They cannot produce one act of the will that is holy, till grace change their wills, no more than a dead man can produce his own resurrection.’ IV.13; VIII.56; Boston, *Fourfold State*, 209.

⁸⁴²‘There is, in the unrenewed will, an utter inability for what is truly good and acceptable in the sight of God. The natural man’s will is in Satan’s fetters; hemmed in within the circle of evil, and cannot move beyond it ... We deny him not a power to choose, pursue, and act, what is good, as to the matter: but though he can will what is good and right, he can will nothing aright and well, John xv. 5.’ Boston, *Fourfold State*, 65.

grace' in trying to explain the unregenerate's good deeds,⁸⁴³ as they are all sinful in God's sight. When moving from the unregenerate to the regenerate state, Boston follows Calvin in saying mankind's original will is not destroyed and replaced but transformed. Boston uses the terms 'renewing,' 'renovation,' and 'new qualities' to describe this process.⁸⁴⁴

Boston's view of free will encompasses a lot of what we have previously addressed. Free will appears to be more of a philosophical subject than a biblical one for Boston, as he chose not to discuss the subject when writing his commentary on Genesis chapter 3, a key passage in the debate.⁸⁴⁵ We have already seen that Boston believed that God uses means and secondary causation⁸⁴⁶ to achieve certain ends; these derive from the First Cause but are nonetheless real in their own right. Boston rejects 'chance'⁸⁴⁷ within God's decree but acknowledges from the human perspective that things are contingent.⁸⁴⁸ Contingency exists within God's decree in the sense that God provides the means for a certain event or circumstance to arise. The free will of humanity may be subject to a certain state of existence, sin, new birth or glory, but within each state it operates freely.

⁸⁴³Boston does, however, frequently refer to 'common providence.' Boston, *CW*, III.254; III.526; III.582; III.584; IV.537; V.360; XI.156; VIII.345, and also to the 'common work of the Spirit.' IV.64; IX.363.

⁸⁴⁴Boston, *CW*, I.568.

⁸⁴⁵T. Boston, "Essay on the First Twenty Chapters of Genesis," unpublished manuscript, MSS. BOS.3 (Edinburgh, New College, 1725). This highlights Boston's devotion to the Scriptures, although he refrains from speaking about things such as free will and causation, he does include discussion of the NT fulfilment of Christ spoken of in Genesis (38ff).

⁸⁴⁶Boston, *CW*, I.168. Cf. I.169; I.171; I.172; etc. Boston's theology being the confessionally held position of the Reformed tradition, as evidenced by *The Second Helvetic Confession* (Ch. 6, Art. 4), and the WCF (Ch. 5, Art. 2).

⁸⁴⁷'Has God decreed all things that come to pass? Then there is nothing which falls out by chance, nor are we to ascribe what we meet with either to good or ill luck and fortune.' Boston, *CW*, I.164.

⁸⁴⁸'Though it is certain in respect of the decree of God, yet it is uncertain in respect of our knowledge of it.' Boston, *CW*, V.561.

4.6.1 Summary of Boston's theology of free will

Firstly, it is understandable why such confusion exists over the issue of free will, when people even within the same Reformed tradition speak of it in different ways. The Augustinian tradition up until the Reformation spoke about free will openly, defending its cause and proclaiming its necessity. They spoke of free will as the ability rational creatures possess to will without compulsion or force. Then came Calvin, Luther, and the Reformation with a strong conviction that salvation is by grace alone by faith alone, and that naturally mankind is in bondage to sin. This being the case, they asserted that humans do not have a free will; instead they have a will in bondage to sin, a will that is not free from its sinful nature wherein it exists. They did not deny that people have the freedom to choose what the intellect selects, but neither did they deny that the human will did not operate under force, but their emphasis was that the human will was not free from the human sinful nature. We see then, that the 'free' in free will is used differently. There is no conflict of theology here but a dual use of terminology which has led to confusion.⁸⁴⁹ Later Reformed theologians appear to have departed from Calvin's hatred of the term,⁸⁵⁰ the WCF has a chapter dedicated to it, and Boston spoke openly of it.⁸⁵¹ I think it would be better if the pre-Reformation understanding of the term was re-established so that whenever anyone spoke about free will they meant that the human will did not act under force (or necessity, compulsion, pressure, etc), but freely makes decisions of its own choosing. Human beings have free will - this should be stated as a positive. The free will possessed by humans operates within a sinful nature; this in no way hinders its freedom but its ability. In its natural fallen state, it cannot will to do

⁸⁴⁹Cf. J. T. Hoogstra, ed., *The Sovereignty of God. The Proceedings of the First American Calvinistic Conference in June 1939* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, Taken from the 1939 edition), 55.

⁸⁵⁰Turretin raises the question of whether or not to retain the use of the term 'free will.' His answer: 'we establish free will far more truly than do our opponents; so the writings of our men abundantly teach that we by no means repudiate this term when properly understood.' Turretin, 660.

⁸⁵¹There is one instance where Boston says, 'Call it no more free-will but slavish lust; free to evil, but free from good ...', but this is one passage, where he is waxing lyrical about the corruption of the human will. Boston, *Fourfold State*, 96.

what is right in terms of salvation, simply because it always freely wills to reject salvation.

With regards to God's will in particular, this shows that the omnipotent will of God created other rational wills which he allows to operate freely of their own choice but not in total isolation from himself. The dependency of free will on God's creative power establishes the will's ability to operate freely. I guess this is a complex way of reminding ourselves that God is the first cause of all things but not the sole cause. This all amounts to what the WCF testifies to, that God can ordain everything that comes to pass, yet 'neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established' (III.I).⁸⁵² In essence, and this should not surprise us, the ability human beings have to freely will things under no compulsion from God, is another way of saying that God created mankind to exist and live in harmony with his own sovereign, omnipotent will. More succinctly, the creation is compatible with the Creator.

4.2 Conclusion

Boston's doctrine of the will of God reveals a God who is sovereign in all his ways, who being governed by who he is, always wills what is right, just, and holy, to his own glory. God's will is his own counsel, which is eternal, immutable, and all-wise, in harmony with the divine perfections, and in harmony with his creation. Therefore his eternal decree unfolds under universal providence and in perfect harmony with the created order established by the Creator. It is a will that is governed by divine perfection, all-wise in decision, omniscient in counsel, pure in holiness, exact in judgment, eternal in existence but present in execution, ordaining all things yet compelling none, permitting evil whilst working good, displaying his power and bringing him glory.

⁸⁵²Boston's language of humanity being on a stage and acting parts in life are not helpful in trying to establish the truth of this point. Boston, *Fourfold State*, 297. Cf. Bruggink, 156-57.

Our aim, to show that Boston's doctrine of God's will is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition, can be seen from how closely Boston follows the theologies of the WCF and Calvin (remembering how Calvin's doctrine of God's will also followed centuries of Christian teaching). There is a shared appreciation between all three sources regarding God's incomprehensibility or unsearchableness as a backdrop for understanding God's will. This results in Boston and Calvin reflecting on the need for God to accommodate his ways to mankind's finite comprehension. Boston, the WCF and Calvin, all speak about God's will as if it were an attribute, especially in their discussions of it with God's other attributes, but Boston following the confession's lead, most accurately describes it as 'God's own counsel,' from which his decrees flow. They all speak of God as the first cause, as the one who ordains all things, not as a result of his foreknowledge but as the eternal Architect, all equally making use of Deut. 29:29's distinction, that God reveals some things, and keeps others secret. There is a common belief in God's universal providence, governing and sustaining all creation, with particular attention paid to the Church. Also, that God elects to salvation certain individuals of his free and sovereign choice, having ordained mankind's fall, permitting his creatures to sin of their own volition, which is the source of sin.

There are differences of opinion too. Calvin was unapologetic about speaking of reprobation, whereas the WCF refrained from using the term, substituting 'passing by' in its place. Boston strangely, and illogically, places holiness as the premier attribute of God, when elsewhere he speaks of God's perfection and simplicity. Boston and the WCF depart from Calvin in his use of Aristotle's fourfold scheme of causation, making no formal use of it themselves. The most obvious departure of thought is in the way free will is spoken of as the years proceed after Calvin. Calvin dismissed the term as being empty of any true meaning; the will is not free but a slave to the sinful nature it operates in. The WCF appears to struggle with the term, it wants to dedicate a chapter to it, recognizing its importance as a subject but then fails to mention the term on the way to explaining it. By the time

we come to Boston, he, like Augustine and the medieval fathers, readily adopts the use of the term and defends it, on the understanding that he is speaking about the will's ability to make rational choices under no compulsion, believing with Calvin that the unregenerate will is a slave to sin.

The differences above are mainly terminological and not doctrinal, with the exception of Boston highlighting one attribute above all others in God. Even where things are expressed differently, i.e., reprobation, the theology behind 'reprobation' and 'passing by' are the same - not everyone is saved and that is the result of God choosing some and not others, for reasons known to himself. Overwhelmingly however, Boston's doctrine of the will of God is stated clearly and as unmistakably Reformed. The context for Boston's emphasis on providence has been established within its mother doctrine of the will of God. To paint a picture of Boston's doctrine of the will of God we could say, it is framed by Augustinianism, styled after Calvin, expressed in the colours of Westminster, and openly displayed in the gallery of Reformed theology. With the picture painted and explained, we can now turn to understand how Boston applied his doctrine of the will of God within his pastoral ministry.

Chapter 5

5.1 The Pastoral Application of Boston's Doctrine of God's Will

Having understood Boston's doctrine of the will of God within the Reformed tradition we shall now explore its practical use in Boston's pastoral ministry. It is important to notice that Boston's doctrine of the will of God was such an effective tool within his pastoral ministry and affirms our argument that any attempt to comprehend Boston's ministry ought to recognize that his doctrine of God's will plays a significant part in the pastoral care of his flock. The doctrine of God's will is therefore not simply a complex dogma which initiates deep philosophical debates and profound dialogue but is of no practical significance to Christian living. Boston utilized this doctrine to aid his pastoral work in the harsh conditions his parishioners experienced. Boston's own life long struggle to submit to the will of God seemingly fuelled a passion within him to encourage others to do the same. A significant part of Boston's influential pastoral care flowed from his doctrine of God's will, as he tried to relate his parishioner's suffering to the word of God.

Let us first be clear with regards to what we mean by 'pastoral application.' The terms 'pastoral theology' or 'practical theology' have had a wide range of meanings attached to them.⁸⁵³ When we speak about Boston's 'pastoral application' of God's will we mean the following: we are interested in understanding how Boston uses his doctrine of God's will in a practical way as a pastor to help, guide, instruct, warn or teach his parishioners. In simple words, how does Boston use his doctrine of God's will practically as a minister of the Gospel? Pastoral theology has many overlaps with practical theology and they are sometimes described as the same thing. Yet, 'Pastoral theology is a much older term than practical theology. It goes back far into the history of the Christian

⁸⁵³J. D. Tidball, "Practical and Pastoral Theology," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, edited by D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 42-48.

community and is related to the need to guide, heal, reconcile, and sustain the community ... A pastor is literally a shepherd who looks after a flock.⁸⁵⁴ This last sentence is a good summary of Boston's life work, being a renowned shepherd of his people. Pattison and Woodward say, 'Pastoral theology might be seen in broad terms as the theological reflection and underpinning that guided pastoral care directed towards ensuring the individual and corporate wellbeing and flourishing of the Christian "flock."' It was the theological activity and tradition associated with "shepherding" or pastoring.⁸⁵⁵ Pastoral theology is the exercising of a gift, and grows out of a reflection of pastoral experience.⁸⁵⁶

The pastoral application of the doctrine of the will of God in Thomas Boston's theology will be best understood if divided into two distinct areas. These areas are his sermons and published works (including his letters). Boston's published works were often the result of a series of sermons but are now often read and studied as unified documents on subject specific areas, such as *Repentance*.⁸⁵⁷ This format will allow the doctrine of God's will to manifest itself in Boston's preaching or work life, and in his accomplished life as an author, having seen already how immensely affected he was in his *Memoirs* by God's will unfolding via providence.

We shall begin by examining Boston's pastoral use of the doctrine of God's will in his weekly ministry of delivering sermons.

⁸⁵⁴S. Pattison, and J. Woodward, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, edited by S. Pattison and J. Woodward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 1.

⁸⁵⁵Pattison, and Woodward, 2. Read this page to see the differences between pastoral and practical theology.

⁸⁵⁶'Unlike other theological disciplines, it is an operation- or experience-focused theological discipline that contributes directly to the understanding of revelation and theology from the "shepherding perspective." The "shepherding perspective" basically means regarding experience and theology from the vantage point of the practice of pastoral care, broadly understood.' S. Hiltner, "The Meaning and Importance of Pastoral Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, edited by S. Pattison and J. Woodward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 27.

⁸⁵⁷The *Fourfold State* was originally a sermon series which spanned four and a half years! Woodruff III, 127.

This will be followed by examining the pastoral application of God's will in Boston's published works.⁸⁵⁸

Having seen from the *Memoirs* that providence as part of the doctrine of the will of God was robust and strongly adhered to in Boston's own Reformed theology, we shall now endeavour to see what impact it made as he translated that from the dogmatic to the pastoral and practical side of his ministry.

5.2 The pastoral application of the will of God in Boston's sermons⁸⁵⁹

The vast bulk of Boston's complete works are a testimony to an enthusiastic lover of preaching. Given that Boston's primary teaching aid was his sermons, do we find a continued interest of God's will unfolding in providence so evident in his *Memoirs* and personal life, spilling over into his weekly ordinary and sacramental sermons? The basic question we are trying to solve here is, does Boston's mainstream Reformed, yet robust, doctrine of God's will, really matter when it comes to the practical living of everyday life?⁸⁶⁰ Are there certain areas of life where Boston feels the need to press home the pastoral application of God's will time and again, or does he use this doctrine on a much wider but less specific basis, using it here and there with no discernible areas of impact? My argument in this part of the thesis is to show the following. 1. Boston's personal preoccupation with and practice of observing providence and God's 'providential will' in his life, ought to exhibit itself frequently in his preaching if it is prominent in his thinking. 2. There are a number of areas in the Christian life that Boston repeatedly targets pastorally with applications drawn from his doctrine of God's

⁸⁵⁸Many of Boston's works were gathered together and published posthumously but since his death, any study carried out upon those works has taken them as individual documents in their own right.

⁸⁵⁹In the following section, the citations shall be accompanied by the sermon title, page numbers, text preached on, and date, where these things are known, since we are focusing on Boston's sermons.

⁸⁶⁰Low makes a footnote to highlight the fact that the circumstances of providence led Boston to hold congregational fasts. Boston, *A General Account*, 244.

will. 3. A robust doctrine of the will of God is of immense practical use in the Christian's daily walking before the Lord.

5.2.1 Does Boston pastorally apply the doctrine of God's will frequently in his sermons?

As previously mentioned, Boston had a general set pattern when he came to preaching. He would highlight the text, the doctrine that flowed from that text, and the pastoral applications from what preceded. What becomes evident as one reads through his sermons (and this pattern does not change across his life-time), is that God's sovereign will as displayed in his providence is an application which arises time and again. We will come to see later how Boston pastorally applied his doctrine of the will of God on some select subject matters in particular, but it is our purpose here to show that Boston pastorally applied this doctrine both frequently and over a wide area of issues in his daily ministry as the pastor of Simprin and Etterick.

Some of Boston's applications are mere sentences to highlight how important it is to follow the will of God, in both the preceptive and decretal (providential) sense, such as when he mentions in his sermon *Of the duty which God requireth of man*, 'that obedience to the voice of the will of God is more acceptable to him than all the sacrifices in the world.'⁸⁶¹ Or that, 'The voice of the word, providence, and conscience is the voice of God; take heed how ye entertain the same,'⁸⁶² as an application of his sermon on how Enoch walked with God.⁸⁶³ These short, pithy applications as encouragements to obey God or to listen for God's voice abound in his sermons. In other places however, the applications he makes delve a little deeper into the subject of the eternal counsel. In one sermon on Isaiah entitled *Christ the Counsellor*, he exhorts his parishioners to believe that every thing that

⁸⁶¹Boston, *CW*, II.51.

⁸⁶²Boston, *CW*, X.630.

⁸⁶³*CW*.X, *Enoch's character and translation explained: with a description of walking with God*, 580-636, Gen. v. 24, (1716).

proceeds from the hand of God into their lives has a divine reason, and whether we understand them or not, the reasons are both good and valid.⁸⁶⁴ In his stirring way with words Boston continues to explain that when the saints finally reach the Father's house and they get to peruse the whole plan of providence as it stood, they will see many things that appear very beautiful which at the time seemed illogical and troubling.⁸⁶⁵ Many of Boston's applications drawn from his doctrine of God's will come in the form of what I term 'challenging encouragements.'

Boston's challenging encouragements are clearly seen when he applies aspects of God's sovereign will to his gospel calls for people to be saved.⁸⁶⁶ This he does in numerous ways, by urging his flock not to fight against the way God works providentially but to heed either the word, or conscience, the rod or rebuke.⁸⁶⁷ Boston calls people not to neglect the means that God uses to accomplish his sovereign will, to attend church and the ordinances, by neglecting God's ordained means a person shows God they have no desire for salvation.⁸⁶⁸ These things are clearly seen in the following extract of a sermon from Hebrews,

Be diligent in the use of the means of salvation. They are laid before you, while they are by the sovereign disposal of Providence, kept from others. Neglect them not, as ye would be found to reject the counsel of God against yourselves. And satisfy not yourselves in the bare use of them, but seek grace and salvation in them from Jesus Christ, they being the appointed means of grace.⁸⁶⁹

The neglect of means is a sin and like all other sin Boston explains that it is an affront to God's infinite sovereignty, it is a rejection of God's preceptive will and it pits the human will against the divine, and so in God's sight it is viewed as a

⁸⁶⁴Boston, *CW*, X.242.

⁸⁶⁵Boston, *CW*, X.239.

⁸⁶⁶T. Boston, *The Straying State and Condition of Mankind Sinners, Together with the Care of the Chief Shepherd in Returning Them and Curing Their Straying Disposition* (The British Library), Eighteenth Century Collections Online [accessed: 11/5/2010], sourced from the British Library via UHI Millennium Institute.

⁸⁶⁷Boston, *CW*, IX.609.

⁸⁶⁸Boston, *CW*, II.398. *Of the means of salvation in general*, 393-399, Heb. ii. 3.

⁸⁶⁹Boston, *CW*, II.399.

resistance and active battle against himself.⁸⁷⁰ There are then the duel aspects of the challenge and the encouragement often present in his applications of his doctrine of the divine will. The challenges to heed God's voice, providence and the word, not to neglect God's appointed means, or fight against God, alongside the encouragements to acknowledge that God gives to us what he keeps from others, that his means are not hidden but revealed in his word, to make use of them since they have been provided by God for that end.

The means that God uses to accomplish his will within his creation may seem perplexing to his people for a time but they are not to despair or conclude that God is not in control. God works in ways that we would never dream of using and that seem foreign to us, for example, he sometimes 'works healing by wounding, and comfort by tears.'⁸⁷¹ On more than one occasion Boston speaks about the incident of Jesus putting clay on the eyes of the blind man in order for him to see, and the fact that God made light out of darkness. Boston also cites the example of means used in the account of Jonah, when he was swallowed by the large fish. Jonah must have thought that God was going to end his life whereas in fact the fish not only saved him from drowning but was used by God as a vessel to transport Jonah to shore.⁸⁷² When things fall out in our lives contrary to how we expected them to or in ways which seem contrary to common sense or even the laws of nature, we ought to trust that God is working out all things according to his purposes. Again we see that challenge to trust God at all times, which must have been hard for Jonah when he was sinking into the deep or spent a second night in the stomach of a fish, alongside the encouragement that God is always in control, echoing Romans 8:28.

It is in a similar sense that God uses temptations (not that he himself tempts) in the life of the Christian, not in order to make them weak but in order for his people to grow strong. Boston plainly states that temptations are brought into the

⁸⁷⁰Boston, *CW*, II.392. *Of the desert of sin*, 389-93, Gal. iii. 10.

⁸⁷¹Boston, *CW*, IX.63. *The perfection of providential dispensations*, 62-65, Ps. xviii, 30, (1709).

⁸⁷²Boston, *CW*, IV.54. *The Lord's helping his people*, 52-60, 1 Sam. vii. 12 (1707).

life of the believer by a holy and wise providence that orders things in such a way that the believer is directly confronted by temptations to sin. In this set of circumstances the Christian has the opportunity to resist the devil, prove themselves and bring God glory. Boston's own words are worth hearing at this point,

By a providential placing them in such circumstances, as the heart may take occasion of sin from them. Thus innocent Adam was led into temptation, being placed within reach of the forbidden fruit; Joseph, by being alone in the house with an adulterous woman, where yet he came fair off; Achan, by seeing the wedge of gold, and having an opportunity to take it, where he fell by it; Peter by being in the High Priest's hall, where he was attacked. It is on this account that afflictions and persecutions are called *temptations*, Jam. i. 2. because there the man is beset with such things as are apt to work on his corruptions, and so to lead him into sin, through fear or hope. By permitting Satan or his instruments, to tempt them to sin. God has them in a chain, but sometimes, for holy wise ends, the Lord lets them loose, 2 Sam. xxiv. 1. compared with 1 Chron. xxi.⁸⁷³

We see in these words that God in his sovereignty is in control. He governs in a way that orders the circumstances of mankind, he controls the extent of influence Satan has in the world, he overturns the wicked intentions of the evil one for wise and holy ends, and through all of it, the believer has the opportunity to mature and bring God glory. In his sermon, *Believers the friends of Christ*, Boston tells his parishioners that they may well be brought into certain situations of temptation where the only reason not to indulge in the sin is obedience to Christ. Everything about their situation may lend itself to the suggestion of giving in to the temptation, nevertheless the friend of Christ will resist.⁸⁷⁴

The presence of temptations to sin does not indicate God's displeasure, even Christ suffered temptations to sin. Boston makes the point that when external things are going well in a person's life, such as their financial situation or health,

⁸⁷³Boston, *CW*, II.633-34. *The sixth petition*, 619-638, Matt. vi. 13.

⁸⁷⁴‘Sometimes holy providence brings people into such circumstances for their trial. The temptation is attended with all advantages which the evil heart could wish, fair occasion, secrecy, and encouragement to it from every hand, but the hand of a holy God.’ Boston, *CW*, V.238. *Believers the friends of Christ*, 220-47, Jn. xv.14, (1724).

they cannot necessarily translate this as a result of walking closely with God (Job 21:7). Whereas when spiritual favours are experienced, despite the external circumstances,⁸⁷⁵ one may rest assured that God is truly favouring them.⁸⁷⁶ The challenge here is to resist the temptation and guard against sin,⁸⁷⁷ the encouragement comes in knowing that temptations themselves are not sinful and are so governed by God's hand that the believer can resist them and walk closely with God during them.

The problem for the Christian experiencing temptations is the sinful inclination to spy out faults in the perfect providential plan of God and doubt God's goodness with respect to the timing or duration of the ordeal. From the human perspective it can sometimes appear that God's plan will miscarry and it is precisely at that point that his providence is called into question. Boston speaks of Abraham when he took matters into his own hand and slept with Hagar rather than waiting for God to provide a son through Sarah. This appears to be a common aspect of the providential plan for the world that Boston has already noted in his life, that things often move towards a point of absolute hopelessness before God turns them completely around, as was the case with Mordecai and Haman. Boston says,

Providence, running, as it seems, quite contrary to the design of it. Many times the Lord has a design on foot for the good of his church and people; but a continual tract of disappointments cross it more and more, till the very grave-stone seems to be laid upon it. Thus it was with Joseph, when he was put into the dungeon. But what fault is there here, more than when the sun sets to make it darker and darker, till day-break. Stay till the dawning of the design.⁸⁷⁸

It is precisely at this point, the point of impending despair, when the circumstances seem hopeless and the timing too late, that Boston encourages the believer with the reassurance that their faith in God need not fail and challenges

⁸⁷⁵Boston, *CW*, V.388. *The believer's hundredfold in this life considered*, 374ff, Mk x. 30, (1729).

⁸⁷⁶Boston, *CW*, IX.31. *Sin which separates God and men*, 27-36, Isa. lxi. 2, (1706).

⁸⁷⁷Boston, *CW*, III.184. *The sins of sinners finding them out*, 180-185, Num. xxxii. 23, (1718).

⁸⁷⁸Boston, *CW*, IX.63. *The perfection of providential dispensations*, 62-65, Ps. xviii, 30, (1709).

them to stand firm.⁸⁷⁹ God works in this way not only in the lives of individuals but in his church too. Although God sometimes has to address his bride with the rod,⁸⁸⁰ Boston also emphasizes to his flock the great encouragements that come from trusting in a God whose power to govern for good is undefeatable.⁸⁸¹ All things are so governed for the benefit of the church.⁸⁸²

5.2.2 Summary of Boston's frequency of pastorally applying his doctrine of God's will

We have shown in these sermons that Boston frequently refers to God's sovereignty, will and divine providence, drawing pastoral applications from his knowledge of God's will to many areas of concern in the lives of his parishioners. This he does over the breadth of his preaching ministry as we have documented in sermons from 1706 to 1732, from his first charge at Simprin to his dying year.⁸⁸³ Boston's applications are made from many sermons on many subjects, prayer, the church, God's timing, external circumstances, temptations, means, ordinances, and often delivered in the form of 'encouraging challenges.' That is, Boston takes what he knows about God's eternal divine will and skilfully uses it to encourage his flock in their walk with God and challenges them to be faithful in that walk. What this means is, the Reformed doctrine of God's will held by Boston, was

⁸⁷⁹'It is God's special time of beginning to work, when men can do no more ... Many a time the Lord makes the wheel of providence drive downward and downward, till we are almost at its extremity; and then is the turning point.' Boston, *CW*, IX.449. *The Saints God's servants and his property*, 439-449, Acts xxviii, 23, (1715).

⁸⁸⁰Boston, *CW*, IV.97. *Sermon XI*, 89-105, Ps. xlv. 10, (1714).

⁸⁸¹'It is a universal kingdom. All is in his hand. He can reach to the ends of the earth. It extends over all persons and things; and he can make all things subserve his purposes. He can display his glorious arm in bringing in shoals of volunteers into the kingdom of grace, and utterly root out all the legions of hell that are in combination against him ... none can resist him more than the clay can resist the potter, Dan. iv. 35 ... He will work, and who can let it? It is in vain to contend with his almighty Sovereign; for he can easily conquer all his enemies, as easily as he caused the Red Sea swallow up Pharaoh and his host. He can baffle all the machinations and plots of his adversaries, disconcert their best-laid projects, and make them retreat with shame and confusion. These are great encouragements for this concern.' Boston, *CW*, II.584-85. *The second petition*, 571-586, Matt. vi. 10.

⁸⁸²Boston, *CW*, X. *The end of time, and the mystery of God finished with it*, 423-464, Rev. x. 6-7, (1732).

⁸⁸³This is not the earliest reference for Boston pastorally applying his doctrine of God's will it is just the earliest documented in this section.

important to him privately and of use to him publicly in the thirty-three years of his pastoral ministry.

5.3 Are there subject specific areas where Boston pastorally applies his doctrine of God's will?

Having identified the broad range of pastoral application that Boston employs from his doctrine of God's will in his sermons, are there specific subjects which he focuses on in particular, as he extracts what is practical out of the dogmatic? Having analyzed the pastoral application of God's will present in Boston's sermon corpus, I have identified four primary areas of application, all which compliment and expand upon the specific areas we highlighted as being stressed in Boston's *Memoirs*. These are:

- a. A need to acknowledge God is God.
- b. A need for the observation of God's will as displayed in providential dispensations.
- c. The hope and encouragement the doctrine brings during trials and afflictions.
- d. The overriding need to submit to God's will in all things.

5.3.1 Acknowledging God is God

Our four primary areas of interest are built on this foundational understanding of Boston's theology, namely, that God is God. This may seem an obvious thing to state but it affirms Boston's belief that God is the First Cause of all things and everything is entirely dependent on him. Listen to all the reasons as to why Boston urges his people to acknowledge God in their lives,

Let us consider the duty which man owes unto God. That is obedience. We are in a state of subjection to God. He is our superior, and his will we are to obey in all things. He is our King, and we must obey him as his subjects, by complying with all his statutes and ordinances. He is our Father, and we must show him our respect, reverence, and affection, as his dutiful children. He is our Lord and Master, and we must yield him the most cheerful and unlimited service, as is our reasonable duty.

He is our supreme Law-giver, and we must receive the law at his mouth, every law and every precept, every ordinance that is stamped with his authority, whatever is subscribed with a “Thus saith the Lord,” readily obey it ... Let us consider the rule of that obedience. It is the will of God.⁸⁸⁴

God’s will demands obedience because that is what it is, the will of God. Mankind cannot exist without God or do anything without his ordaining power, therefore in Boston’s view, everything mankind is and everything it does, should be in conformity to the will of the one who makes all things possible. God’s ways are perfect because God is perfect. What is the result of this for Boston’s parishioners? It is three-fold, it is to accept what comes from God’s hand, trust that it is given by divine wisdom, and not complain against it.

Accepting God’s will, as being the will of Almighty God does not come naturally to mankind. Yet there are no ambiguities at this point in Boston’s thinking, all people but especially Christians need to reflect on God’s will.

Men do not entertain due thoughts of the sovereignty of God, and his awful majesty, Matt. xx. 11-15. God’s sovereignty would, if duly seen and considered, quell the mutiny of unruly passions, that rise within men’s breasts, and arraign the great ruler of the world at their bar, for mismanagement. We are absolutely his and he may dispose of us as he will, and all that is ours, and we are obliged to obey him without disputing, and to submit without quarrelling.⁸⁸⁵

Our acceptance of God’s will, whether in the preceptive or decretive sense, is the correct response to God and the way to bring him honour. Connected to the acceptance of God’s will in our lives is trusting that his will is governed by his being and is therefore most wise, holy and just. Mankind is naturally disposed to misunderstand, quarrel with, and murmur against, God’s methods and management of providence. This is tantamount to not trusting God. Boston points out that everyone has had some quarrel with the way God works in their life, whether that’s begrudging the blessings of others or lamenting the troubles of our own.⁸⁸⁶ Boston urges his listeners to trust the ways God works in providence

⁸⁸⁴Boston, *CW*, II.52-53. *Of the duty which God requireth of man*, 51-58, 1 Sam. xv. 22.

⁸⁸⁵Boston, *CW*, III.291. *Man, sinful man is a complaining creature*, 287- 305, Lam. iii, 39, (1717).

⁸⁸⁶Boston, *CW*, II. *The third petition*, 586-601, Matt. vi. 10.

for it is ‘the product of infinite wisdom, mixed with infinite love,’⁸⁸⁷ even during times of trial. What God designs for his people and brings about in their lives, is ultimately what is for their very best, and true happiness is unknown outside of his pleasure for us. Boston assures his flock that if they try and carve out for themselves a life unrelated to God and his will, they will only end up cutting themselves and causing themselves harm.

Those who accept God’s ways and trust his management of affairs are contrasted by Boston with those who grumble and complain. Boston tells his flock that there are no justifiable reasons for anyone to complain to God about their treatment at his hand because the Lord can never do us wrong. To do so is an affront to God.⁸⁸⁸ Boston pleads with his people to walk soberly before God regardless of their lot and circumstances, acknowledging that all things come from his hand whether favourable or not. He also adds that providence is a book that the believer can try and read to discern the mind of God.⁸⁸⁹ At the heart of the problem however, Boston recognizes that complaining against how God works is the sin of rebellion against the will of God.⁸⁹⁰ There are then, important repercussions in acknowledging that God is indeed, God, and most relevant for our study is that once this has been established, the fact that God has a sovereign will demands some sort of response.

5.3.2 Observing providence

As a result of acknowledging that God is God, Boston repeatedly affirms the need for an observation of providential dispensations that are met during the journey of

⁸⁸⁷Boston, *CW*, IV.102. *Sermon XI*, 89-105, Ps. xlv. 10, (1714).

⁸⁸⁸‘We must not complain of our lot, or murmur because better has not fallen to our share. They who do this, “are murmurers and complainers, walking after their own lusts.” He that blames his lot reproaches him that allowed it to him. Everyone ought to think. All men sit at God’s table, and God himself carves everyone’s part to him. A holy wise providence doth this, and to complain of the dispensation is sinful and hazardous, as reflecting on the wisdom and holiness of the sovereign manager.’ Boston, *CW*, III.289.

⁸⁸⁹Boston, *CW*, X.602-03. *Enoch’s character and translation explained: with a description of walking with God*, 580-636, Gen. v. 24, (1716).

⁸⁹⁰Boston, *CW*, III.303.

life. Although Boston speaks very highly of this practice, the observation of providence ought to remain subservient to the word of God. When this occurs, Boston notes that it ‘is an eminent part of the exercise of godliness.’⁸⁹¹ Not only is providential observation an aid for godly living, it can help a Christian know when it is necessary to fast,⁸⁹² it can be a source of comfort and light, or reveal God’s faithfulness or manifest itself as a reproof.⁸⁹³ Boston wholeheartedly believed that any believer who failed to observe providence would miss out on God’s blessing. His passion for the observation of providence is present in these following words,

Be much in self-examination. Be careful observers of providence; the providence of God towards the church, and towards yourselves in particular, Psal. cvii. Providence is a river that brings down the rich ore of experiences, which are to be gathered by Christian observation. The Bible is the word that God preacheth to the world; and providence is the application of the doctrine. In the Bible, the word is brought to our ears, and in providence it is set before our eyes; though most of us are blind as moles, and see it not; but the experimental Christian doth see.⁸⁹⁴

Let us be clear what Boston means when he speaks about observing providence. Boston is not saying that the situations and circumstances presently experienced ought to determine behaviour, otherwise David should have killed Saul in the cave, or worse, was right to sleep with Bathsheba given the circumstances at that time! This is not what Boston means, Boston is urging his flock to accept that God in his sovereignty works in their lives in such a way that he can speak to them with regards to their relationship with him. Boston goes as far as calling providence a ‘witness’ to God that works alongside his word,⁸⁹⁵ and the

⁸⁹¹Boston, *CW*, IV.85. *A heart exercised unto godliness necessary to make a good Christian*, 81-89, 1 Tim. iv. 7, (1711).

⁸⁹²Boston, *CW*, IX.360.

⁸⁹³Boston, *CW*, IV.392. *Christian watchfulness stated, and enforced*, 387-394, Mark xiii, 37, (1707).

⁸⁹⁴Boston, *CW*, II.654. *A discourse on the experimental knowledge of Christ*, 645-659, Phil. iii. 10.

⁸⁹⁵Boston, *CW*, III.249-51. *The great danger of professors who hold the truth in unrighteousness*, 214-252, Rom. i. 18, (1719).

interpretive key for understanding providence is Christ.⁸⁹⁶ This emphasis, that God speaks through the things that unfold in the lives of his people, helps reassure the reader that Boston's doctrine of God's will is not some Stoic-like determinism but actually represents God's will as something that can be responded to in a real way. Boston does not say that God's eternal decree unfolds in people's lives so whatever will be will be, this would indeed lead to apathy, but Boston tells his flock to use all the available means for living in an active relationship with God. God has not ordained all things from eternity to then sit back and watch them unfold as if the world were his favourite wind-up toy. God's ordination of all things includes his own activity, he knew before the world was created that he would become incarnate and die on a cross, so to suggest that human actions are somehow orchestrated by God in such a way that detracts from their essential reality and freedom would only hold true if that applied to God too. The very idea that people need to observe providence indicates for Boston that by doing so mankind can respond to it. The person who acknowledges God and observes how he works in his creation can lead a life that is relationally intricately and intimately involved with God. Boston says,

By his providence, which, duly compared with the word, contributes much to clear the way; Psalm xxxii. 8, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go; I will guide thee with mine eye." Ye are then to be careful observers of providences, which are really waymarks in the wilderness, Psalm cvii. By his Spirit, which renders all the rest effectual; John xvi. 13, "When he the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth." He illuminates and causes to shine, the word, Christ's example, and providences. He illuminates the traveller too, as well as the way; disposes, moves, and efficaciously leads the traveller on his way.⁸⁹⁷

There is a distinct Trinitarian undertone in Boston's understanding of 'God's' will. As the will of the Father unfolds in the world the believer can look to Christ to make sense of their situation and be led by the Spirit into a deeper and fuller

⁸⁹⁶'Many a time, the child of God is at a stand with providences. They appear to them as the wrong side of things; they cannot see the beauty, harmony, and order of them, till they go to Christ with them, who is able to satisfy them.' Boston, *CW*, IV.379. *Christ the physician of souls*, 359-386, Matt. ix. 12, (1707).

⁸⁹⁷Boston, *CW*, X.568. *Believers a mystery ...*, 550-579, Song viii, 5. (1721).

relationship with God. When Boston deals with the theme of observing providence he is keen to deal with the subject, not as an abstract theme or metaphysical conundrum, rather he is at pains to ground his doctrine in the realities of human experience, acknowledging that providence can be difficult to observe.⁸⁹⁸ Although Boston seems to have mastered the art of observing providence, there remains the thorny question over whether his parishioners felt as capable as their under-shepherd in this practice.⁸⁹⁹ Nevertheless, possessing a correct knowledge of how God works is of great benefit for the Christian, especially when they are experiencing trials and afflictions.

5.3.3 Affliction and the will of God

The need to acknowledge the ‘hand of God’ in afflictions is the third main application of Boston’s doctrine of God’s will. And again, Boston’s pastoral applications surrounding God’s will and affliction have a lively relationship between God and mankind at its heart. Boston makes no apologies for stating that the personal lot of any individual is hand tailored by God himself.⁹⁰⁰ We would

⁸⁹⁸Boston says, ‘(1) The design of providence may sometimes lie very hid; and therefore it is good to wait, and not to be rash, Psal. lxxvii. 19.

(2) Sometimes providence seems to forget the promise; but it is not so, but only the time of the promise is not then come, Gen. xv. 4. with xvi. 2.

(3) Sometimes providence seems to go quite cross to the promise, and to work contrary to his word. But wait ye, they will assuredly meet, Gen. xxii.

(4) Oftimes providence favours a design, which yet will be blasted in the end, for that it was not the purpose of God, Jonah i. 3.

(5) Oftimes providence will run counter in appearance to the real design, and by a tract of dispensations will seem to cross it more, and more, till the grave stone appear to be laid on it. And yet, ‘at evening-time it shall be light,’ Zech. xiv. 7.

(6) Providence many times lays aside the most likely means and brings about his work by that which nothing is expected of, 2 Kings v. 11, 12.

(7) *Lastly*, Sometimes providence works by contraries, as the blind man was cured with laying clay on his eyes.’ Boston, *CW*, I.228.

⁸⁹⁹A question that can never be answered with any certainty.

⁹⁰⁰‘We must not be choosers of crosses. Every one must take up his own, allotted to him by sovereign wisdom, that is the best judge what cross fits us best ... know, that if God mind to take a particular trial of you for heaven and eternal life, and there be any one thing wherein, of all other things, ye are least able to be touched, God will choose your cross for you in that very thing: ye will be sure to be touched in the sore heel, and get rubs where you are least able to abide them. And it is highly reasonable that the trial should be there, wherein the competition is betwixt God and self.’ Boston, *CW*, VI.313. *The necessity of self-denial*, 306-18, Lk ix. 23.

never choose what God chooses for us to experience, and yet God chooses those things that foster and enable fellowship with him. In his sermon *The peculiar mercy and business of life*,⁹⁰¹ Boston warns his flock not to despise the ways that God works and the things he brings into their lives. Similarly, in *The perfection of providential dispensations*,⁹⁰² Boston expresses the frequency with which believers meet with afflictions in their obedience to God, noting that this is a common experience for the saints and is according to a holy end and plan. Our situations are so governed by God that every affliction is in fact a bitter medicine for restoring relational health between God and his children. ‘God weighs every grain of sand which he puts in our glasses; he will never put in too little, nor too much; nothing wanting, nothing superfluous ... In respect of the times of them. Nothing too soon done, nor too late; all fall out in their proper season, determined in the unchangeable counsel of God.’⁹⁰³ The Christian may observe that there is a time and season for everything under heaven (Eccl. 3:1).

Boston identifies certain ways in which God commonly works to fulfil his perfect plan. As Boston recalled in his own life, God often lets certain situations deteriorate almost to the point of hopelessness before stepping in and delivering his people. ‘Thus are the mysterious steps of providence before named all managed, and may be accounted for ... Deliverance is sweet at any time; but the more hopeless, the more sweet and surprising is it when it comes.’⁹⁰⁴ Boston often reminds his people of this fact and highlights Haman as a testimony to its truth.⁹⁰⁵ The difficulties of life are fully compatible with the divine plan and the blessings of life are equally governed. Boston mentions how God provides his

⁹⁰¹Boston, *CW*, VII.547-92.

⁹⁰²Boston, *CW*, IX.62-65.

⁹⁰³Boston, *CW*, IX.64. *The perfection of providential dispensations*, 62-65, Ps. xviii, 30, (1709).

⁹⁰⁴Boston, *CW*, X.242. *Christ the Counsellor*, 231-250, Isa. ix. 6.

⁹⁰⁵‘To let things go to an extremity, to the point of hopelessness, before a hand to be put to help them, and set them right again ... Haman carried his plot so far against the Jews, that the decree was passed, the letters of execution writ, and the posts dispatched with them, before there was a turn. It is a maxim with men, to crush things in their beginnings, because they may prove too strong for them afterwards; but our Lord takes the contrary method, to glorify the power of his hand.’ Boston, *CW*, X.541. *The end of time, and the mystery of God finished with it*, 423-464, Rev. x. 6-7, (1732).

people with grace in order to remain holy and godly whilst receiving ‘the sun of prosperity’ shining on them. Boston also mentions ‘balancing providences’ being present in the life of the believer, that is, some bitterness being allowed by God to mix with the saints prosperity in order to keep them humble, and dependent on the Lord. ‘Every rub a Christian meets with in his way through the world, is a memorandum for him, that “this is not his rest.”’⁹⁰⁶ And finally Boston mentions that the course of God’s providential favour can change into one of affliction. This is a way to stop many of God’s children forgetting him, and to stop any ease from turning into sleep. God sends adversity among his people which in turn sends his people to God.

Afflictions as part of God’s providential design not only send people to God but conforms them into the image of his Son. Faith, self-denial, patience, hope, and a host of other fruit of the Spirit all tend to start growing (and in some cases flourish), when the child of God meets with affliction.⁹⁰⁷ Since this is so, the believer ought to humble themselves before God and accept whatever dispensations come from his hand.⁹⁰⁸ Accepting God’s will is not a recipe for apathy however, Boston lists numerous ways in which the Christian can meet affliction head on. These include, 1. The need to pray for faith that God’s ways and timings are perfect. 2. The need to try and understand perhaps why a certain thing has entered one’s life. 3. To apply the present situation to Scripture as the word sheds light on God’s providential designs. 4. Pay heed to conscience under God’s chastisement knowing that God often targets those sins and lusts in our life that we are least inclined to surrender. 5. Think about the sin God repeatedly speaks to in your life, as his rod often finishes the work his gentle rebukes start. 6. Pay attention to the type of affliction that is presently experienced, as it can

⁹⁰⁶Boston, *CW*, X.523. *Sinners interested in Christ, obtaining favour of the Lord*, 521-533, Prv. viii. 35.

⁹⁰⁷Boston, *CW*, X. *The way to life and the way to destruction unfolded*, 308-397, Mt. vii. 13-14. (1731).

⁹⁰⁸Boston, *CW*, X.624. *Enoch’s character and translation explained: with a description of walking with God*, 580-636, Gen. v. 24, (1716).

often illuminate the sin for which it has been sent to correct.⁹⁰⁹ We can see once more the challenging encouragement with regard to afflictions, the challenge to trust that God's will is perfect in its timing, duration, and dispensations, and the encouragement that God is firmly in control and works on the individual level to draw us nearer to himself. Through the plan of God's eternal decree, God conforms his people into the image of his Son, until they like him say, 'not my will but yours be done' (Lk. 22:42).⁹¹⁰

5.3.4 The overriding need to submit to God's will in all things⁹¹¹

Throughout Boston's sermons, the need for believers to submit to God's will is stated repeatedly, forcefully, and passionately. There is always a struggle when the divine will is pitted against the human will. The struggle does not have to do with which will shall conquer⁹¹² but the struggle is present when fallen mankind even desires to submit to God's will.⁹¹³ This goes to the very heart of what Boston understands about true Christianity.⁹¹⁴ 'The true Christian has renounced his own will, and taken Christ's will for his. He hath learned to submit to his

⁹⁰⁹Boston, *CW*, X.603ff.

⁹¹⁰'They must follow the providential will of Lord: "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." If we have said, I am the Lord's, then we must have said, Our will is the Lord's. It remains that our will should follow the Lord's, as the shadow doth the body. If it be God's will that we should be poor, sick, crossed, etc, that should also be our will; if not, we do not follow the Lord fully. It is a sad matter we should give up ourselves to be servants, and yet still aim at being masters, to cut and carve for ourselves. There will be a crook in every lot of ours under the sun ... That which is crooked, in respect to our will, is straight enough with God's, which is the true rule, so that if would follow the Lord fully, our will should be bended to the crook, and not the crook straightened to our will.' Boston, *CW*, IX.305. *Faithfulness towards God exemplified and rewarded*, 299-313, Num xiv. 24, (1712).

⁹¹¹Woodruff acknowledges that submission to God's will is stressed within Boston's sermons. Woodruff III, 251.

⁹¹²'Your struggle with the will of his providence is a vain struggle, "for his counsel shall stand," and what he will have crooked, thou shalt not make straight. It makes it more heavy than it would be. For fight against God who will, he will always be the conqueror.' Boston, *CW*, IV.103. *Sermon XI*, 89-105, Ps. xlv. 10, (1714).

⁹¹³'It is one of the greatest struggles which a child of God has, to get his will conformed to the will of God.' Boston, *CW*, II.598. *The third petition*, 586-601, Matt. vi. 10.

⁹¹⁴'It is the disposition of a child of God, to submit his lot and condition in the world to the lord, to be cut and carved as may serve his glory. Without this one cannot be a child of God.' Boston, *CW*, II.570. *The first petition*, 565-70, Matt. vi. 9.

preceptive and providential will, that in all things he may please him to whom he owes himself.⁹¹⁵ Boston is adamant on this,

Absolute resignation of ourselves to the will of the Lord is necessary to evidence our sincerity. There is no reality where there is any reserve, for where Christ has the chief room in the heart, every thing will give place to him, Acts xx. 24. The will must be the first sufferer, if ever a man suffer to purpose. It must be melted down into an universal compliance with the will of God.⁹¹⁶

It is the hypocrite who cannot submit to God's will,⁹¹⁷ the believer on the other hand, acknowledges that to follow Christ is to submit to the Father's will.⁹¹⁸ This is Boston's pastoral application time and again to his Simprin and Etterick congregations, as his doctrine of the will of God is preached and unfolded before them.

Let us be clear regarding what Boston means by 'submission to the will of God.' Boston is not talking about a passive 'whatever will be will be' mindset that incites an attitude of non-activity. Neither is he endorsing a Stoical outlook for life, that because everything has been set in stone by God and fixed, there is no point in trying to change anything or fight the inevitable. Boston's emphasis on submission to God's will is firstly aimed at God's preceptive will. Mankind ought to submit to God's commands and obey them. Secondly, the submission relates to those things in life which having done everything in one's power to change them, still remain. For example, if a person becomes ill they do not simply say 'it is God's will' and lay there, they pray repeatedly to get better, and call for a doctor and take all the medication that could help the situation. If after having done all that is humanly possible to improve the illness it still remains, like Paul's thorn in

⁹¹⁵Boston, *CW*, IV.243. *Christ, the life of the believer*, 239-247, Phil. i. 21, (1706).

⁹¹⁶Boston, *CW*, IV.163. *Sermon XVII*, 163-166, Philp. iii. 8, (1712).

⁹¹⁷Boston, *CW*, IX.363. *The hypocrite detected*, 349-368, Rom. ii. 28-29, (1719).

⁹¹⁸'In an absolute resignation to the will of God, saying in everything, "Not my will, but thine be done," Luke xxii. 42. Walking with God is a following of him as the shadow does the body. It causes men put a blank in the Lord's hand, that he may fill up in it what he pleases. But so far as we come short of the great duty of absolute resignation to the will of God, we come short of walking with God.' Boston, *CW*, X.624.

the flesh, then the person must submit to it, knowing that God is in control of the situation.⁹¹⁹ Someone may argue that the person then has no choice whether to submit or not, but submission is an act of the heart. The person may commit themselves to their heavenly Father trusting that he does all things well or they may become angry and rail against God and spend their energy grumbling and complaining. Here we have highlighted the difference between ‘lament’ and ‘complaint,’ the former is addressed to God in hope and faith despite the hurting and pain, the latter flows from the hurt and the pain without the faith and hope in God. Submission within the context of Boston’s teaching has to do with having a right heart before God, trusting his ways, believing that he knows best and living in hope.

Boston’s heartfelt pleas for his flock to submit to God’s will come from his personal knowledge that to do so is best for them. If God’s wisdom is infinite and he knows us better than we know ourselves it makes sense for us to trust God’s judgment regarding what we do and do not need in our lives.⁹²⁰ It is often in direct reference to God’s attributes that Boston highlights the perfection of the divine will and presents submission to it as both logical and biblical. Boston elsewhere mentions the unlimited power of God’s sovereignty which in itself

⁹¹⁹I can already hear the caricatured responses to this. Someone will say, ‘so if Susan is being repeatedly raped or 6 year old Danny is systematically abused, they should submit to this as God’s will for their lives.’ Of course the answer would be no, in the same way that Paul desired his thorn in the flesh to go, or Peter escapes from prison, or Christians pray not to be persecuted. The fact remains however, that people do get ill and are not healed, do get sent unjustly to prison and are not released, and are persecuted without relief, or raped. This leaves us with two options, either God is not in control of these situations whether by choice or impotency, or God is in control of these situations and ordains them to occur (directly or by the hand of free agents), permitting wicked acts to take place while prohibiting their occurrence (through his revealed will). What we know for certain is that God sent his Son into the world to suffer excruciating pain and die, and Christ our perfect example submitted himself to his Father’s hand, trusting that he will work good even out of evil. ‘Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good’ (1 Pet. 4:19).

⁹²⁰‘If God be King over all, is there any fault in the administration; nay, is not all well done, yea, best done? Let his sovereignty silence us; should it be according to thy mind? His infinite wisdom should satisfy us, who knows better than we do what is best for us, and can over-rule all things for his glory and our good. Submit yourselves to the good sceptre.’ Boston, *CW*, II.574. *The second petition*, 571-586, Matt. vi. 10.

ought to silence objections and require submission to it.⁹²¹ In the light of God's righteousness and justice, God's will should be submitted to, and again, submitted to to the point of silence.⁹²² Submission is necessary precisely because God's attributes in the perfection of his being are displayed in his will. If God actively governs the whole of creation that he deemed fit to bring into existence, surely it would be the height of madness to assume that he makes mistakes with regards to our personal lives. Boston plainly states, 'there is no flaw in the way and will of God,'⁹²³ and when the children of God reach heaven they will declare that the entire will of God was perfect. The forcefulness of Boston's message to his people about submitting to the will of God is seen in his repeated use of the term 'absolute resignation,' indicting there is nothing about our lot or circumstances that should not be acknowledged as part of God's will for us. He says,

Shall not his sovereign dominion over us command our submission and absolute resignation? His sovereignty who giveth not an account of any of his ways may silence us. His infinite wisdom may satisfy us. There is no chance work in the world, not one stroke at random in all thy condition; it is not a work huddled up in a haste. The wheel of providence is full of eyes. Every thing in thy condition was from eternity in the womb of the wise decree, and brought upon thee accordingly.⁹²⁴

If this type of statement is viewed in isolation it could well lead people to conclude that Boston's account of God's will and divine providence was exceedingly deterministic. Woodruff suggests that because the duration of trials is fixed by God, Boston's theology becomes fatalistic at this point.⁹²⁵ This is not the case precisely because in its overall context, Boston's pulpit exhortations to submit to God's will indicate the natural bent in human nature to complain and

⁹²¹Boston, *CW*, VI.650-51. *The Christian warfare: Or, the good fight of faith*, 619-682, 1 Tim. vi. 12, (1723).

⁹²²Boston, *CW*, VI.646.

⁹²³Boston, *CW*, IV.104. *Sermon XI*, 89-105, Ps. xlv. 10, (1714).

⁹²⁴Boston, *CW*, III.304. *Man, sinful man is a complaining creature*, 287- 305, Lam. iii, 39, (1717).

⁹²⁵Woodruff III, 258. If a person gets cancer there is nothing they can do to guarantee they could cure themselves, they may well die. The duration of how long they have cancer is in God's hand. One person may take all the medical help going and die, another refuse all treatment and live, although the duration of having cancer is in God's hand, there is no restriction of human freedom to act in response to it. This is not deterministic but an acknowledgement that some things are outside of human control and regulation.

fight against it, ensuring the freedom mankind has is both genuine and real.⁹²⁶ We must emphasize again, that submission to God's will is not a call to resign into inactivity or an encouragement for non-action.⁹²⁷ A person may be born into poverty, Boston is saying they should not grumble and complain about it, this is not a prohibition for using legitimate means provided by God to work hard and rise out of poverty.

The need for submission to God's will is not just to his 'providential will' (synonymous with God's secret will), but equally to God's revealed will. Obedience to the Lord's commands is one of the distinguishing marks of a true Christian.⁹²⁸ A person can discover the reality of their closeness with God by assessing how willing they are to obey God's commands.⁹²⁹ Submission to God's revealed will is confirmation that a person is truly walking with Christ, it is presented by Boston as a test for measuring genuine faith. Boston is keen to make this point clear in his sermons.⁹³⁰

walking with God imports ... Complying with the will of his command in all things; Acts ix. 6. The heart of the believer is reconciled to, and approves of the law as holy, just, and good; and while he walks with God, he labours sincerely to suit his walk thereunto in all things, being grieved at any reluctancy that is in the heart against any piece of obedience, crying with David, Psalm cxix. 5, "O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!"⁹³¹

Obedience to God's revealed will or law as an indicator of genuine Christianity is certainly not a novel idea. It is Boston's strong emphasis on mankind's obedience to God's providential will that is striking in his sermons. The driving force of this emphasis lies in the fact that Boston believes that God is good to his people, that

⁹²⁶We shall further develop this point when we examine Boston's belief that this life is a 'probation' which determines where we spend eternity and not solely the eternal decree of election.

⁹²⁷For example, Paul did not simply resign himself to the fact that he had his 'thorn in the flesh,' it came into his life and lead him to the action of prayer, and multiple prayers at that. When God revealed to Paul that it was part of his will for him, Paul nevertheless submitted to it.

⁹²⁸Boston, *CW*, IV.474. *The distinguishing characters of real Christians*, 466-550, Phil. iii. 3.

⁹²⁹Boston, *CW*, V.228. *Believers the friends of Christ*, 220-47, Jn. xv.14, (1724).

⁹³⁰Boston, *CW*, X.83-84. *Sermon VI*, 76-87, Deut. v. 29, (1719).

⁹³¹Boston, *CW*, X.598-99. *Enoch's character and translation explained: with a description of walking with God*, 580-636, Gen. v. 24, (1716).

he wants what is ultimately best for them and sometimes periods of pain and suffering, affliction and trial, although not wanted by anyone, are necessary in a fallen world and are actually blessings within the divine plan.⁹³² Boston does not say this without feeling or experience, his own chronic pain and loss of many children ensured his flock that his teaching was borne from a heart full of empathy.

The submission that Boston requires of his parishioners leaves no part of life untouched. Any experience of loss is to be submitted to, whether that is a loss of wealth, health, people, reputation, liberty, comforts, or life itself.⁹³³ Boston concedes that this will not happen without a struggle⁹³⁴ but there is not anything necessarily sinful about the struggle itself, even Christ struggles in the garden, ‘not my will but yours be done.’ Sometimes God sends afflictions as punishments for sin, just as David and Bathsheba’s first child died as a result of their actions, these are to be submitted to in the light of God’s will being just.⁹³⁵ Submission to God’s will lasts right up to and includes the point of death. Death says Boston,

must be accompanied with entire resignation to the will of God, Matt. vi. 10. We must in our desire of it even on these accounts be resigned to the will of God. As to the time, we must never be peremptory as to that, but wait the time prefixed of God, Job xvi. 14. He will keep us no longer in life, than he has use for us either in the way of doing or suffering; and we must be content to wait his time for our admittance into uninterrupted communion to perfection of holiness, and into rest ... There are many ways of going out of the world, we must leave it to the Lord, which will be the way for us; whether the way of lingering sickness or sudden death, natural, or violent by the hand of man.⁹³⁶

⁹³²Boston actually calls afflictions blessings. Boston, *CW*, III.297.

⁹³³Boston, *CW*, V.383. *The believer’s hundredfold in this life considered*, 374ff, Mk x. 30, (1729).

⁹³⁴‘A submission to the will of God in afflicting providences. This is our duty, whatever be our trial, Psal. xxxix. 9 ... But it was a difficult duty, because of that corrupt self-love which cries for ease, and so much prevails in all men; because of that blindness of men’s minds, whereby they take that which is really for their good to be for evil to them, and because we are all so much wedded to our own will. Therefore the saints desire the removal of these impediments by God’s grace, and the subduing of our hearts to a submission.’ Boston, *CW*, II.598. *The third petition*, 586-601, Matt. vi. 10.

⁹³⁵Boston, *CW*, II.601. *The third petition*, 586-601, Matt. vi. 10.

⁹³⁶Boston, *CW*, V.500. *A good name is better than precious ointment*, 461-501, Eccl. vii. 1 (1730).

Throughout life, God may deem it fit to take away from us the very things he previously gave us for our comfort and enjoyment, as witnessed in the life of Job.⁹³⁷ The correct human response is submission to God's will. This could be perceived as an incredibly negative, restraining or fearful, approach to life, were it not for the fact that God's will, along with his other attributes is governed by wisdom, love, justice and mercy. Sometimes God takes away from his people things they cherish in order to give them something far better. It was through Christ losing his life that he gained a people for himself and he is our perfect example.⁹³⁸

Knowing that God's will is perfect in accord with his nature, Boston's call for his flock to submit to that will in every possible way makes complaining against it a particularly heinous crime in Boston's eyes. Time and again, as Boston pastorally applies his doctrine of the will of God he pleads with his listeners not to complain or grumble about their lots from God's hand.⁹³⁹ Boston is quite scathing at times about complainers, especially in his sermon, *Man, sinful man is a complaining creature*. He says, 'Complainers, such as are dissatisfied with their lot, and with the distributions of providence, complain of the least, and worse falls to their share. They bark at the mountains of brass, the immovable purposes of God, as dogs at the moon and with equal success.'⁹⁴⁰ In Boston's view, complaining is useless and unprofitable, useless because God's will is always accomplished and unprofitable because God works for the good of those who love him. Whatever pain is caused by God's afflicting hand, it is only made worse by complaining, and in the light of human sinfulness Boston declares that God does not afflict us for it as we deserve. Lamentations 3 is a favourite of Boston's for highlighting the correct response to affliction, which in the context of complaining is silence.

⁹³⁷Boston, CW, V.380-81. *The believer's hundredfold in this life considered*, 374ff, Mk x. 30, (1729).

⁹³⁸Boston, CW, III.302. *Man, sinful man is a complaining creature*, 287- 305, Lam. iii, 39, (1717).

⁹³⁹'We are men and not Gods, creatures and not Creators, subjects and not lords, and therefore ought to submit and not to complain.' Boston, CW, III.293. *Man, sinful man is a complaining creature*, 287- 305, Lam. iii, 39, (1717).

⁹⁴⁰Boston, CW, III.303.

He therefore concludes, ‘that there is no solid reason why man should complain,’⁹⁴¹ indicating that the root cause of complaining is pride.⁹⁴²

Although submission to God’s will is a challenge,⁹⁴³ Boston encourages his listeners to engage in that challenge noting the benefits that arise from it. The obvious benefit to submission is the Christ-likeness of the person submitting.

You must also yield your will to him, that his will may henceforth be thine. Saying, “Father thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” If thou wilt have a will of thine own still, and not submit it in all things to the Lord, thou doest not yield to, but rebel against the Lord. If the motions of a will contrary to the Lord’s rise within thee, thou must deny and cross them and submit thy will to him.⁹⁴⁴

Conformity to Christ is therefore a primary factor in Boston’s exhortations to his flock. Other benefits include possessing a right balance of fear and hope, fear keeps the soul from despising the Lord’s ways whilst hope trusts in God’s goodness towards us.⁹⁴⁵ There is also a peace that accompanies a willing submission to God, Boston says such a person ‘discovers infinite wisdom tempered with love and good-will, in the ordering of our lot, and so the soul rests in that.’⁹⁴⁶ Coupled with that peace is the acknowledgement that all of God’s ways are just,⁹⁴⁷ content that within the eternal divine counsel there are perfect reasons for everything.⁹⁴⁸ It is fitting to finish this section on submission with Boston’s wonderfully crafted concise statement on the subject:

Your will is also the Lord’s: Acts ix. 6, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” You must learn to say, Thy will be done. Put away your self-will. The will of his commandments must

⁹⁴¹Boston, *CW*, III.302-03.

⁹⁴²Boston, *CW*, IV.445. *Christ, the life of the believer*, 239-247, Phil. i. 21, (1706).

⁹⁴³‘In the day the soul takes Christ it gives up its own will and resigns itself to his will, saying from henceforth, *Thy will be done*. And much of this death consists in holding by and renewing that resignation. It makes one’s will yield to the will of the Lord, as the wax to the seal.’ Boston, *CW*, III.350. *Those that are in Christ are dead to the world*, 342-353, Col. iii. 3, (1720).

⁹⁴⁴Boston, *CW*, III.405. *The Duty of yielding ourselves to the Lord*, 397-410, 2 Chron. xxx. 8 (1727).

⁹⁴⁵Boston, *CW*, IX.72. *Fear and hope, objects of the divine complacency*, 66-75, Ps. cxlvii. (1718).

⁹⁴⁶Boston, *CW*, III.319. *The pleasures of real religion*, 305-342, Prov. iii. 17, (1717).

⁹⁴⁷Boston, *CW*, VI.628.

⁹⁴⁸Boston, *CW*, VI.311. *The necessity of self-denial*, 306-18, Lk ix. 23.

determine your practice; the will of his providence, your lot. The long quarrel betwixt the Lord and yon must now be at an end, namely, whether your will or his shall be done. His will must ever govern your will, and yours stoop to his.⁹⁴⁹

It should come as no surprise to us to find that the observation of providence and the need to submit to God's will even in times of trial and affliction, should significantly exhibit themselves in Boston's sermons given they were a critical part of his own life according to his *Memoirs*.

5.4 A robust doctrine of the will of God is of practical use

As I have previously argued, Boston's Reformed doctrine of God's will is robust, leading to a number of issues that prove it has practical import. It does not lead to a life resigned to fate nor encourage a life of inactivity. If either of these were true, then why is Boston, who firmly believed in eternal election to salvation, limited atonement, and God's indefatigable will to accomplish all his desires, so vocal and persistent to preach the gospel and plead with his people to be reconciled to God? Let us remind ourselves of a number of things we have already established. Firstly, the God whose will we are dealing with is always the God made known in Christ, not an absolute God of raw power, and so we find Boston at the forefront surrounding the issue of the free offer of the Gospel in the Marrow controversy.⁹⁵⁰ Secondly, God ordains all things in such a way that takes into account the freedom he has given to his creatures. Thirdly, the normal *modus operandi* God uses to accomplish his will is through divinely established means. Taken together, it should not be surprising that Boston views this life as a state of 'probation.' This goes against the grain of the traditional Reformed view of probation which locates it chronologically pre-Fall. Boston however, repeatedly speaks about this life being a 'probation,' revealing that although he firmly believed God ordains all things, he does not ordain things in isolation from what

⁹⁴⁹Boston, *CW*, IX.454. *Sermon XLI*, 450-464, Acts xxviii, 23, (1715). Cf. VI.315; IX.50.

⁹⁵⁰See, Lachman; Thomson, Ch.10.

people do and say in their lives.⁹⁵¹ There is a need to distance the fact that God ordains all things with the idea that what God ordains he directly ‘causes’ to happen. Certainly in the case of Boston, his pastoral application of the will of God results in his fervent activity to preach the Gospel in the hope that people will respond to it and be saved. It is people’s response to the Gospel in this life that ‘primarily’ determines their eternal destination.

If God created a world without the possibility for his creatures to sin, no probationary period would have existed. That God’s creatures can rebel against him suggests he created them with a will of their own, that they are responsible agents, that what they do in life determines their eternal destinies. In the mixing pot of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, the possibility of sin was a necessary ingredient in God’s plan for humanity. The idea of a ‘probation’ for Adam is found in Gen. 2:16-17, and is present in Augustine’s theology.⁹⁵² When Calvin speaks about Adam’s original created state and the type of will he then possessed, he plainly indicates that Adam could have remained in a state of innocence and the only reason he failed to do this was because he chose otherwise. Calvin says,

In this upright state, man possessed freedom of will, by which, if he chose, he was able to obtain eternal life ... Adam, therefore, might have stood if he chose, since it was only by his own will that he fell; but it was because his will was pliable in either direction, and he had not received constancy to persevere, that he so easily fell. Still he had a free choice of good and evil; and not only so, but in the mind and will there was the highest rectitude, and all the organic parts were duly framed to obedience, until man corrupted its good properties, and destroyed himself.⁹⁵³

⁹⁵¹I am not advocating that God ordains things in response to human action but that God’s ordination of all things in his perfect knowledge and wisdom, ordains all things in such a way that they possess an inherent reality of their own. So that apples fall from trees not directly because God ordains they do, but because he has ordained the behaviour or biological make-up of apple trees to produce apples, the law of gravity, the procession of seasons, the effects of growth from the weather, etc. Yet in one sense, if God ordains all these things (and a thousand others at the macro-level of biology and function of atoms), then one can say quite simply that God does ordain that apples fall from trees. My point being, that apples do not fall from trees without behaving in a way that is perfectly natural and real to how they have been created to act.

⁹⁵²Augustine, *CG*, 2.13.1.

⁹⁵³Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.8.

Adam did not have to plunge the world into sin and invite death to the created order. Adam, and if he had stood those who followed him, need not have rebelled against God, it was always a matter of choice.

The Westminster Confession is also clear that Adam initially existed in a state of probation whereby he could have attained to eternal life by his obedience but failed to do that on account of his sin. Question twenty of the Larger Catechism says, ‘entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.’⁹⁵⁴ Adam could have chosen perpetual obedience. The notion of a probationary period and the idea of a covenant of works at the time of creation is a key part of covenant theology, of which Boston was an adherent. He follows Calvin and the Westminster Confession in testifying to the probation idea, held out to humanity to determine where they will spend eternity; ‘Confirmation in a righteous state, is a reward of grace, given upon continuing righteous through the state of trial; and would have been given to Adam, if he had stood out the time given for probation by the Creator; and accordingly is given to the saints, upon account of the merits of Christ ...’⁹⁵⁵

The idea of a probationary period is an important one for Boston who identifies it as pertaining to our earthly lives post-Fall. It reiterates the truth that everything God created was good, it was humanity exercising its free will that led to the entrance of sin and death. The invasion of evil into a good creation was made possible by God but actualized by mankind. Mankind failed the initial probation of retaining a state of innocence, but another probationary period is now active, it is possible to regain paradise lost, it all depends on whether a person believes in the Lord Jesus as Saviour (Jn 3:16-18). The failure of the first probation had dire

⁹⁵⁴WCF, LC, Q.20. See also, SC, Q.12, and WC, VI.II.

⁹⁵⁵Boston, *Fourfold State*, 13.

consequences, a failure of the second probation has eternal consequences, but the probation is real. God has ordained that we exercise liberty of the will, and ordained that our decisions are our decisions, and ordained that our decisions bear consequences.⁹⁵⁶ None of God's ordination detracts from the reality of our ability to will freely. 'Yet, O house of Israel, you say, "The way of the Lord is not just." But I will judge each of you according to his own ways' (Ezek. 33:20).

If Boston views this life as a state of probation⁹⁵⁷ and trial, whatever the relation of God's eternal election is to this life, it is one that upholds genuine human freedom and action rather than annulling it. 'There is no returning to this life, to amend what is amiss; it is a state of probation and trial, which terminates at death.'⁹⁵⁸ In his sermons this point is further elaborated, in *The Lord's helping his people*, Boston says, 'God has appointed this life for the time of a trial, when it is ended, the sentence is passed, and no place remains for a new time of trial.'⁹⁵⁹ Although Boston firmly believed in the WCF's 'God ordains whatsoever comes to pass,' there is actually so little of the divine decrees mentioned when he preaches a Gospel message – the emphasis is nearly always on mankind's responsibility to accept what Christ has done and not to reject so great a salvation.⁹⁶⁰ The first practical use of holding to a robust doctrine of God's will is therefore, that God's ordination of all things provides all things with an inherent reality that has been given by God to be exercised in its own freedom and sphere of operation.

⁹⁵⁶'The whole tenor of Scripture, and all God's treatment of man in Providence and in Redemption, point to this - that the present world is designed as a state of probation, to give to each an opportunity of deliberately making his choice between good and evil ... Life and death, good and evil, must be so placed before him, and his own will be left so far free, as to render the choice truly his own.' Forbes, 58.

⁹⁵⁷Boston, *CW*, X.429.

⁹⁵⁸Boston, *Fourfold State*, 312.

⁹⁵⁹Boston, *CW*, IV.69. *The Lord's helping his people*, 52-60, 1 Sam. vii. 12 (1707).

⁹⁶⁰'This world was ordained to be the place of trial, the other the place of retribution, according to men's works. The trial cannot always last, otherwise it would be no trial; but the retribution may very well last for ever, and really will do so. Therefore we must necessarily remove out of this world as the place of trial, into the other place of retribution, which therefore must be looked on as our settled abode, Matt. xxv.' Boston, *CW*, V.561. *Readiness for our removal into the other world opened up, urged and enforced*, 556-586, Lk xii. 40, (1730).

Once creaturely freedom and reality to act has been established, as it was in Boston's own theology, a host of further practical pastoral applications flow from his doctrine of God's will. The way in which God governs all things by his providence can sometimes lead to a call or incitement to labour for the Lord. In his sermon *Believers labouring for their reward*, Boston says,

You have the call of providence. What may be the conduct of providence towards each of you in particular, you ought to observe. I dare not but say, that the dispensation of providence towards this congregation at this time, calls us to stir up ourselves and to set about our work. The state of affairs also, in this land at this day, has a loud call to us. Many are afraid of a stroke to these nations; and while such affairs are in agitation, it is unaccountable to be idled or unconcerned.⁹⁶¹

Far from leading to apathy, a robust doctrine of the will of God results in action. In another sermon entitled *A caveat against receiving the Gospel in vain*, Boston notes that it is precisely because God's will is sovereign and he ordains all things that ministers are encouraged to preach the Gospel, in the knowledge that God uses the proclamation of his word in accordance with his will.⁹⁶² The will of God is therefore an encouragement to labour for the Lord, to preach the Gospel and also to pray.⁹⁶³ In *Of the Spirit's help in prayer*, Boston indicates that those who observe providence may be enriched in their prayer lives and pray more earnestly,⁹⁶⁴ it may also help the person praying to realize that what God requires of his creatures according to his commandments and what he ordains to happen may differ.⁹⁶⁵ This is not because the will of God is at variance with itself as if his revealed will and secret will were fighting for dominance but simply that God

⁹⁶¹Boston, *CW*, IV.299. *Believers labouring for their reward*, 268-308, Heb. iv. 11 (1706).

⁹⁶²Boston, *CW*, II.444. *A caveat against receiving the Gospel in vain*, 443-454, 2 Cor. vi. 1.

⁹⁶³'That we are to eye his sovereign power and dominion over all, in our address to him, believing that he is able to help us in our greatest straits, that nothing is too hard for him but he can do whatsoever he will, Psal. cxv. 3. This is a noble ground for faith.' Boston, *CW*, II.564. *The preface of the Lord's prayer*, 561-65, Matt. vi. 9.

⁹⁶⁴'Be careful observers of providence, Psalm cvii ... The spirit is in these wheels; and more people are set to observe these motions, the more they will readily get to observe. This is a way to carry you off formality in prayer, and give you an errand in good earnest to the throne of grace, whether in the way of petition, confession, or thanksgiving.' Boston, *CW*, IX.72. *Of the Spirit's help in prayer*, 19-81, Rom. viii. 26, (1727).

⁹⁶⁵Boston, *CW*, IX.106. *Of God's hearing of prayer*, 97-123, Ps. lxxv. 2, (1728).

reveals what is good for mankind while ordaining that people have the freedom to disobey.⁹⁶⁶

Another practical application of Boston's doctrine of God's will comes from his belief that those who observe providence can be led into the very thing God designed them for in this life. Again, this speaks of Boston's belief in the ability of people to 'read' providence but also of the need to submit to one's lot in life.

In *The third petition*, Boston says,

We must act according to the will of providence, Acts xiii. 36. and we have need of grace for it. When God by his providence puts work into our hands, and gives us abilities and occasions to serve him, we are obliged to employ all for his service, else we answer not the design. Mercies and rods have a call. And every one is by providence put into some particular station, with some talents, less or more, for the duties of that station. He does the will of God's providence, that employs his interest, gifts, and abilities to his calling, moving in his own sphere prudently, constantly, and vigorously, as those in heaven do.⁹⁶⁷

It is worth reminding ourselves that although Boston strongly favours Christians observing providence, providence is always subservient to the word of God. There is a harmony between providence and God's word.⁹⁶⁸ Boston says, 'Providence is a curious piece of embroidery, and the word is the pattern.'⁹⁶⁹ Again, he says, 'We are to observe providences, but not to make a Bible of them; but bring them to the word, and that will open the mysteries of providence.'⁹⁷⁰ Boston highlights the danger of separating providence from the word, whereas

⁹⁶⁶Fisk says, 'shall we say (as do the strict Calvinists) that God has a revealed will, and a secret will which is not in agreement with his revealed will, thus exposing God to the charge of insincerity and hypocrisy?' Fisk, 202. One is left wondering why God is insincere or hypocritical for revealing to mankind how they *ought* to act and yet letting them choose if they obey him or not, thus ensuring their freedom?

⁹⁶⁷Boston, *CW*, II.598-99. *The third petition*, 586-601, Matt. vi. 10.

⁹⁶⁸'Providence often has an odd aspect in our view, till we carry the matter to the Bible; and there we see it exactly answering the word.' Boston, *Repentance*, 212. Elsewhere Boston places Scripture above providence as a guiding principle for life. 'Providence is not our Bible; the works of God may be very various, but the word of promise is always the same, it is never moved.' Boston, *CW*, VI.352. Cf. VI.357.

⁹⁶⁹Boston, *CW*, I.214. Every experience of life is providentially an accomplishment of Scripture, of which Boston groups together under the five headings of, 1. Scripture-doctrines, 2. Scripture-prophecies, 3. Scripture-promises, 4. Scripture-threatenings, and, 5. Scripture-examples.

⁹⁷⁰Boston, *CW*, VI.649.

submitting to providence under the authority and teaching of the word is part of what it means to walk with God.⁹⁷¹ If this balance is achieved, the Christian can know that they walk before God in accordance with his will; in accord with God's revealed will which the word clearly declares and in accord with his providential will as they submit to their lot, giving thanks for all their blessings from God and acknowledging too that their trials are part of God's will for them.⁹⁷² Boston's belief in the need to observe the out-workings of the sovereign will of God is a source of comfort to him,⁹⁷³ both in life and in death.⁹⁷⁴

The incorporation of the doctrine of the will of God by Boston into his sermons for the use of pastoral application reveals that the doctrine of God's will is not just a subject of metaphysical and philosophical interest, but it is a very practical doctrine for the body of Christ. The universal plan of the divine decree revealed in providence is intricate and complex but it reveals it is run by a single director of operations.⁹⁷⁵ As a result, the harmony that exists within providence is evidenced by the irony that is often retrospectively viewed in history, showing that God deliberately works all things out, displaying his justice and part of the interplay between his revealed and secret will. Boston says,

Adam will be as God, and he becomes like the beast that perisheth. David's pride of the numbers of his people is punished by the loss of seventy thousand of them. Rachel must have children, or she cannot live; she gets them and dies in bringing one forth. The Jews crucify the Lord of glory, lest the Romans should come and take away their place and their nation; and that is the very thing that brings them.⁹⁷⁶

There is a mindful concern within Boston to emphasize the practical application of providence as well as the doctrine itself. This is an ever present result of the

⁹⁷¹Boston, *CW*, X.605. *Enoch's character and translation explained: with a description of walking with God*, 580-636, Gen. v. 24, (1716).

⁹⁷²Boston, *CW*, X.610.

⁹⁷³Boston, *CW*, IX.244. *Sermon XXIII*, 230-244, Isa. xxxii. 2, (1715).

⁹⁷⁴Boston, *CW*, V.560. *Readiness for our removal into the other world opened up, urged and enforced*, 556-586, Lk xii. 40, (1730).

⁹⁷⁵'The mystery of providence, in the government of the world, is, in all the parts thereof, the building reared up of God, in exact conformity to the plan of his decree ... So that there is never a crook in one's lot, but may run up to this original.' Boston, *CW*, III.508.

⁹⁷⁶Boston, *CW*, I.219.

preacher within. This proves to be of immense value, grounding Boston's doctrinal conclusions in the reality of life and showing his parishioners that life ought to be bound to true doctrine.

5.4.1 Summary of Boston's pastoral application of the will of God in his sermons

We have shown that Boston's personal preoccupation with the practice of observing providence and God's providential will overflowed into his sermons on a regular basis to illustrate a wide range of practical pastoral points. The particular areas Boston targets pastorally as he applies his doctrine of God's will include the need to acknowledge that God is God, and sovereignly reigns over all the earth. As his children observe the unfolding of God's will in providence they can discern God speaking to them, sometimes with rebukes or chastisements, sometimes with encouragements and hope. This is particularly advantageous when the Christian is faced with affliction, for being armed with the knowledge that God ordains all things for his glory and his people's good, the Christian can trust that God does all things well. The ultimate goal for the child of God is to submit his will to God's as did Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, 'nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.' When this blessed and hallowed state is achieved the Christian is truly following in the footsteps of Christ, trusting the Father by the help of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the will of God is then of immense practical import as the Christian prays to God, is lead by God, entrusts their life entirely to God, and makes the most of their life and opportunities before God.

5.5 The pastoral applications of the will of God in Boston's published works

We have demonstrated that the doctrine of the will of God was an important aspect of Boston's theology and that providence and God's providential will were a central aspect of his everyday life. This manifested itself with an abundance of evidence in his *Memoirs* where we saw Boston pay acute attention to his lot in life

as originating from the hand of God, and the repeated confession that the greatest struggle of his life was submitting to God's will. This was reaffirmed to be true when reviewing his sermons. Boston's sermons pick up and elaborate his own concerns and thoughts regarding the will of God. His sermon applications drawn from his doctrine of God's will become in a very real sense a reflection of his own life experience in the light of his adherence to Reformed teaching on God's will. Boston recorded his own interaction with his belief in God's will which issued in many general references to it in his sermons; among these general references we have been able to identify four areas of more specific and detailed analysis. Nevertheless, these four areas, acknowledging God is God, observing providence, affliction and submission, were identified in sermons not necessarily dedicated to those subjects and were confined to the limitations of a thirty minute sermon.⁹⁷⁷ So when Boston takes the time to focus specifically on these issues in series of sermons drawn together to form books in their own right, we should expect these issues to be further developed and explored. We shall turn our attention to *The Crook in the Lot* and *Repentance* to see if this is true.⁹⁷⁸ These both contain a detailed and prolonged focus on applying the confessional dogmatic statements regarding the eternal divine counsel, to the benefit and aid of Boston's struggling parishioners to lead lives that bring glory to God. It is in these works that Boston's life-long preoccupation with observing providence, and his frequent practice of highlighting God's will in his sermons, are put into direct pastoral application as a lasting memorandum on which the sheep of Christ's flock can still feed.

⁹⁷⁷Boston, *CW*, II.374fn.

⁹⁷⁸We shall also use information drawn from Boston's other published works but some have very little to say concerning God's will. *The Fourfold State* has more to say but it deals primarily with doctrinal issues around God's will rather than pastoral applications, and Ryken has already dealt in detail with this work albeit on a different issue.

5.6 Boston's Pastoral Application of the will of God in The Crook in the Lot

Boston's *The Crook in the Lot*⁹⁷⁹ is a work which deals directly with the unfolding of the sovereign will of God via providence in the lives of his creatures. It is a work of pastoral advice on how to face those things in life which could be described as 'trials' or 'afflictions.' It is in effect a translation of Boston's doctrine of the will of God into practical ways to live life in the face of difficult and trying times. It is a pastor's call to the sheep of his pasture to provide them with the ways and means to live as the people of God, in a hostile world ruined by sin but governed by the hand of their heavenly Father. More than any other of Boston's works, *The Crook in the Lot* is a direct pastoral application of his doctrine of God's will, as an exposition of Ecclesiastes 7:13, 'Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight which He hath made crooked.' A 'crook' is therefore anything that comes into our lives which goes against the grain and makes life difficult.

5.6.1 The Introduction

Boston begins by calling attention to the need for a right view of God in times of affliction. He highlights the importance of having a proper view of afflictions, as God's word reveals that they are just, issuing as they do from the hand of God in a way that reflects the divine perfections and purposes.⁹⁸⁰ It is only a right view of God that will enable a Christian, by faith, to look past the situation they are facing and to find comfort in God's ways and ultimately in God himself. It is the Word of God that reveals the work of God, and this in turn helps us understand who God is.

As Boston works his way through Ecclesiastes 7, he makes some initial observations on how Christians are to live under God's will. Firstly, it is better

⁹⁷⁹Boston, *CL*.

⁹⁸⁰Boston, *CL*, 1.

to be humble and patient rather than proud and impatient when experiencing difficulties, because submitting to what God is doing in our lives is better than fighting against God. We may not think that what is happening in life is for our best, but because God is the Father of his children we need to trust in who God is despite the situation and circumstances that we visibly see. In fact, simply looking at our present circumstances with no eye towards God is a fatal flaw in Boston's view, for it leads us into a state of anxiety. People are apt to focus on their afflictions and constantly dwell on them in an unhelpful manner, looking for its causes everywhere (as Boston all too often did himself). If, however, people lifted up their eyes off of their affliction and on to God (who alone can change it, having sent it), if they could perceive something of his hand in the situation, they may be all the more able to bear it. After all, Boston has already mentioned the benefits of looking to the author of crooks for assistance in them.⁹⁸¹

It is the God who ordains everything that comes to pass, that matches the particular and peculiar lots to each and every individual, and God never does anything without the best, wisest and most righteous reasons. We cannot change the trials that come into our lives, but those trials can change us, as we submit to God's will we face the difficulties of life in the correct way. Boston plainly states that earthly afflictions are from the hand of God, and he who controls the type also controls the duration. He warns his readers not to wrestle in vain to make straight what God has bent since it is only God who can change the situation. If people properly grasped this, they would cease to grumble and complain, and in silent submission they would endure the chastising rod of the heavenly Father.⁹⁸² We begin to see that Boston's pastoral applications of God's will made in his sermons are the subject of a more thorough investigation in this book. Therefore from the start, we see that the 'crook' in our lot comes from God. This forms the basis for much of what Boston has to say to his readership, everything else is built upon this foundation and it the starting point for his second chapter.

⁹⁸¹Boston, *CL*, 3.

⁹⁸²Boston, *CL*, 3.

5.6.2 Chapter 2

Boston begins this chapter reiterating the universal experience of crooks,⁹⁸³ in that everyone has them, but also that every person's crook is different. Boston makes a wise pastoral application of this last point, reminding his people that no life was ever crook-free. It is all too often the case that people view other's lives, with their hidden crooks, as being problem free, and envy them to the point of adding to their own affliction.⁹⁸⁴ Boston of course, reminds his reader that this is not so, not even Christ's earthly life was without crooks.⁹⁸⁵ Boston goes on to speak of Haman and how his lot must have seemed enviable given his riches, status, and position in society, yet Mordecai was a huge 'crook' in Haman's lot, to the point where he could no longer enjoy any of his blessings (Esther 5:13).⁹⁸⁶ Although the crooks in life come from the hand of God, crooks only exist because of the Fall, originally being a result of sin. It was sin that introduced death and sorrow and disobedience into the world, and it is as these things unfold that God wields them as a master craftsman for his people's good and his own glory. Boston's doctrine of God's will is pastorally applied specifically at this point:

In respect of the will and purposes of God, there is no such thing as a crook in anyone's lot. Take the most harsh and dismal dispensation in one's lot, lay it to the eternal decree, made in the depth of infinite wisdom before the world began, and it will answer it exactly, without the least deviation, "all things being wrought after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). Lay it to the providential will of God in the government of the world, and there is a perfect harmony.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸³There is a certain train or course of events, by the providence of God, falling to every one of us during our life in the world, and that is our lot, as being allotted to us by the sovereign God, our Creator and Governor ...'. Boston, *CL*, 4.

⁹⁸⁴At one point Boston answers the question of the person who says, 'no-one has ever experienced the strange trials that I am going through under providence.' Boston reminds his reader that others have trodden the same paths even if their footprints have long disappeared, God's chosen paths for his people ought not to produce grumbling but submission to his guiding hand. Boston, *Fourfold State*, 208.

⁹⁸⁵Boston, *CL*, 4-5.

⁹⁸⁶Boston, *CL*, 5.

⁹⁸⁷Boston, *CL*, 8-9.

If God's will is always done then his people have no reason to distrust his ways, especially as he has revealed in his Word that trials will come (1 Pet. 4:12-13). If difficulties are coming our way under the providence of God we need to look past the 'unsightliness' of the trial to the God of wonders who directs it our way.⁹⁸⁸ Once our eyes are directed away from God and purely onto the difficulty presently faced, the devil has an easy job in entangling the child of God in sin. Boston says, 'the crook in the lot is a handle whereby the tempter makes surprising discoveries of latent corruption even in the best.'⁹⁸⁹ Boston reminds us that particular trials are tailored specifically for each individual, often being delivered at our most 'tender part,' the one place we feel least able to bear it (Ps. 55:12-13). The area of our life that is targeted is often the one that cherishes a hidden sin. God creates crooks to fit specific sins in different individuals, this reveals the omniscience, omnipresence, and wisdom of God's will, that in all places he tailor makes crooks to draw people away from their 'gods' to himself.⁹⁹⁰

There are certain parts of *The Crook in the Lot* where we see Boston the preacher shining through, providing numerous biblical examples to aid his points. He presents his observation that crooks usually display themselves in one of four ways. Firstly, in the 'natural' or 'physical' part of one's life, manifested in illness or bodily defects, something visually unpleasant. He shows that,

Tender eyes made the crook in the lot of Leah (Genesis 29:17). Rachel's beauty was balanced with barrenness, and that was the crook in her lot (Genesis 30:1). Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, was, it seems, no personable man, but of a mean, outward appearance, for which fools were apt to condemn him (2 Corinthians 10:10). Timothy was of a weak and sickly frame (1 Timothy 5:23). And there is yet a far more considerable crook in the lot of the lame, the blind, the deaf and the dumb. Some are weak to a degree in their intellects; and it is the crook in the lot of several bright souls to be overcast with clouds,

⁹⁸⁸'faith will reveal a hidden sightliness in it under a very unsightly outward appearance; faith will perceive the suitableness thereof to the infinite goodness, love, and wisdom of God, and to the real and most valuable interests of the party. By this means a person comes to take pleasure, and that a most refined pleasure, in distresses (2 Corinthians 12:10).' Boston, *CL*, 10.

⁹⁸⁹Boston, *CL*, 11.

⁹⁹⁰Boston, *CL*, 12.

notably bemisted and darkened, from the crazy bodies they are lodged in.⁹⁹¹

This of course, Boston spoke from experience, where a clear and heartfelt allusion to his wife's condition is striking.⁹⁹² Secondly, crooks afflict people with regards to their honour, when their name or reputation is affected, as in the case of David (Ps. 31:11-13). Thirdly, a crook may appear in the vocational aspect of one's life. A person may work hard and be industrious, plying their trade with skill and diligence but God opposes their efforts, and providence undoes their hard work, frustrates their plans, and robs them of success, leaving them in the grip of sore afflictions.⁹⁹³ Lastly, crooks can appear within a person's relationships, the very 'joints of society.'⁹⁹⁴ The loss or illness of relatives (Matt. 15:22), marital problems (Job 19:17; 1 Samuel 25:25), parenting problems (1 Samuel 2:25; 20:30-33), commonly afflict mankind. Often, it is in these very joints of society where people expect to find comfort and help, that burdens are common and most pressingly felt;⁹⁹⁵ David's son tried to kill him, Job's wife tries to make him sin, one of Jesus' close friends betray him.

After Boston explains what 'crooks' are, he proceeds to demonstrate how they are of God's design and why he uses them. Boston's evidence that crooks are of God's making comprises the following reasons. Crooks, by their very nature are either punishments or afflictions, and so are considered to be 'penal evils.' Since crooks are a form of penal evil and all penal evil is expressly attributed to God (Amos 3:6), crooks themselves must come from God's hand. Next, he mentions how the Scriptural doctrine of providence plainly teaches that God directs every part of every affliction that ever happens according to his will.⁹⁹⁶ The providential hand that gave us life, also directs us in life, and all that life directs at

⁹⁹¹Boston, *CL*, 13.

⁹⁹²See, Boston, *Memoirs*, 346.

⁹⁹³Boston, *CL*, 15.

⁹⁹⁴Boston, *CL*, 15.

⁹⁹⁵'So men oftentimes find their greatest cross where they expected their greatest comfort. Sin has unhinged the whole creation, and made every relation susceptible to the crook.' Boston, *CL*, 17

⁹⁹⁶Boston, *CL*, 18.

us (Matt. 10:29-30), including of course, the crooks in our lot. Finally, crooks come from God because he ordains everything that happens.

God has, by an eternal decree, immovable as mountains of brass, Zechariah 6:1, appointed the whole of every one's lot, the crooked parts thereof, as well as the straight. By this same eternal decree the high and low parts of the earth, the mountains and the valleys, were appointed; the heights and the depths, the prosperity and adversity, in the lot to the inhabitants thereof are determined; and they are brought about, in time, in a perfect agreeableness thereto.⁹⁹⁷

It is Boston's doctrine of God's will, in the form of the Westminster standards and after the fashion of Calvin's theology that is in use here. He says, 'The mystery of providence, in the government of the world, is, in all the parts thereof, the building reared up of God in exact conformity to the plan in His decree ... So there is never a crook in one's lot that cannot be traced to this origin.'⁹⁹⁸ It is Boston's strong doctrine of God's will that provides him with confidence and assurance in the face of trials. He can exhort people to trust in God and submit to his ways precisely because he believes all things come from the hand of God, whether as correction or discipline or punishment, but always in accord with God's justice, love, mercy and grace. Boston's declaration that all crooks come from God's hand is not made in isolation from what he elsewhere states concerning God's use of means and causation. Job was directly robbed by Chaldeans, Satan instigated their action, and God ordained it could occur, but God was in control of the situation.

Having established that crooks come from God Boston turns his attention to show how crooks may work. He begins by distinguishing between sinless and sinful crooks. Sinless crooks include things such as poverty (1 Sam. 2:7) or illness (Ex. 4:11), these Boston says, by God's wisdom and power flow directly from his hand.⁹⁹⁹ Sinful crooks however, defile a person as well as afflict them, so that a

⁹⁹⁷Boston, *CL*, 19.

⁹⁹⁸Boston, *CL*, 19.

⁹⁹⁹Boston, *CL*, 19. Cf. 'Such crooks in the lot are of God's making in the most ample sense, and in their full comprehension, being the direct effects of His agency, as well as the heavens and the earth.' Boston, *CL*, 20.

person is afflicted on account of a sinful action, for example, the loss of a wife because she was murdered. Boston says of sinful crooks that they are not produced by God in the same manner (being unable to sin), rather, he ordains them by his divine permission, and they operate under his constraining hand. Even these occur towards some good end.¹⁰⁰⁰ Here again, Boston's doctrine of God's will impacts his pastoral wisdom, and he even clarifies what he means by the term 'permission.'¹⁰⁰¹ When God removes his restraining grace, mankind falls freely into the darkest corruption, fulfilling the sinful lusts of the flesh, but even the most wicked of all rational creatures is bound by God's power and permission (Job 1:12). Although Satan does every evil he can within the boundaries permitted him, he can never cross those boundaries. In another instance, God uses the jealousy of Joseph's brothers to sell him but for the good of his whole family, he also uses the sinfulness of Absalom to punish David for the Uriah incident. This is no different from Boston's understanding of the place of sin within the will of God, where God uses the sinful free actions of his creatures for pure and holy purposes.

Boston inquires into why God makes crooks in the lots of his creatures, and says this knowledge is universally sought after.¹⁰⁰² There are numerous general reasons why God may introduce a crook into someone's life. These include, to test their state as to whether or not they are in the faith; compare Job who was found upright with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22) whose lot proved he was not a disciple of Christ. Another reason is to wean us from the things of this world and produce in us a heavenly perspective, in the same way that the prodigal's circumstances reminded him of his true home (Luke 15:17). Some crooks are served as a reminder of sin, a work of conviction that may lead to repentance, and some are for punishment of sin. Even when some sins are

¹⁰⁰⁰Boston, *CL*, 20-21.

¹⁰⁰¹'Though He is not the Author of those sinful crooks, causing them to be by the efficacy of His power, yet, if He did not permit them, willing not to hinder them, they could not be at all ...'. Boston, *CL*, 21.

¹⁰⁰²Boston, *CL*, 23-24.

forgiven eternally, the punishment for those sins may remain throughout life, hence the sword never departed from David's house though he repented with tears and was forgiven for murdering Uriah (2 Samuel 12:10). A crook may be for the prevention of sin or equally used to discover a sin. The eloquence of Boston's example at this point reminds us of his gifted abilities as pastor and preacher, he adopts a universally known illustration, saying,

There are some corruptions in every man's heart which lie, as it were, so near the surface that they are ready on every turn to rise up; but then there are others also which lie so very deep that they are scarcely observed at all. But as the fire under the pot makes the scum to rise up, appear atop, and run over, so the crook in the lot rises up from the bottom and brings out such corruptions as otherwise one could hardly imagine to be within. Who would have suspected such strength of passion in meek Moses as he displayed at the waters of strife, and for which he was kept out of Canaan (Psalm 106:32-33; Numbers 20:13).¹⁰⁰³

Such discovery of sin both humbles and makes known the true state of our spiritual condition. And to that end, some crooks are designed to help Christians, whereby they can exercise certain fruit of the Spirit. For example, without any crooks, patience and long suffering would be superfluous. So we see how Boston uses his doctrine of the will of God and all that it encompasses, God's sovereignty, his decree, providence, free will, the existence of sin, how he pastorally provides the believer with a way of making sense of the trials of life and gives suggestions on how to best cope under those trials. He mentions that the crook in a person's lot is the product of providence with the purpose of revealing the true nature of a person's conduct and character. Where the grace of God is present in a life, God uses crooks to help that grace shine. The crook can produce many of the fruit of the Spirit as God uses it as a refining fire to purge away sinful dross that is only removed by the crook.¹⁰⁰⁴ Boston takes the subject of trials and tribulations and produces from it a message of hope and grace, all stemming from his knowledge of God's sovereign will and ways. This echoes what we identified in Boston's sermons, namely the dual aspects of challenge and

¹⁰⁰³Boston, *CL*, 30.

¹⁰⁰⁴Boston, *CL*, 31.

encouragement, in which I identify the work of a skilful shepherd. Boston's Etterick congregation ever warmed to him as his ministry progressed and I discern it had something to do with his ability to help his flock grow in Christ, as he challenges and encourages them to understand and submit to the sovereign will of God.

Boston also sees a threefold use of why crooks come into people's lives and they are all positive – they can be used for reproof, consolation and exhortation. The crook may be a reproof to the person who has no thought of God and no understanding of his ways (Ps. 28:5). Boston says that a deep guilt belongs to those who only view the secondary causes of their afflictions without ever acknowledging the first cause, that is, that God is God.¹⁰⁰⁵ Similarly, the person who attributes their circumstances to luck denying the hand of God, walks in blindness. The crook of reproof is also aimed at the unsubmissive, 'whose hearts, like the troubled sea, swell and boil, fret and murmur, and cannot be at rest under the crook in their lot. This is a most sinful and dangerous course.'¹⁰⁰⁶ The reason for this is that the one who complains about their lot is really moaning against God, as in the case of Numbers 14:2ff. This kind of person is more likely to look at the first cause alone without ever considering secondary causes. A balance is required. Finally, the crook of reproof is used against the careless and unfruitful who resist their crooks not searching for the design of God therein, and so miss out on the blessing. The three reproofs mentioned above are essentially aimed at those who fail to acknowledge God is God, those who refuse to submit to God's will, and those who neglect the observation of providence, three of his four primary applications of his doctrine of God's will surfacing again.

The second of Boston's pastoral applications of the unfolding of providence in the crook of reproof deals with the remaining primary application missing above, that of affliction, Boston says,

¹⁰⁰⁵Boston, *CL*, 33.

¹⁰⁰⁶Boston, *CL*, 35.

This speaks comfort to the afflicted children of God. Whatever is the crook in your lot, it is of God's making; and therefore you may look upon it kindly. Since it is your Father who has made it for you, question not but there is a favourable design in it towards you. A discreet child welcomes his father's rod, knowing that, being a father, he seeks his benefit thereby, and shall not God's children welcome the crook in their lot, as designed by their Father, who cannot mistake His measures to work for their good, according to the promise?¹⁰⁰⁷

Because God has a design in all that takes place the believer can trust in the discipline of their Father. The third use of this doctrine is found in exhortation, an exhortation to submit to the crook in the knowledge that it is of God's doing. Boston describes the crook that is the result of a person being treated unjustly, and notices the interplay of God's will and its relationship to causation and justice. He speaks of the crook as being 'immediately' from man's hand yet 'mediately' from God's, but it is as a penal evil God directs its occurrence. He speaks about God being the 'principle' party as opposed to 'lesser principles,' and if the latter are unjustly treating someone we can rest assured God does not, using the occasion for personal correction, as seems fitting to the divine wisdom and decree.¹⁰⁰⁸ Boston's main message regarding crooks is that we need to submit to them under the sovereign hand of God. Everyone has some crook, the Christian is guaranteed to encounter lots (Jn. 16:33; 1 Pt. 1:5-7, and often more severe), and if we fail to submit to them we shall not only miss out on the blessing intended for us (Heb. 12:11), but add to our condemnation.

5.6.3 Chapter 3

God can choose what he likes to be a crook in anyone's life and it will only be removed at his bidding. This is the primary message of chapter three. Boston begins this chapter based on a founding principle of his doctrine of God. He says, 'God keeps the choice of everyone's crook to Himself, and therein He exerts His sovereignty. It is not left to our opinion what that crook shall be or what shall be

¹⁰⁰⁷Boston, *CL*, 37.

¹⁰⁰⁸Boston, *CL*, 38.

our peculiar burden; but as the potter makes of the same clay one vessel for one use and another for another use, so God makes one crook for one person and another for another, according to His own will and pleasure.¹⁰⁰⁹ The things we face in life are planned by God, designed for our good and his glory; we do not put in requests for certain crooks we think are needed, because we never recognize the need for discipline. Mankind is like a flower that would love to bask all day in the sun not knowing it is slowly withering, frowning upon the stormy winds that bring the rain, not realizing that the discomfort of what the storm brings is what makes it grow strong. But God knows us perfectly, and he introduces crooks to our lives where he sees fit,¹⁰¹⁰ and they remain in place as long as God appoints them.

Although God directs each and every crook, it is mankind's natural response to try and straighten the crook they are facing rather than submit to it. A crook is a yoke hard to bear and mankind resists its weight (Jer. 31:18), and desires its removal.¹⁰¹¹ Although crooks may be removed, even by the use of means, they are never removed purely by the force of mankind but by the authorization of God, in his way and in his time. Why are crooks managed by God in this way? Boston answers because everything is in total dependence on God, a lesson which repeatedly needs emphasizing to help mankind learn the true nature of relationship with God.¹⁰¹² It is this display of God's sovereignty in our lives that brings to remembrance our finite, human weakness, and smashes to pieces all thoughts of autonomous independence, which lays pride in the dust of humiliation. Our plans and desires are always subject to the will of God.

How does Boston suggest we face the crooks in our lives? After submitting to God's hand upon us we can pray that he may remove the present trial. Our own attempts to rid ourselves of crooks are pointless, and often make the matter worse,

¹⁰⁰⁹Boston, *CL*, 42.

¹⁰¹⁰Boston, *CL*, 42-43.

¹⁰¹¹Which is not necessarily sinful (Matt. 26:39).

¹⁰¹²Boston, *CL*, 45.

God is the only one who can straighten out the crooks, and it is a work he delights in.¹⁰¹³ Notice again Boston's language as he applies his doctrine of God's will into pastoral wisdom, 'Our faithless, out-of-the-way attempts to even the crook are but our fool's haste, and that is no speed at all, as in the case of Abraham's going into Hagar. God is the first mover, who sets all the wheels in motion for evening the crook, which without Him will remain immovable (Hosea 2:21-22).'¹⁰¹⁴ It is a different way of saying that God the first cause governs all things in his providence, and yet although his decree is from eternity we are to bring our prayers to God's throne because his decree does not destroy the reality of our freedom and actions, but rather establishes their existence.¹⁰¹⁵ Boston's pastoral theology is not only consistent with his doctrine but feeds on it, ever applying to the concrete circumstances of life the concrete truths of who God is and how God acts. This indicates that the historic Reformed doctrine of God's will is incredibly practical and Boston always points his readership back to God, proving he had the skill of a faithful pastor.

As we can not escape from God's sovereignty in his world, Boston urges us to continue with our crooks in a way that is becoming and beneficial as children of God. For this we need patience, Christian fortitude,¹⁰¹⁶ and an eye for profit - seeing the advantages that may be hidden in the crook. He uses the example of a bad tasting medicine that brings physical health as a picture of a God sent crook that works spiritual health. In light of the immovable will of God Boston urges his people to view their crooks as necessary, and if they are to continue for long periods, to embrace them with 'Christian resignation.'¹⁰¹⁷ Sometimes the more we struggle the more painful our situation becomes, we will struggle enough in

¹⁰¹³'He loves to be employed in evening crooks, and calls us to employ Him that way. Psalm 50:15 ... The straits of the children of men afford a large field for displaying His glorious perfections, which otherwise would be wanting (Exodus 15:11).' Boston, *CL*, 47.

¹⁰¹⁴Boston, *CL*, 48.

¹⁰¹⁵'Delays are not denials of suits at the court of heaven, but trials of the faith and patience of the petitioners.' Boston, *CL*, 49.

¹⁰¹⁶'Satan's work is, by the crook, either to bend or break people's spirits, and oftentimes by bending to break them. Our work is to carry evenly under it, steering a middle course, guarding against splitting on the rocks on either side.' Boston, *CL*, 53.

¹⁰¹⁷Boston, *CL*, 55.

accepting the crook but struggle more in resisting it. We are to take up our cross rather than constantly push it away, we are not to please ourselves in life but him who gave us life. Boston reminds his readers that a proper view of eternity is helpful in putting their crooks in perspective, for all God's children will one day be free of them, and even now, God is present to uphold us in them.¹⁰¹⁸ God's eternal will is both the first cause and the key to every crook of life, and Boston unlocks his doctrine of the will of God to disclose how we are to live in relation to it. Just because God is the Almighty and his will is never thwarted, this does not mean his children will be free from pain or trials, on the contrary, they above all others will be trained by the discipline of God (Heb. 12:3-11). In that sense, a crook in the life of the believer is a sign of God's fatherly love and affection for them, so Boston pastors his readers to bear their crooks after the manner of Christ who entrusted himself to the will of his Father. Beside the eternal perspective as an aid for weighing the true worth of trials, Boston elsewhere suggests the very temporal approach of recognizing that things could be worse than they are!¹⁰¹⁹ This of course is nearly always true, but rarely appreciated by those to whom it is said. Bearing crooks after the manner of Christ is by far the more sensitive approach in Boston's pastoral application, but his other point is valid, in that he is trying to instil in his readers a right outlook on their afflictions.¹⁰²⁰

5.6.4 Chapter 4

In this chapter Boston explores what it means to consider the crook as the work of God. He notes five chief ways this is achieved.

¹⁰¹⁸'the Lord makes no crook in the lot of any that but what may be borne of them acceptably, though not sinlessly and perfectly.' Boston, *CL*, 58.

¹⁰¹⁹Boston, *Fourfold State*, 296.

¹⁰²⁰Boston's application at this point is masterful in its simplicity and effect. 'If thou be in Christ, thou mayest well bear thy cross. Death will put an end to all thy troubles. If a man on a journey be not well accommodated, where he lodges only for a night, he will not trouble himself much about the matter; because he is not to stay there, it is not his home. You are on the road to eternity; let it not disquiet you that you meet with some hardships in the inn of this world. Fret not, because it is not so well with you as with some others. One man travels with a cane in his hand; his fellow-traveller, perhaps, has but a common staff or stick: either of them will serve the turn. It is no great matter which of them be yours; both will be laid aside when you come to your journey's end.' Boston, *Fourfold State*, 298; 429.

- i. Remembering the source or the spring of the crook.
- ii. Acknowledging the hand of God in the delivery of the crook (Ps. 28:5).
- iii. Acknowledging it is a holy and wise work of God overflowing from the divine perfections.
- iv. Contemplating upon the crook as the work of God.
- v. Consideration of the crook in accordance with its end, what it will achieve.

All five of these points are pastoral applications of Boston's doctrine of the will of God. His whole pastoral approach to the trials of life is to call to remembrance God's sovereignty. Listen to Boston himself,

The decree of God purposes that crook for us from eternity ... the sealed book in which are written all the black lines that made the crook. Whatever valleys of darkness, grief, and sorrow we are carried through, we are to look on them as made by the mountains of brass, the immovable divine purposes (Zechariah 6:1) ... The providence of God brings to pass that crook for us in time (Amos 3:6). Nothing can befall us without Him in whom we live. Whatever kind of agent the creature may be in the making of our crook, whatever they have done or not done towards it, He is the spring who sets all the created wheels in motion, which ceasing, they would all stop - though He is still infinitely pure in His agency, however impure they are in theirs.¹⁰²¹

Boston is ever keen to draw on God's will as an explanation for the events of life and to make reference to Ezekiel's wheels. As we have seen, the doctrine of divine providence as the unfolding of the will of God dominated much of Boston's thinking; it is literally a matter of life and death.¹⁰²²

A crook in and of itself is not sufficient to conform us into the image of Christ, as it is only as it is used in faith that it becomes beneficial. Where there is no faith a crook may well harden a person adding to their condemnation. It is therefore only Christians who can hope to attain to a proper disposition under their crooks. Only

¹⁰²¹Boston, *CL*, 61.

¹⁰²²'God, in the course of his providence, hides some of his saints early in the grave, that they may be taken away from the evil to come. An early removal out of this world, prevents much sin and misery. - They have no ground of complaint, who get the residue of their years in Immanuel's land.' Boston, *Fourfold State*, 327.

the believer can turn their gaze at the very point at which the crook most galls them and find comfort in it as a work of God. Only the believer can trust that a purpose is involved with the crook even though it is hidden from them. Only the believer has the indwelling Spirit of God who can be called upon to work in the crook. Boston offers certain advice to the Christian that will help them endure their personal crook. He says first and foremost, to consider the trials of life as God's work, a conforming work into the image of his Son. This acknowledgment will take the sting of bitterness out of the trial and help sweeten it a little. Coupled with that, remember also the divine perfections from which the trial flows, and so rest assured the trial arrives escorted with mercy, grace, patience and justice, laid on for good, and his sovereignty and love are present so that the afflicted may be both silent and satisfied, before and in Christ.¹⁰²³

Boston's belief in the sovereignty of God, expressed in his beloved Confession of Faith as a summary of the Reformed doctrine of God's will, helped form in Boston a true pastor's heart. Who, when faced with the practical realities of life's hardships, shepherds his flock by leading them to remember who God is and what he is like, as the deepest comfort afforded to God's people. The God who ordains all things is none other than the God of all comfort and Father of mercies (2 Cor. 1:3). Boston can therefore always see the silver touch of God's grace in the darkest of trials and help God's people to view their crooks from a correct perspective. He calls his people to consider how God's work in their lives by the use of crooks, reminds them of their sin, steers them from their normal courses of sin, and corrects them in sin. God carefully selects each and every trial of life as a means to estrange people from the ways of the world and replace in their hearts a desire for glory.¹⁰²⁴ The crook viewed as a work of God draws out the bitterness of the trial, providing hope and engendering faith.

¹⁰²³Boston, *CL*, 67.

¹⁰²⁴Boston, *CL*, 67.

5.6.5 Chapter 5

The correct perspective of viewing a crook as coming from God goes hand in hand with being humble in accepting it. In this chapter, Boston views the differences between the proud and the humble in their approach to life's trials. It is better in Boston's mind to share in afflictions with the lowly than to be rich with the proud, as Proverbs 16:19 indicates. His proposition is this: there are multitudes of afflicted people in the world brought low by their hardships but they are far better off than the proud who always get their own way.¹⁰²⁵ These are those who follow the one that said, 'Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart' (Matt. 11:29), but they are a rare breed. That is to say, being afflicted is not rare, Boston has already proved the universal nature of crooks, but the rarity is found in those who marry their afflictions with a spirit of humility and submission. Only the grace of God can produce in the afflicted a heart that truly embraces a trial in submission.¹⁰²⁶ The difficulties of life, especially those which are more inconvenient than grievous, ought to be learning aids, to instruct the people of God in the ways of humility.

Boston identifies three characteristics of the humble. Firstly, their lot contains grievous affliction. God's sovereign hand upon certain individuals is majestically explained by Boston as he unfolds how God's will, through painful discipline, is actually an expression of the Father's love.

There is a yoke of affliction of one kind or other oftentimes upon them (Psalm 73:14). God is frequently visiting them as a master does his scholars and a physician his patients; whereas others are in a sort overlooked by Him (Revelation 3:19). They are accustomed to the yoke, and that from the time they enter into God's family (Psalm 129:1-3). God sees it good for them (Lamentations 3:27-28).¹⁰²⁷

Adjoined to this, there is usually some kind of affliction that God chooses specifically for his children that remains with them their entire life. This Boston

¹⁰²⁵Boston, *CL*, 70.

¹⁰²⁶Boston, *CL*, 71.

¹⁰²⁷Boston, *CL*, 72.

calls their ‘special trial,’ one that perhaps is most frequent or most heavy or runs deeper than all others, a constant point of refinement, where the flame never goes out when the rest of the fire settles.¹⁰²⁸ Secondly, to their affliction is added a lowliness of character. They think little of their person, works, and achievements, but their sin is ever before them, whereas they look past the sins of others, giving honour where it is due. These people trust in God as the Almighty, think highly of him and look to him for all things. They are subordinate to the will of God and happy for God to be in control. Thirdly, God’s grace lowers their spirit to the state of their afflicted lot. They are therefore able to submit to God’s will¹⁰²⁹ knowing his ways are just. They refrain from complaining choosing to endure their lot in silence (Lam. 3:26), one of the marks of true godliness for Boston. Unlike the wild horse who kicks up a fuss and refuses to be ridden, the humble person is like the home-reared tamed horse, which willingly bears the saddle and the weight of the rider. They have a satisfaction with their lot, able to draw comfort from the giver of circumstances despite their circumstances, appreciating the medicine whilst despising the taste, understanding its use whilst regretting the symptoms which require it, thankful for the Father’s hand that administers it.¹⁰³⁰ As a result of all this, the person with the low spirit can even rest in their affliction, in the knowledge that God will release them in his time.¹⁰³¹

Boston’s pastoral application of God’s will at this point is to direct God’s children to appropriate behaviour in the midst of their God-sent lot. He highlights the best way to be whilst experiencing either a general or particular lot, that fighting against it will add further pain but godly submission will conform the believer to the image of Christ. Boston proceeds to show how much more painful the crooks

¹⁰²⁸Boston, *CL*, 72-73.

¹⁰²⁹‘There are no hardships in our condition but we have procured them to ourselves; and it is therefore just that we kiss the rod and be silent under it, and so lower our spirits to our lot.’ Boston, *CL*, 74.

¹⁰³⁰Boston, *CL*, 76.

¹⁰³¹‘It will not be for moving for a change till heaven’s moving brings it about. So this does not hinder prayer and the use of appointed means, with dependence on the Lord, but requires faith, hope, patience, and resignation.’ Boston, *CL*, 76.

of the proud are by their natural opposition to God.¹⁰³² Although nobody enjoys trials and affliction, Boston recommends it is better to be in the low, afflicted state with a humble spirit, than to wage a futile war against the providence of God. Humility is always preferable to pride, or as Boston puts it, ‘Gold in a dunghill is more excellent than so much lead in a cabin. Why so? Humility is a part of the image of God. Pride is the masterpiece of the image of the devil.’¹⁰³³ Although crooks themselves may appear to dominate a person’s life, it is actually the person’s life that is more important, and the changes that occur in their life as a result of God’s providential dealings. Boston uses the example of two sick men to prove the point. He asks which man is in the better state, the one who is moved from a coarse bed to a comfy bed but retains his illness, or the one who remains in the coarse bed but is healed?¹⁰³⁴ The outward circumstances of life pale into insignificance compared with the inner working of God in every person. Christ’s scourging was real and exceedingly painful, but in the agony of bearing the sins of the world, the spiritual depths of anguish were far worse. It is through the changing crooks of life that God attends to his work of making his children more Christ-like (1 John 3:1-3). Only submission to this process brings blessing, and the crook that carries the most pain has the potential to produce the most fruit,¹⁰³⁵ hence from the horrors of Christ’s salvific work on the cross came fruit and life and blessings immeasurable. To be made humble during trials is better from the divine perspective than annulling the trials themselves.¹⁰³⁶ Boston exhorts his reader to dwell upon the greatness and holiness of God, as well as our own sinfulness, as this will help us become humbled before God’s sovereign will. Just as Christ humbled himself and came in the form of a servant.

¹⁰³²‘The question between heaven and us is whether God’s will or our will prevail? Our will is corrupt, God’s will is holy, and they cannot agree as one. God says in His providence that our will must yield to His; but it will not do so till the iron sinew in it is broken.’ Boston, *CL*, 78.

¹⁰³³Boston, *CL*, 81.

¹⁰³⁴Boston, *CL*, 85.

¹⁰³⁵‘there is never an act of resignation to the will of God under the cross, nor an act of trusting in Him for His help, but they will be recorded in heaven’s register as good works (Malachi 3:16).’ Boston, *CL*, 86.

¹⁰³⁶Boston, *CL*, 87-88.

5.6.6 Chapter 6

Boston continues with his theme of humility making it the major pastoral application of living life under the sovereign will of God, using 1 Peter 5:6 as his text. The fabric of society itself is a state of trial for everyone, being composed of relationships which entail subjection and authority, husbands and wives, children and parents, magistrates and the populace, all being subject to God's will and authority. It is our duty as created beings to be humble and it is from being in a state of humility that we find God exalting us. Again, Boston does not shy away from stating that it is God who brings us into humbling circumstances, and he goes over once more those circumstances God uses to produce humiliating lots.

The aim of humbling ourselves under the will of God is to acknowledge certain things. These include, i. 'Noticing God's mighty hand as employed in bringing about everything that concerns us, either in the way of efficiency or permission ... He is the Fountain of all perfection, but we must trace our imperfections to His sovereign will. It is He who has posted everyone in their relations by his providence ...'.¹⁰³⁷ ii. We need to acknowledge our unworthiness before and in comparison to God. iii. A sense of our own sinfulness will be a defence against pride. iv. We need to be silently submissive before God's almighty presence and power.¹⁰³⁸ v. We ought to recognize God's mercies towards us even in the midst of our trials, knowing our present state is not as bad as our sins deserve. vi. An admiration of the counsels of God will help us when we do not understand the ways of God's providence. vii. We need to realize our own gifts are nothing in the sight of God and we are no better than anyone else. viii. An attitude of submission is required in the humbling state in which we find ourselves, as was the example of Christ (Phil. 2:8). These are Boston's recommendations as a pastor, on what to do and how to behave when God brings into our lives a time of

¹⁰³⁷Boston, *CL*, 97.

¹⁰³⁸Boston, *CL*, 98.

testing and trial, when we are confronted with the unsearchable ways of God's sovereign will.

As previously mentioned, Boston could always apply his theological knowledge of the Reformed doctrine of God's will into practical guidance for life. The call to observe providence repeatedly occurs in Boston's writings,¹⁰³⁹ and in this chapter, the phrase 'under the mighty hand of God,' is used extensively to refer to God's will.¹⁰⁴⁰ This just goes to show how important the doctrine of God's will was for Boston and how applicable that doctrine was in his preaching and writing. As Boston writes he unpacks his doctrine of the will of God, so that we can understand how we are to live as responsible people before a God who ordains all things. For example, Boston says,

The humiliation of our spirit will not take effect without our own agency therein; while God is working on us that way, we must work together with Him, for He works on us as rational agents who, being moved, move themselves (Philippians 2:12-13). God by His providence may force down our lot and condition without us, but our spirit must come down voluntarily and of choice, or not at all.¹⁰⁴¹

Notice the interplay between providence, free will, God as first cause, and secondary causes, although they are not mentioned by name we can only understand these sentences by knowing Boston's doctrine of the will of God. It is as all doctrines should be, life informing and life changing.

When we resist the providences of God by not yielding to them, it only hardens us in our sin and pride.¹⁰⁴² It was God's will that Christ's entire earthly life was one of humiliation, and so it is with us, there will always be something which will require us to exercise humility before God. God's sovereign decree includes those things which provide us with the opportunity to be humble, reinforcing the

¹⁰³⁹Boston, *CL*, 100.

¹⁰⁴⁰Or very similar terms surrounding being under God's hands. Boston, *CL*, 100, 98, 97, 96, 94, 93, 90, 89, 88, etc.

¹⁰⁴¹Boston, *CL*, 100-01.

¹⁰⁴²'It is a direct fighting against God, a shaking off of subjection to our sovereign Lord, and a rising in rebellion against Him (Isaiah 45:9).' Boston, *CL*, 101.

truth that the crooks of life descend from God; they are aids and means within the big picture. What does Boston exhort us to do? Resolve to improve your spiritual life by the very circumstances providence throws your way.¹⁰⁴³ When the plan of God is incomprehensible to us, we should opt for silent adoration, believing he has a kind design in all his ways towards his children.¹⁰⁴⁴ After all, what tutor exists that could teach us more directly, fittingly, personally or patiently, than God our Father, the one who knows our needs even before we ask?

5.6.7 Chapter 7

Boston's main point of chapter seven is to reassure his reader that the crooks and trials that are experienced are not only ordinary to life but the designated way to reach heaven. Each chapter reiterates the same fundamental points with slight changes of emphasis. Look how he opens up this new topic by re-treading old ground.¹⁰⁴⁵ He says that it is the 'hand of God' that brings a person low, and the best response is quiet submission, until God sees fit to lift that person out of their trials. The humbling afflictions are not the main objective of providence here but the refining of the heart, so that by God's grace growth is experienced by the child of God.¹⁰⁴⁶ God appoints the way in which we are to reach heaven, through trials and tribulation, he also appoints the length of time we endure those trials before we enter heaven. God's ways and his timing are both perfect (Hab. 2:3; Eccl. 3:3, 11). Because of this, Boston is able to offer hope to his reader, his pastoral application of the will of God is, in the circumstances you are facing, wait

¹⁰⁴³Boston, *CL*, 104.

¹⁰⁴⁴'Inure yourselves silently to admit mysteries in the conduct of Providence towards you, which you are not able to comprehend but will adore ... Even in those steps of Providence which we seem to see far into, we may well allow there are some mysteries beyond what we see. And in those which are perplexing and puzzling, sovereignty should silence us. His infinite wisdom should satisfy, though we cannot see.' Boston, *CL*, 106-07.

¹⁰⁴⁵We shall therefore only mention those things which are different to what has proceeded.

¹⁰⁴⁶Boston, *CL*, 115.

patiently, but wait hopefully too. The people of God are humbled for a season but their lifting up is as sure as the mercies of God.¹⁰⁴⁷

Boston adjures his reader to draw comfort from God's providential dealings with the created order, that God's faithfulness in governing his world ensures his faithfulness to his beloved children, that he will not forget them but lift them in due time after a season of humility. Speaking of providence, Boston says,

Let not the Lord's humbled ones be idle spectators of these things ... Will the Lord's hand keep such a steady course in the earth, sea, and visible heavens as to bring a lifting up in them after a casting down, and only forget His humbled ones? No, by no means ... Observe the providence of God in the dispensations thereof, about the man Christ ... Did not Providence keep this course with Him, first humbling Him, then exalting Him and lifting Him up? It first brought Him to the dust of death in a course of suffering for thirty-three years, then exalted Him to the Father's right hand in an eternity of glory.¹⁰⁴⁸

Providence unfolds in the life of the believer in the same manner as the pattern set by the master. What the Father sees as fitting for the master of mankind is likely to be repeated in the lives of his children who follow the master.¹⁰⁴⁹ It is the Father's plan to conform his children in the image of his only begotten Son, to share not only in his death, resurrection, and glory, but also in his sufferings (Phil. 1:29). If by the providence of God Christ was lifted up after his time of trial and affliction, surely the believer can take some comfort that their journey will follow suit.¹⁰⁵⁰ Boston comforts his readers who are experiencing affliction, who are cast down and weary, by reminding them that Christ himself is now interceding for them. Boston reminds his people of Isaiah 63:9 which speaks of his intercession for his people and his affiliation with their suffering, and how precious they are in his sight (Zech. 2:8). Although God reigns in glory he is always mindful of his

¹⁰⁴⁷'No circumstances are so low but He can raise them, so entangling and perplexing but He can unravel them; so hopeless, but He can remedy them.' Boston, *CL*, 120.

¹⁰⁴⁸Boston, *CL*, 122.

¹⁰⁴⁹Boston, *CL*, 123.

¹⁰⁵⁰Boston proceeds on a series of observations regarding providence in relation to grace, the church, and the overthrowing of the wicked. Boston, *CL*, 124ff.

children's suffering.¹⁰⁵¹ God's will for the lives of his children is not divorced from his attributes and being, he will always be just, merciful, and righteous in his dealings with them. When we look at Christ and see how he lived his life, entrusting himself to the Father, even on the cross, we can continue to trust the Father also at the point of our greatest need.¹⁰⁵²

5.6.8 Chapter 8

Boston has already stated there will be a final lifting up of the humble but here he deals with being lifted up out of humbling circumstances in time. This is not a certainty. One person may suffer an affliction for their entire journey of life, whereas another may be lifted out exactly the same affliction after a few months. The promise of being lifted up in the former case is only realized in the life to come, the latter is lifted up in time and then in eternity. Sometimes we endure long seasons of being humbled but this is the tried and tested method God uses to prepare his children for useful service, as was the case with David and Joseph. The earthly life will always have times of humbling even when God lifts us up out of particular afflictions.¹⁰⁵³ All the small and temporary liftings we receive from God's hand in this life are a testimony and guarantee of the final great lifting up that awaits the saints in glory. At that time, we 'will get a full satisfaction, as to the conduct of Providence, in all the steps of the humbling circumstances, and the delay of the lifting up, however perplexing these were before (Revelation 15:3).'¹⁰⁵⁴ A day is dawning when the saints get to see all the threads of the tapestry of providence, and what was bitter in time becomes sweet in eternity.

¹⁰⁵¹Boston, *CL*, 128.

¹⁰⁵²'He and His Father are One, and their will is one. So both Christ and His Father will do the lifting up of the humble ones, but only in the due time.' Boston, *CL*, 129.

¹⁰⁵³'They may have their singing times, but their songs, while in this world, will be mixed with groanings. 2 Corinthians 5:4: "For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened." The unmixed dispensation is reserved for the other world; but this will be a wilderness unto the end, where there will be howlings with the most joyful notes.' Boston, *CL*, 132-33.

¹⁰⁵⁴Boston, *CL*, 137.

Boston encourages his reader by urging them to remember the reward of their afflictions will far outweigh the present pain in enduring them, and the duration of their afflictions will be short in comparison to the time spent reaping the rewards. Boston reminds his people of Paul's words concerning present trials in 2 Corinthians 4:17: 'For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.'¹⁰⁵⁵ Our judgment concerning what is good for us is as equally bad as our judgment of timing but Infinite wisdom never mistimes anything.¹⁰⁵⁶ This is one of the designs of providence that we come not to trust in ourselves but in the Lord alone for everything. Humbling afflictions pry us gently away from self reliance with the opportunity to rely in faith in the God of all comfort.

Boston mentions six things that can help prepare the believer for being lifted up from their afflictions. i. A deep sense of personal sin and the acknowledgment that there is no worth in and of ourselves that demands we be lifted up. ii. 'A resignation to the divine pleasure as to the time of lifting up.'¹⁰⁵⁷ iii. A complete trust in God for bringing about the lifting up in his own way. iv. A recognition that God could lift a person up as much or as little as he chooses. v. A continual spirit of prayer ought to be exercised patiently during the lifting up process. vi. A sense of one's own failures in handling the present trial. This pastoral advice proves once more that Boston's strong belief that God ordains everything is never separated from the means God uses to accomplish his decree. There is never a resignation to circumstances as if fate was operating in the world. How we behave in our afflictions, under the mighty hand of God, determines much about what we learn, how much we are changed, the length, the severity, and the painfulness, of our humbling afflictions. These things all pertain to the temporal lifting up.

¹⁰⁵⁵Boston, *CL*, 138-39.

¹⁰⁵⁶'when all the circumstances, always foreknown to God, shall come to be opened out and laid together before us, we shall then see the lifting up has come in the time most for the honour of God and our good, and that it would not have done so well sooner.' Boston, *CL*, 139.

¹⁰⁵⁷Boston, *CL*, 143.

The eternal lifting up is of a different nature to the temporal. The final lifting up and exaltation of the humbled children of God is not only certain but perfect. Lowliness is unknown in heaven, the eternal lifting up is higher than any earthly lifting up, and its height is matched by its constancy. The humbling circumstances of life will be remembered in that great lifting up but all trace of bitterness will be removed from the memory thereof. Boston believes that Christians will remember their trials and tribulations they suffered on earth when in heaven, although the text he gives in support of this (Revelation 6:10), speaks of those who have died and are in Christ's presence but before the final judgment of creation.¹⁰⁵⁸ Boston's doctrine of the will of God leads him to urge the humble to have confidence in their final lifting up, and again, to wait patiently for it.¹⁰⁵⁹ The final words of the book deserve to be heard in full:

You have heard much of the "crook in the lot," the excellency of humbleness of spirit in a low lot, beyond pride of spirit, though joined with a high one. You have been called to humble yourselves in your humbling circumstances, and have been assured in that case of being lifted up. To conclude, we may assure ourselves that God will at length break in pieces the proud, be they never so high, and He will triumphantly lift up the humble, be they never so low.¹⁰⁶⁰

5.6.9 A tension between the notion of passivity & Boston's belief in free will?

Boston often repeats his pastoral application of his doctrine of God's will; that God's children need to submit to God's will. How does he reconcile the apparent tension between the notion of passivity (that is, obedience, submissiveness and compliance to God's will) with his belief in free will? Boston's Reformed theology appeals to the way in which humans have been created. We exist within a world that God ordained to include means and causes, that makes the human will compatible with God's Sovereign rule over creation. Therefore, what God ordains to happen in the lives of human beings can be met with a genuine response from his creatures. The Christian can seek to submit to God's will or

¹⁰⁵⁸Boston, *CL*, 148.

¹⁰⁵⁹'Fruit plucked off the tree of providence ere it is ripe will readily set the teeth on edge. It proves like manna kept over night (Exodus 16:20).' Boston, *CL*, 84.

¹⁰⁶⁰Boston, *CL*, 150.

fight against it – this may in no way affect the trial (submitting to an illness does not guarantee its removal), but the genuine response of either submission or resistance can influence the blessing or the bitterness of the experience of the trial. Although the un-regenerated human will can do nothing to please God as it remains dead in its sin, the Christian, having been born of the Holy Spirit but still wrestling with the sinful nature can either embrace or resist the way God works in their life. What God wills from eternity to happen most definitely is ordained in a way that enables men and women to genuinely respond to God’s will. Even the non-Christian who consistently resists God’s will does so freely, willing to be a slave to sin. In Boston’s theology therefore, there is no real tension between mankind’s ability to will freely and his message to the Christian to submit to God’s will. Boston simply echoes the theology of the WCF III.I that the will of the creature is in no way compromised by the Sovereignty of God.

5.6.10 - Conclusion

More than any other of Boston’s works *The Crook in the Lot* contains the most frequent and direct pastoral application of his doctrine of the will of God. God is portrayed by Boston as the ‘Great Artisan’ who carves the lives of his creatures and for them to complain of their lot is to deny God’s wisdom, holiness and sovereignty.¹⁰⁶¹ It is precisely because God ordains all things in accordance with his divine perfections and being, through the display of his providence that Boston can write with such assurance and biblical warrant, on the subject of earthly trials. Time and again Boston pleads that we recognize God’s sovereignty, that we are all under his mighty hand, and that submission of our spirits to God’s will (however mysterious it may seem), is the best medicine for the ailment. Faith and patience are the two supports that enable us to rest in our afflictions before God, to be silent before him, knowing that his will is in accord with his promises.

¹⁰⁶¹Boston, *CW*, III.289. Cf. ‘Complainers, such as are dissatisfied with their lot, and with the distributions of providence ... bark at the mountains of brass, the immovable purposes of God, as dogs at the moon and with equal success.’ III.303.

Boston urges us to observe providence, not because it is fixed and static but precisely because it can change our present circumstances, since God's government and preservation of the world reminds us of his faithfulness and love for his people. The sovereignty of God brings comfort, hope, and generates endurance, it brings to remembrance that God and his ways are incomprehensible, yet always just and wise. The crooks are not a sign of God's displeasure but his loving fatherly discipline. If Christ our great example, in accordance with God's will, lived his earthly life in a state of humiliation before being raised up to the highest state of glory, then we can have confidence in the Father that we shall share in the pattern of providence displayed in Christ's life. We must remember the full title of this work, as it concerns *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God Displayed in the Afflictions of Men*. Boston's pastoral skill has its source flowing from his doctrine of the will of God. When faced with Boston's God, we can have confidence that mysteries are not mistakes, lowliness is not rejection, and silence speaks volumes.

5.7 Boston's pastoral application of God's will in Repentance¹⁰⁶²

Boston's series of sermons that form his work on repentance may seem at first an unlikely source from which to derive an understanding of his doctrine of the will of God and how he applied that doctrine pastorally. However, we read in *The Passages of My Life* that Boston's sermons on repentance were sandwiched between two intense studies on providence of which he calls 'the sweet subject'.¹⁰⁶³ The small book contains a wealth of wisdom regarding the nature of true repentance and its absolute necessity.¹⁰⁶⁴ Yet, it is on this theme of repentance, one of the key ingredients of the Christian life that the centrality of God's will boils to the top in the pastoral application of Boston. Having already

¹⁰⁶²Boston, *Repentance*. This book is the result of several sermons preached over the course of 1717 in Ettrick (CW, IV.377ff).

¹⁰⁶³Boston, *A General Account*, 215.

¹⁰⁶⁴Boston deals with the necessity of repentance, the parts of repentance, the danger of delaying it, the lack of arguments for delaying it, and why and how God is patient in his dealings with those who refuse to repent. Boston, *Repentance*.

seen how Boston's strong doctrine of God's will affected him personally in his *Memoirs* and subsequently his preaching ministry, and how prominent a theme it became in *The Crook in the Lot*, when he deals with God's sovereignty in the light of human suffering, we see it also has a dynamic presence in his pastoral concern for a call to true repentance.

5.7.1 God's sovereignty as a call to repentance

From the start, Boston makes it plain that God is sovereign and his will is unquestionable in regards to justice or righteousness. As we saw in his doctrine of the divine decree, whatever God wills is just and right simply because it is God who wills it. All have sinned, and God calls all to repent, but his call comes softly to some and as a violent shake and a shout to others.

God's sovereign power and absolute dominion, which he will have the world to understand: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?" (Matt. 20:15). Thus our Lord accounts for the dispensation of the man's being born blind (John 9:3). All men have that in them and about them, which may make them liable to the heaviest strokes that any of the children of men meet with. Therefore whatever any suffer, the Lord does them no wrong, since he punishes them less than their iniquity deserves. But amongst many whom justice may strike, sovereignty picks out some, and causes them to smart. And who may say, "What are you doing?"

We are now under the mixed dispensation of providence; not the unmixed, reserved to another world, when all men will be put into their unalterable state. Now this is very agreeable that God signally punishes some of society, while others as guilty do escape, that the whole may, with David, "sing of mercy and judgment to you, O Lord" (Ps. 101:1). And thus the dispensation of diverse colours is held up in the world, as a display of the manifold wisdom of God. The mercy of God to some is magnified by his severity on others.¹⁰⁶⁵

It is hard not to notice the total centrality of the divine will and it's all encompassing nature from this passage. It also reveals how Boston held God's sovereignty and mankind's responsibility as both being true, that is, this passage

¹⁰⁶⁵Boston, *Repentance*, 25-26.

which so forcefully illuminates God's sovereignty is part of Boston's call for sinners to repent.

God's will, unfolding in providence brings God glory and displays his wisdom and mercy and judgment and this once more underscores the inseparable nature of God's attributes within his Being. The divine perfections are always displayed in God's work.¹⁰⁶⁶ These ideas are wonderfully expressed when he calls upon believers to adore the mercy of God that they do not feel the full strokes of God's hand upon them that others do. He says to his parishioners, rest assured, the sore afflictions of others could easily have fallen out in your lives, indeed, your own sinfulness requires it but purely due to the mercy and compassion of God are these things spared.¹⁰⁶⁷ Here again, Boston's use of 'under the hand of God' reiterates his firm belief that God ordains everything that comes to pass. Boston preaches to his parishioners the divine perfections of God alongside his pleas for their repentance, he warns them not to gaze at other's dispensations of providence where some of the wicked are happy and at ease but look upon what their own sinful lives deserve. There are no mistakes in the unfolding of divine providence anymore than there could be faults within God's will.

A remembrance of God's sovereignty is a forceful argument in Boston's plea for his flock to repent. He reminds them that God wills their existence as their Creator, implying the Lord's sovereign dominion over everyone's life. God therefore has the right to ask for repentance and the right to expect it. Boston also argues that God is their Preserver (Heb. 1:3; Acts 17:28), and what sense does it make to grieve the one who sustains your life?¹⁰⁶⁸ After all, '*He can destroy you,*

¹⁰⁶⁶'This dispensation is in some sort necessary to confirm us in the belief of the judgment of the great day. God punishes some remarkably, that the world may see that there is a God that judges on the earth; he does not so punish all, that men may be assured that there is a judgment to come.' Boston, *Repentance*, 27.

¹⁰⁶⁷Boston, *Repentance*, 27.

¹⁰⁶⁸Who was it that preserved you in the womb, that brought you out of it, so that it was not made your grave? Who has kept the brittle thread of your life from being broken hitherto, and fed you all your life long? Is it not the Lord?' Boston, *Repentance*, 106.

and that when he will (Matt. 10:28).¹⁰⁶⁹ If God's will is always accomplished, even in and through the sinfulness of rational creatures, and he is the judge of the entire world, it is folly and madness to postpone repentance let alone forsake it. Boston states that nothing can be hidden from the all-seeing one, nothing unknown to the all-knowing, nothing goes unpunished by the just one, and neither can the all-powerful one fail to execute his final reckoning.¹⁰⁷⁰ A will that knows all, sees all, and does all its desire, is one that any sane person ought not to resist.

It is important to note that Boston's doctrine of the will of God comes to the fore in his dealing with trials, suffering and salvation.¹⁰⁷¹ These are the things which humanity can only respond to in either submission or resistance. These are the areas where God's sovereignty is seen, as it were, in its most obvious manifestation, where the emphasis is on how God works with his creation. When Boston deals with other subjects such as repentance, although God's sovereignty is always present and working in the world, Boston's emphasis lies more toward our responsibility as rational human beings. Here we find Boston's pleas to his parishioners for them to repent and go on repenting, for them to believe and keep the faith, for them to turn from their sin and become holy. Of course, none of these are possible apart from God's grace under his sovereign will, but the direction of his pastoral emphasis changes from what God is doing and how he does it, to what we ought to do and how we are to do it.

Related to Boston's pleas for people to repent is his awareness of God's use of means to accomplish his will. God can work what looks like miracles in people's lives, as when the thief on the cross repented and converted just before dying but that is not the normal way of things. Boston makes the point,

The ordinary rule is, that as men live, so they die; a holy life, a happy end; a graceless, careless life, an unhappy and miserable end. Because providence may go off the ordinary road, and do

¹⁰⁶⁹Boston, *Repentance*, 106.

¹⁰⁷⁰Boston, *Repentance*, 107.

¹⁰⁷¹Boston uses the example of the two thieves on the cross to highlight God's gift of salvation through grace. Boston, *Repentance*, 149.

that in a few minutes with some, that ordinarily costs many years to others; can you venture eternity on that, that he will do so with you? Moses fasted forty days and nights, yet who will venture on that in hopes of having his life preserved without food? (Exod. 34:28).

Are there not eminent instances to the contrary, in which men living in their sin have been struck down in a moment, getting no time to repent of them, but fiery wrath has put an end to their days?¹⁰⁷²

In other words, do not delay repenting. It is necessary and of the utmost urgency, and if you have no will to repent just now, perhaps many years before your death, do not expect God to help you repent only moments before it. The preaching of God's word is a means to conform to the preceptive will of God, and Boston urges his listeners not to spite those means and refuse to repent. God's will unfolding in providence does so according to means, the means are established and guaranteed, whereas miracles are not.¹⁰⁷³ Boston rightly perceives that the vast majority of people die with the same attitude towards God and repentance as they lived, and is God unjust to deny a person grace on their deathbed who throughout their life spurned that grace?¹⁰⁷⁴ Boston places the onus on his hearers to repent; mankind has a real responsibility to obey God.

5.7.2 The observation of providence as a testimony for the need of repentance

The observation of providence so prevalent in his own life is so frequently urged upon his flock in the matter of repentance.¹⁰⁷⁵ This focus on the unfolding of God's will in providence as an aid and a warning for repentance, goes to show just

¹⁰⁷²As evidence for this Boston looks at Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), Korah (Num. 16:31), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Boston, *Repentance*, 151.

¹⁰⁷³'When the best appearances of deathbed repentance are, it is hard to make sure conclusions, but as Augustine said in such a case, "I don't say, that such a person will be damned, or that he will be saved; but you, whilst you are in health, mind the business of repentance.'" Boston, *Repentance*, 162.

¹⁰⁷⁴Boston, *Repentance*, 151.

¹⁰⁷⁵'The strokes that others meet with, are loud calls to us to repent. That is the language of all the afflicting providences which we see going on in the world.' Boston, *Repentance*, 29.

how central a doctrine the will of God was for Boston. It is a guide in his own life, a pastoral key for understanding and coping with affliction, and a pastoral tool to provide evidence of the need to repent. Boston mentions that those people who abound in sinful lifestyles do so in the face of multitudes of calls from providence to turn from their sin. There is no excuse at the final judgment for the impenitent, as both providence and the word of God are called as witnesses to bear testimony against them. Providence itself testifies against those nations that are without the Scriptures.¹⁰⁷⁶ God's delay in executing judgment on people for their sins is an act of merciful love in order that they might repent but the wickedness of mankind uses that grace as a means to revel in sin. This was the subject of one of Boston's sermons (summer, 1728) from Eccles.8:11.¹⁰⁷⁷ Boston begins by highlighting the special place of providence within Ecclesiastes, where Solomon teaches lessons from his observations of it, some of which are difficult to reconcile.¹⁰⁷⁸ What is Boston trying to reconcile? The observation of providence that the wicked that are arrogant and rich go down to their graves in honour, and they avoid any justice their wicked lives deserved. How can these things be in the world of a Sovereign Righteous God? Boston's answer is that there is a judgment coming and none will avoid it. He speaks on texts such as Ps. 50:21, that although God has kept silent concerning mankind's sin he has not been inoperative, but having passed perfect judgment on sin (Ps. 37:13), he waits to execute his judgment with detailed precision (Eccl. 11:9). Although many people presently laugh about 'getting away' with their wickedness, God also laughs at their foolish thoughts, knowing the end from the beginning.¹⁰⁷⁹ Boston's message to his flock is that judgment is coming, and God's will shall be universally exonerated by every living being, and seen and declared to be holy, just, righteous and pure.

¹⁰⁷⁶Boston, *Repentance*, 30.

¹⁰⁷⁷Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily; therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

¹⁰⁷⁸Boston, *Repentance*, 163.

¹⁰⁷⁹Boston, *Repentance*, 170.

Boston's eschatological observations of God's will being displayed in the final judgment are matched by his keen understanding of how God's will operates in the present. Boston's insights into the methods of providence used by God bring the subject of God's will once more to the fore. There are two methods of providence in God's dealings with wicked people regarding his judgment of them; these are the 'swift' and the 'slow' method. Boston takes his prompt for the swift method of providence from Mal. 3:5 - 'I will come near to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers.' Sometimes God answers a sinner's wickedness with instant judgment, at other times even at the thought of the wickedness.¹⁰⁸⁰ The point is made most forcibly in Boston's own words, and in this extended quotation below take notice of the broad range of his biblical examples.

Sometimes the execution trysts with the very doing of the ill work, so that the sinner is taken away with the stroke in his sin. Thus fared it with Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire (Lev. 10:1-2); with Zimri and Cozbi cut off in the act of uncleanness (Num. 25:8); and with Herod, who was eaten up of worms for his atheism and blasphemy (Acts 12:23).

Sometimes as the ill work is done out and ended, the execution begins. So it fared with Sennacherib's blasphemous letter. He had writ it, and was read; so his sin was completed; and that very night the Lord smote his army, and soon after himself (2 Kgs. 19:14, 35).

Sometimes the execution keeps pace with the ill work, and the one goes on as the other does; judgment in the several degrees following hard at the heels of the sin. So it fared with Hiel, in his building of Jericho (1 Kgs 16).

Sometimes execution begins with the sinner's beginning to reap the fruit of his sin when he leans upon his wall, a serpent bites him. So it fared with Ahab taking possession of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21:18-19). And so it fared with the lusters in the wilderness (Ps. 78: 30-31).

Sometimes when one's sin begins to work, in its bitter fruits and effects on the other, it recoils on the sinner himself. So it fared with Judas the traitor (Matt. 27: 3-5). It is a sport to some to do mischief to others; but before all be done, it may, in the just

¹⁰⁸⁰'Sometimes the sinner has an ill work in design, and the Lord counts his will for the deed, and prevents a speedy execution; as in Haman's case. He hatched the mischief, but he did not see it come forth.' Boston, *Repentance*, 181.

judgment of God, come as heavy on themselves as their neighbour.¹⁰⁸¹

There are enough examples of God's immediate execution of judgment in his providence to warrant a respect for God and foster in Boston's flock the need for repentance.

5.7.3 God's will in relation to his other attributes

What God is like and how God works has not always been easy to reconcile for some people. In discussing the ways of God in providence, Boston always sheds light on what God is like. When Boston speaks about 'kinds' of providence he is first referring to the two general ways providence operates, namely, favourably or crossly. Boston lists Job 5:6; Amos 3:6; Ps. 9:16; Isa. 26:11; Job 35:9-10, 36:13; Gal. 6:17; Isa. 27:9, as examples of how a 'cross' providence works. He reminds his readers that providence operates under a holy sovereign God and yet may include affliction, judgment, the rod, and even evil. Cross providences are often used by God as a call to repentance.¹⁰⁸² Whereas 'favourable' or 'smiling' providences are experienced by those who depend upon God with humble hearts and lessons are learned by those things which come upon them as a result of providence. Secondly, within both of these kinds there exists 'great and small lines.' Great lines are represented by those acts of God which unmistakably issue from his hand (2 Chron. 16:19-20), and the small lines of providence represent the minute details of life. Thirdly, there are the common and uncommon kinds of providence, the former denoting such things as the pattern of seasons, while the latter is concerned with miracles and great deliverances. Boston also notes that the way providence falls out needs to be read with a careful eye, given that some good things fall on the wicked and some troubles are encountered by the good, since the wheat and the tares are still growing together.¹⁰⁸³ These thoughts are

¹⁰⁸¹Boston, *Repentance*, 182.

¹⁰⁸²Boston, *Repentance*, 29, 30, 31.

¹⁰⁸³Boston, *CW*, V.445.

also found in Turretin's *Institutes*, which had some influence on Boston.¹⁰⁸⁴ If the ways of God are divorced from the being of God, they can all too easily look unjust, and Boston combats this in his attempts to explain why God works as he does.

There is a 'slow method' of providence where God takes account of mankind's wickedness, passes sentence upon it but delays the execution of the sentence for a time. Boston admits there 'are times in which holy Providence, as it were, winks at ungodly sinners (Acts 17:30),¹⁰⁸⁵ times where wicked acts have seemingly gone unnoticed by God.¹⁰⁸⁶ Because of this delayed judgment, many people delve further into their wickedness reassuring themselves that they have successfully evaded judgment; they perceive the delay as a license for indulging in ungodly living. All these people are doing, Boston says, is slowly tightening the noose around their own necks unawares. 'None go to the highest pitch of wickedness all of a sudden, but by degrees.'¹⁰⁸⁷ Boston therefore exhorts his people to flee from sin and to repent, to stop adding to the evidence of their trial of judgment that is sure to come but desist immediately. This is all just another way of Boston telling his people that they need to observe providence correctly. A true understanding of God's will leads to repentance, and acknowledges the gracious, patient hand, that provides the means to do it.

The correct view of God's will, which understands that it can not be separated from God's other attributes of justice, mercy, patience, love, etc, enables a person to avoid the errors that appear on the face of God's providential dealings with the

¹⁰⁸⁴Turretin, 493-94. In more than one place Boston is directly influenced by Turretin, although Boston leaves no references. In *The Crook in the Lot* Boston says concerning providence, 'there is a holy and wise providence that governs the sinful and heedless actions of men (as a rider does a lame horse, of whose halting not he, but the horse's lameness, is the true and proper cause).' Boston, *CL*, 18. Turretin says, 'Although the pre-motion of God is extended to evil actions, it does not on that account make God guilty of the fault or the author of sin ... he who drives a lame horse is the cause of the motion, but not the lameness.' Turretin, 509.

¹⁰⁸⁵Boston, *Repentance*, 183.

¹⁰⁸⁶'An omniscient God could pull the veil off them, but in the slow method it is a long a-doing.' Boston, *Repentance*, 183.

¹⁰⁸⁷Boston, *Repentance*, 183.

world. Boston clearly warns, ‘We will account for this slow method of providence. And there is much need to do it, because there is a mystery of providence in it that is not easy to unriddle, and among men there are sad blunders about it.’¹⁰⁸⁸ For example, some people may view the apparent lack of immediate justice from God as a sign that God does not care, is unjust, or cannot intervene. By the very nature of providence, it may appear on the surface of things that God’s people suffer more difficulty than the children of the devil.¹⁰⁸⁹ Boston does not downplay the way things can appear, the wicked often do prosper in their wickedness, but he takes issue with the wrong interpretation of the way things appear. Notice how the reality of the unfolding of providence has troubled some of the best of saints. It is difficult and puzzling to grasp, especially when faith wanes and we rely only on experience. Boston mentions Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1-2), Habakkuk (1:2-4), and Asaph (Ps. 63), who were all caused to stumble at the prosperity of the wicked as a ‘knotty piece of the book of providence.’¹⁰⁹⁰ These occasions were when the saints failed to comprehend God’s will in its entirety, the temporal unfolding of providence eclipses the eternal decree. Boston says it is one of the common faults of humanity to compartmentalize God’s will but when this occurs it distorts a proper view of God’s will as it exists in its relation with all the divine perfections.

When God’s will is viewed in separation from the divine attributes, errors occur. Boston says that there is universal confusion regarding the unfolding of divine providence, people are especially prone to see discrepancies between the patient mercy of God and his divine perfections.¹⁰⁹¹ Boston proceeds to remind his congregation of four divine perfections which are essential for keeping a balanced

¹⁰⁸⁸Boston, *Repentance*, 185.

¹⁰⁸⁹‘Yea, objects of God’s indignation may in that respect be treated as if they were the darlings of heaven; and the objects of God’s special love, as if they were the butts of his wrath: “There is a vanity which is done upon the earth, that there be just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked: again, there be wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous’ (Eccles. 8:14). This has been sometimes puzzling to the saints.’ Boston, *Repentance*, 184.

¹⁰⁹⁰Boston, *Repentance*, 186.

¹⁰⁹¹Boston, *Repentance*, 186. Cf. Boston, *Repentance*, 211-12.

view of the will of God in his dealings with the world. The first of these is the Lord's omniscience whereby he sees every act of his rational creatures either good or bad. Secondly, God is holy and hates sin. Thirdly, God is just (shall not the judge of all the earth do right? Gen. 18:25), and will certainly punish sin. Lastly, the Lord is good, and will do good things for his people. We can subsequently rest assured that every sin (which God sees) will be punished (because he is holy) since he is just (and will judge sin), and all this is for the benefit of God's people (as he is good). At another point when questions arise regarding the method of providence, Boston again points his hearer to other divine perfections and attributes of God for a more balanced understanding:

Though the slow method seems strange to us short-sighted creatures, it is not at all strange being viewed in the glass of the infinite perfections of the divine nature. A thing will appear in a shallow river, that being cast into the sea will appear no more. We wonder at the slow method of providence, while we look to men; but we will cease to wonder if we look to God. God is eternal, from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 90:2) ... In God's eternal duration there are no differences of time; all is present to him. Time is for measuring created beings, but not the infinite being ... He sees exactly the time appointed for execution against every impenitent sinner, and will not let pass beyond that, one moment.¹⁰⁹²

When Boston therefore preaches about the necessity of repentance a good deal of some of his sermons is concerned with understanding the will of God, being acquainted with the ways of God as his will unfolds in providence, and understanding God's will in relation to God's being as a whole.

Boston devotes a considerable time to explaining the reasons behind why God holds back from punishing sin immediately. These further reasons for the slow method of providence are closely tied to Boston's understanding of the perfections of God. In his first consideration, he says the slow method is utilized to help produce repentance and stop people dying in their sin, so illuminating the merciful nature of God. After all, if everyone was judged for their sins after the manner of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), with such a speed of the sentence

¹⁰⁹²Boston, *Repentance*, 200.

being carried out, people would count it as oppression.¹⁰⁹³ So it is to mankind's benefit that God delays his coming judgment but more importantly, it is to God's glory that he acts as he does.¹⁰⁹⁴ By the slow method of providence God's longsuffering and patience are colourfully spread across the canvass of life, his universal good-will is made visible as well as his 'overcoming goodness' whereby he brings forth good out of other's evil. Coupled with these perfections Boston says, 'Justice is his act, his strange act; but mercy is what he has a peculiar delight in. He is slow to anger, but ready to forgive. This is written in very legible characters in this method.'¹⁰⁹⁵ Boston masterfully shows that God does ordain everything that comes to pass, and as everything does come to pass his divine perfections are manifested even the way he deals with and responds to sin. The subject of God's will is used by Boston to pastorally help his parishioners make sense of the world and their own personal circumstances as the divine perfections work out all things to the glory of God, and to show to them their absolute need to repent.

Boston's second consideration for the slow method of providence concerns God's knowledge of mankind's posterity. Boston was not one to beat around the bush, and he openly states that some people exist for no other reason than to try others, yet even in these people, generations may be born from them who prove to be elect and loved of God. In this way and for this reason, God includes them in his plan of providence.¹⁰⁹⁶ Something similar is seen with David's sin. Solomon was born from an adulterous relationship where his mother's husband was murdered by his father, and so sometimes God punishes people for their sins by providing

¹⁰⁹³Boston, *Repentance*, 188.

¹⁰⁹⁴God has the glory of some perfections, which otherwise would not shine forth so illustriously.' Boston, *Repentance*, 189.

¹⁰⁹⁵Boston, *Repentance*, 189. Cf. 'The longer God has borne with, and the more kind he has been to impenitent sinners, the more inexcusable they will be; and the more will God's severity against them be justified. And so this method tends to the clearing of God's justice.' Boston, *Repentance*, 190.

¹⁰⁹⁶Boston, *Repentance*, 190.

them with enough years to see the ruin of their family.¹⁰⁹⁷ Some people are left in their sin and left to see the results of it, being strangers to God's discipline they are given over to their sinful desires.

Boston's third consideration for the use of the slow method of providence deals with the discipline that God lovingly meets out to his children.¹⁰⁹⁸ Boston's thinking in *The Crook in the Lot* is at work again when he deals with repentance. What men and women encounter under the hand of God are means bearing messages.¹⁰⁹⁹ Boston says, God is calling people to repentance, and he is calling them through the cross providences in their lives, each affliction bearing a message from the divine will. Such was the case of Balaam when God confronted his sin and caused him to turn, and God was speaking by the same method to the whole nation in Boston's opinion.¹¹⁰⁰ As God ordains everything that comes to pass, nothing that falls out under providence hits a person at random but is governed by God's will to a particular end. Boston basically says 'heed the call' of God's will in your life. To accomplish this end, God sometimes uses the ungodly in the slow method of providence as a trial for the refining of his people. Connected to this is the idea that the slow method of providence is also used for the hardening of sinners.¹¹⁰¹ In his marvellous characteristic way with words Boston says, 'For as the godly are eyesores to the wicked, so the wicked are often

¹⁰⁹⁷Cf. 'Men are often punished in their posterity ... A holy just God sometimes pursues quarrels against some evil-workers through several generations, as it threatened in the second command. The third and fourth generation are mentioned, because men may live to see themselves punished in their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. And they may be spared in this slow method for that very end. Witness Zedekiah.' Boston, *Repentance*, 191.

¹⁰⁹⁸Cf. 'As the world is kept up for the sake of God's people, so it is guided as it is by providence for their sakes. And it is their good that is designed by it.' Boston, *Repentance*, 191.

¹⁰⁹⁹Even when Boston is dealing with repentance, he has a strong emphasis on the use of trials. Cf. Boston, *Repentance*, 197.

¹¹⁰⁰Boston, *Repentance*, 108.

¹¹⁰¹'It is a stroke, whereby the disease of sin is increased, and the gospel-remedy is rendered ineffectual. The heart being hardened, the loose is given to lusts that before were under some constraint (Eph. 4:19); and the means of grace become useless, if not noxious: the hardened heart turning the food of the soul, as it were, to poison in effect (Isa. 6:10; 2 Cor. 2:16).' Boston, *Repentance*, 193.

as whetstones and files to the godly.¹¹⁰² Boston notes the general course of the way of the world; that the children of the kingdom receive adversity but the friends of the world prosper under its smile.

Both the swift and the slow judgments of God are necessary in Boston's view. It is as these methods are employed in the government of the world under the providence of God that people are left without excuse for their wickedness and refusal to repent.

The swift method is necessary to show, that there is a God to judge upon the earth ... For as ordinary as the slow method is, there are never wanting instances now and then of swift process against ungodly sinners: which is necessary to bear testimony to the being of a God, and of a providence concerned in human affairs. And there are as many of these, as may give sufficient warning to all. The slow method is necessary, to show there is a judgment to come.¹¹⁰³

Once more, this is an observational point regarding the mechanics of providence but it is a well made point. Boston appeals to his listener's knowledge of how God governs things in the world. The natural course of events testifies to a God who will bring every person into judgment sooner or later, the important thing is to repent before that judgment arrives.¹¹⁰⁴

In one of Boston's own applications of these things as he taught his people on the need to repent, he makes a bold and thought-provoking statement. 'There cannot be such worth in outward prosperity, nor such evil in affliction, as we generally imagine. For a holy, wise God would never heap what is really best on the objects of his wrath, and what is really worst on the objects of his love.'¹¹⁰⁵ The only right response is to question whether or not this is true. I think the answer depends on whether we view our earthly lives purely in their temporal form or whether an eternal dimension is also added. Boston of course, incorporates the

¹¹⁰²Boston, *Repentance*, 192. Boston knew this type of affliction first hand, when he recalls how some people added to his grief after his child had died. Boston, *Memoirs*, 161.

¹¹⁰³Boston, *Repentance*, 202.

¹¹⁰⁴Cf. 2 Peter 2:3-6.

¹¹⁰⁵Boston, *Repentance*, 204.

eternal dimension, and from that perspective his statement is true. In light of God's children inheriting the eternal kingdom of heaven, earthly prosperity is not worth anywhere near the value placed on it by the world (Lk. 12:18-20), and the severest trials and afflictions of the saints will appear as mere inconveniences in light of the glory that will follow ('For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' Rom. 8:18). If we could but momentarily glimpse things from the heavenly Father's intention, our estimation of possessions would plummet whereas our attitude towards our trials would be transformed (Heb. 12: 6-11). It would be wrong however to forget that we have no experience yet of the eternal dimension, our entire basis of knowledge is derived from temporal experience. From this angle we ought not to downplay the reality that, 'For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant' (Heb. 12:11). This may make the unbeliever's life in many ways easier, but 'easier' is not necessarily 'better,' it is easier to make toast than a roast dinner but the added burdens that go into making the latter meal are the very things which make it 'better.' Boston is aware of the crux of this argument and he recognizes it is only when a person seeks to understand the way of providence by faith that they will achieve a right perspective of their circumstances. Boston comments,

Consider there may be a mystery in the dispensations of providence; but there can be no iniquity, error, or mistake ... Silently adore that wisdom and the deep design of providence which you cannot see through, that certainly are in the slow method God uses with some ungodly sinners, evil-workers. Though you cannot see how God's glory can miss to suffer by it, believe that God will doubtless get glory by it.¹¹⁰⁶

Viewed in and of itself, providence can be interpreted in many varied ways. Boston says that providence may well appear strange as people try to observe it, but the word of God always focuses the skewed perspective, and prove the unity of his works with his word.¹¹⁰⁷ When providence is observed correctly however, Boston argues that it makes good sense to repent, and to obstinately refuse is 'to

¹¹⁰⁶Boston, *Repentance*, 206.

¹¹⁰⁷Boston, *Repentance*, 212.

deny the true tribute to our Sovereign Lord and King,¹¹⁰⁸ who requires it by right and will punish the unrepentant.

5.7.4 Conclusion to Boston's Repentance

Boston's message is, repent while the door of mercy is still open - do not delay. God's sovereign will can harden or soften a sinner, but in his merciful goodness God calls people to repentance through the government of his world via providence, providing numerous opportunities for the wicked to turn from their ways. Boston's appeals for repentance often flow out of his doctrine of God's will: if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, it is hopeless to pretend God will let us escape from paying the price our sins deserve. His observations of providence in the life of the believer once more turn our attention to the will of God in trials and afflictions; ideas presented afresh from his *Memoirs* and *The Crook in the Lot*. When we understand things from the perspective of God's will, earthly enticements diminish but the discipline of the Father becomes an esteemed prize. We can confidently say that Boston pastorally applies his doctrine of God's will primarily in the areas of acknowledging God, observing providence, suffering/trials, and submitting to them, and there is a strong presence of those applications when he deals with the necessity of repentance.

5.8 Boston's pastoral application of God's will in his correspondence

If God's will unfolding in providence in the life of Boston is an important part of his theology and worldview, as we have suggested, the crowning evidence would be that it was clearly displayed in his private correspondence. This is what would be expected if his *Memoirs* are a good reflection of his personal life and his sermons and books a good reflection of his public ministry. In a series of letters to his close friend Mr Hog, we get an honest picture of Boston's harsh home-life, especially with the frequent mentions of his wife's condition and his own poor

¹¹⁰⁸Boston, *Repentance*, 214.

health. The pastoral applications we identified in his sermons and published works are evident again as he writes to his friends and parishioners.

In one letter regarding prosperity and providence (14th December 1724),¹¹⁰⁹ Boston clearly instructs his friend that when things take an unexpected turn for the worse we ought to believe God plans it with good for us in mind, since everything God does is the best that can be done. On top of this temporal perspective, when God's children reach heaven the eternal perspective will prove that to be the case beyond all doubt. This exhortation for an eternal perspective does not mean that people cannot have seasons of blessed insight to their temporal afflictions in the present. After stating that the dark cloud that has hung over his wife shows no signs of dispersing, Boston acknowledges that God is in control of the entire situation and as Boston observes God's ways with his wife's affliction, he submits to God's infinite wisdom and resolves to trust the great Governor of affairs. He writes (8th August 1724),

She has not wanted seasonable supports from a higher hand; and when several coals were by wise and holy Providence cast in together into our furnace, she who behoved to be waited on and served before, was even helped to wait on, and be very helpful to others in distress; and then the clouds returned after the rain, and now she comes little out of the bed at all. But all is necessary, and He is infinitely wise who has the managing of all in His hand ... In that respect it is medicinal; it shines with many gracious purposes about it; and, end as it will, one may have the confidence of faith, that it shall end well.¹¹¹⁰

The continual confrontation in Boston's life of poor health while he trusts in God leads him to the place where he sees absolutely no discord between God's goodness and love against human trials and affliction. Boston walked the road of painful health so long he eventually arrives at the conclusion that afflictions are in fact part of God's goodness and love for his people. In one letter regarding his ill health (June 1724), Boston writes that he has 'been in the furnace of affliction'

¹¹⁰⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 500-01. Unless stated, the letters referred to in this section appear in the appendix of Morrison's edition of the *Memoirs*.

¹¹¹⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 499.

which issues from ‘the rod of a kind and gracious God on myself and family.’¹¹¹¹ This is a telling passage which shows that Boston’s pastoral application of God’s will was first and foremost applied to his own life before he ever ventured to minister to other people. In one letter to Mr Hog to comfort him over his wife’s tender condition (25th April 1726), Boston makes no hesitation in saying that health or infirmities of people are a work of sovereign disposal, and a work to be adored. If this is too challenging for his friend to accept he immediately encourages him to recognize that Christ himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and that they will one day reign with Christ because they have suffered with him.¹¹¹²

Nearly all of Boston’s letters to Mr Hog and letters to others¹¹¹³ mention afflictions of some sort and the over-riding Lord’s hand in the situation, whether that’s concerning health, poverty, or spiritual affliction. Boston is under no illusion that due to mankind’s sinful nature, the natural reaction to experiencing affliction is to rail against God but he also declares the need to acknowledge that affliction comes from God.¹¹¹⁴ As we have seen in his *Memoirs*, sermons and books, Boston emphasizes the need to submit to God’s will, and in his private correspondence that same theme is strongly stated showing our previous conjectures to be correct. On the 21st of May 1726, in a letter to his friend Mr Hog concerning the death of one Hog’s children, Boston, making mention of the six children he lost himself, wrote,

Ah! ah! why are we thus not fully satisfied and acquiescing in the wise management of the great Counsellor, who puts clouds and darkness round Him, bidding us follow at His back through the cloud, promising an eternal uninterrupted sunshine on the other side. “Lord, increase our faith,” is a petition we need to be oft putting up. But I hope the Lord has taught you and your spouse resignation to the will of Him who does all things well.

¹¹¹¹Boston, *Memoirs*, 499.

¹¹¹²‘The heaviest burden of affliction is but light in respect of the weight of glory we have in hope; and the affliction that is of such continuance as the party has forgot prosperity, is but for a moment, being compared with the eternity of that weight which faith has the view of.’ Boston, *Memoirs*, 501.

¹¹¹³Boston, “Letter to Mrs Shiell.”

¹¹¹⁴Boston, *Memoirs*, 503, (5th June 1727).

But I find it is a difficult lesson to learn: the flesh still spurns
and rises against the rod.¹¹¹⁵

This was only six years before Boston passed away and he is still writing about his personal struggle to submit to the will of God, although in other letters he writes how pleased he was for God to carve out whatever lot he deems is best for him.¹¹¹⁶

It is not only submission to God's will Boston's discusses, all of the issues we have raised under the pastoral applications of Boston's doctrine of the will of God appear at some point within his letters. There are, as we would expect, numerous references to providence,¹¹¹⁷ and direct parallels made with the biblical accounts of Jacob and Job where providence appeared to be destroying them before it turned their fortunes around (22nd July 1727). He speaks of the Lord's prerogative to bring into the lives of his children the afflictions that best suit them for their sanctification, and work in their suffering.¹¹¹⁸ This process of sanctification is worked out by means within the divine decree, afflictions being one of those means.¹¹¹⁹ Boston also notes that his observations of providence revealed to him that his most godly friends were all under affliction at one particular time.¹¹²⁰ In a study focused on a specific subject such as God's will, it is easy to forget that Boston's main emphasis in life and work and the whole reason for his theology surrounding God's will, was his love for and interest in Christ as the revelation of the one true God. This is brought to our remembrance in his letter to Mr Hog on 21st November 1730, in the twilight of his years.¹¹²¹ The overall tone of Boston's discussions of God's will shine through in his letters where he talks about God as the 'Sovereign Manager' and the one who 'carves out

¹¹¹⁵Boston, *Memoirs*, 502.

¹¹¹⁶Boston, *Memoirs*, 505, (27th January 1728).

¹¹¹⁷Boston, *Memoirs*, 504; 506; 508; 510; 511; etc.

¹¹¹⁸Boston, *Memoirs*, 505, (13th April 1728).

¹¹¹⁹Boston, *Memoirs*, 506, (5th October 1728).

¹¹²⁰Boston, *Memoirs*, 506, (19th April 1729); 511 (23rd March 1732).

¹¹²¹'It will be your wisdom to consider it as the work of God, your God, in Christ; being persuaded, that according to the measure of that persuasion, so will the Christian carriage under the rod be.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 507.

lots' for people.¹¹²² There is also the repeated point that everything God does as the result of his eternal counsel is good and done well.¹¹²³

We see then, that the doctrine of the will of God that was often on Boston's own mind and clearly displayed in his *Memoirs*, became a prevalent subject in his preaching ministry, widely popularized in his published works, and continued up until his death to be a matter of significance within his private correspondence. Subservient only to his love for God in Christ, God's will appears to be the one thing that continually commanded his attention for the duration of his adult life. Other subjects were very important too, such as covenant theology, as this appears frequently in his sermons and dogmatic studies but rarely in his personal reflections or correspondence. Boston seemed to be able to compartmentalize covenant theology to the theological teaching aspect of his life, whereas the will of God was perhaps more prevalent in his private life than it was in his public ministry, which we have shown to be littered with references. We can say with confidence that God's will unfolding in providence preoccupied Boston's thoughts and theology in a way that remarkably influenced how he practiced his pastoral care of his flock.

5.9 - Is it legitimate to use the doctrine of providence in the manner practiced by Boston?

Can we say with clarity and detail that Boston's pastoral use of his doctrine of providence is used legitimately? There is no single word answer to this question, some areas of Boston's use of the doctrine of providence are legitimate, whereas others seem less so. We shall seek to answer this question with the aid of how Boston dealt with the case study of the man born blind in Jn. 9. Boston does legitimately use his doctrine of providence when he ascribes all things to be within God's control because God is Sovereign. This is at the essence of the

¹¹²²Boston, *Memoirs*, 508, (8th December 1731).

¹¹²³'Let us exercise patience to wait the end of the Lord; and as sure as the Bible is the word of God, we will see there was nothing in the conduct of Providence, about us and our matters, that should have been out, and nothing out that should have been in. O! He doth all things well.' Boston, *Memoirs*, 508, (30th December 1731).

Reformed doctrine of God's will. Boston is therefore correct to attribute all the trials of life to be within the plans and purposes of God. When Christ suffered for the sins of the world it was part of God's plan (Isa. 53:10). The question that follows concerns the way in which God brings about our trials in his providence.

Boston differentiates between different 'crooks' as we have seen.¹¹²⁴ Concerning the man born blind, Boston attributes his blindness to God's providence.¹¹²⁵ The way in which different dispensations of providence fall out are described by Boston, and in the case of the man born blind his trial was not sinful or a direct result of personal sin (other than that all suffering is ultimately linked back to the Fall).¹¹²⁶

There are pure and sinful crooks, which are mere afflictions, clean crosses-grievous indeed, but not defiling. Such was Lazarus' poverty, Rachel's barrenness, Leah's tender eyes, and the blindness of the man born blind. Now, the crooks of this kind are of God's making, by the efficacy of His power directly bringing them to pass and causing them to be ... The man was "born blind, that the works of God should be made manifest to him" (John 9:3) ... Such crooks in the lot are of God's making in the most ample sense, and in their full comprehension, being the direct effects of His agency.¹¹²⁷

Boston is right to apply his doctrine of providence in this way. Being blind in and of itself is not a sin or the direct result of a sin. Other trials however, what Boston names 'sinful crooks,' God ordains to happen via means, causation and human free will, but they go against God's revealed will.

Boston's practical use of his doctrine of providence is Reformed in theology and biblically warranted, apart from his private habit and public recommendation of 'observing providence' to determine present and future decisions.¹¹²⁸ This is the one aspect of his application of providence that I would to say is not legitimate. Every person is guided to some extent by their circumstances, but Boston appears

¹¹²⁴See, 194-98.

¹¹²⁵'God's sovereign power and absolute dominion, which he will have the world to understand: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?" (Matt. 20:15). Thus our Lord accounts for the dispensation of the man's being born blind (John 9:3).' Boston, *Repentance*, 25-26.

¹¹²⁶Cf. Boston, *CL*, 5.

¹¹²⁷Boston, *CL*, 19-20.

¹¹²⁸In trying to perceive how God has worked via providence retrospectively is little danger, but even here a degree of uncertainty remains.

to place too great an emphasis on mere circumstances than is biblically legitimate. This being the case, Boston could at times draw erroneous conclusions from the events of his life.

Providential dispensations arrive at their destinations via different roots. Some are caused directly by God willing them to be so (the man born blind), others are the result of natural causation and means (Eli's frailty due to old age, 1 Sam. 4:12ff), whereas others are due to the sinful actions of mankind (crucifixion of Christ). That Boston sought to distinguish and understand how providence worked reveals the extent of his desire to submit to it as unto God. Boston pastorally applied his doctrine of providence successfully and legitimately, apart from his emphasis on the need to constantly observe providence which almost eclipses at times the priority of being led by God's Word.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

6.1 The Reformed Expression of Boston's doctrine of the will of God

We have covered a lot of ground doctrinally, historically and pastorally, but let us now draw the threads together. Our intention has been to examine the Reformed doctrine of the will of God and its pastoral application in the theology of Thomas Boston. We have sought to understand what Boston's doctrine of the will of God was, together with the ways that doctrine was used by Boston pastorally. It was necessary to establish Boston's doctrine of the will of God before understanding how he then utilized that doctrine pastorally in his preaching and writing.

We began by examining Boston's *Memoirs* to see the dramatic extent to which his understanding of God's providence influenced Boston's private life and ministry. We established that to fully understand Boston one had to appreciate the extent to which God's will and God's providence formed a central theme of his life and theology. The preoccupation of providence in Boston's understanding of his own life and circumstances looks certain to have been influenced by his reading of Flavel's *The Mystery of Providence*, which was written the year Boston was born. Significant details of Flavel's manual are found in Boston's *Memoirs*, with not only the same theological points being made, but with the same stresses and emphases duly recorded. Boston's *Memoirs* appear to demonstrate a genuine dependence upon Flavel's work.

Boston's doctrine of the will of God was not his own invention. He was a Minister of the Church of Scotland, prizing its confessional standard as pure and true. The WCF was wholeheartedly adopted by Boston including its strong emphasis on the sovereign will of God and all that this encompasses. Boston assented to the Confession's teaching because he understood it to be a confessional statement of orthodox Reformed theology. Boston's doctrine of the will of God comes after the formulations of Calvin and the early Reformers on the

subject and everything that led to its confessional status and form at Westminster, and it follows squarely within the Reformed tradition.¹¹²⁹ Boston identified a continuity between what he taught, what was expressed in the WCF, what Calvin and the magisterial Reformers expressed, with conformity to scriptural truth. We also established that Calvin's doctrine of God's will largely followed in the footsteps of some of the most influential figures of the Christian Church, such as Aquinas, Lombard, Bernard and Augustine. Therefore we can say that Boston's doctrine of God's will, being representative of influential individuals and a major Reformed confessional statement, is a good reflection of historic Reformed Christian teaching on God's will. This then is the first point: Boston's doctrine of the will of God is Reformed in substance and expression.

Having established that Boston's doctrine of God's will is Reformed and of great importance for understanding the man, what can we say about the content of that doctrine? Boston's doctrine of God's will, following in the footsteps of Calvin and the WCF, is one that believes that God is sovereign. We have seen that we can only know of God what he has decided to reveal to us but in the Scriptures we find an omnipotent God whose will ordains and decrees everything that happens. These actions of God remain incomprehensible to human finite understanding, God's reasons being known only to himself, there being no higher reason than the will of God. In the eternal divine perfection of God's being there is his counsel, this is what we term the will of God. God's counsel is what governs and controls all his actions or decrees. It is from God's counsel that the world was created and created in the way it was, with the inclusion of the fall, sin, suffering, redemption, and all that seemed most fitting to the infinite wisdom and knowledge of God.

The actualization of God's will in creation is his providence, whereby nothing occurs which is not part of his eternal decree so that even his permission is a part

¹¹²⁹In the light of the fact that we have dealt with theologians over a span of fourteen centuries, such as Augustine in the fourth century through to Boston in the eighteenth century, theologians from different countries, using different languages, shaped by different issues, cultures, politics and history, the consistency of thought regarding God's will is nothing short of incredible.

of his active willing. As the first cause of all things God brings to fulfilment his eternal plan by the use of means and second causes working in human beings according to their created natures. The WCF and Boston however are favourable towards the term ‘permission’ on the understanding it is not a ‘bare’ permission. God has ordained the existence of evil from which he deemed it appropriate to bring forth good. Boston acknowledges that sin and evil are self-originating within God’s rational creatures, God being the first cause of all things but not the sole cause. In sum, Boston agrees with Calvin, ‘God, therefore, ordained that which should come to pass, because nothing could have been done had He not willed it to be done.’¹¹³⁰

We also showed that a great many Reformed theologians thought about God’s will as an attribute, either labelling it such, including it under the attribute of God’s sovereignty, or discussing it in direct relation to God’s other attributes in a way that suggested it was an attribute. This leads us to offer the following succinct definition: God’s will is one of his attributes whereby God according to his own counsel, knows, plans, and executes all things.

The complex nature of God’s will from the finite perspective of humanity results in Boston acknowledging its singular nature as dwelling in the simplicity of God’s essence, whilst employing distinctions as a necessary tool for our comprehension. The most helpful distinction for our understanding of God’s single will is that of ‘secret’ and ‘revealed.’ Everything mankind needs to know about how to live before God is revealed in the Scriptures, most commonly expressed in commands, which constitute the revealed will of God. The secret will of God speaks about those things that God does and knows he will do, which he has not shared with mankind. The distinctions are used for our comprehension of God’s will but they are one and the same thing within the singular simple counsel of God.

¹¹³⁰Calvin, *SPG*, 281; Calvin, *Anabaptists & Libertines*, 242.

We demonstrated that speaking about the divine counsel of God simply as ‘God’s will’ at all times necessarily leads to confusion, and I suggested the term should be limited in use to refer to God’s revealed law and what he deems to be good for humanity, or as an expression of human submissiveness, or as a title of a subject area. This would enable profitable discussion of God’s will to proceed with less confusion than has previously ensued. Three further distinctions under the ‘secret’ aspect of God’s will ought to be adopted. I suggested it would be useful if we spoke of God ‘willing,’ ‘ordaining,’ and ‘permitting’ certain things, indicating what each of these entailed within the singular will of God. I proposed that the use of the term ‘cause’ was rarely helpful for contemporary discussion of God’s will unless it was preceded by the terms ‘First’ or ‘secondary,’ which clarified its meaning. These distinctions can then be used for clarity of definition, instead of just using ‘God’s will’ without identifying which of the far ranging meanings is intended. My terminological proposals would bring a clearer foundation of understanding on which to build a shared knowledge of God’s will.

We have therefore, via the theology of Thomas Boston and the Reformed tradition, defined what God’s will is regarding its intrinsic nature and designated its specific locale for discussion within the subject area of the attributes of God. We have made suggestions towards a unified understanding of terminology on God’s will, which I believe would engender future meaningful discussion in an area that is frequently misunderstood for the very reason that people currently employ the generic term ‘God’s will’ in multifarious ways. Further discussions on God’s will, could incorporate these suggestions whilst remaining faithful to the Reformed tradition as expressed in its historic confessions and by its influential advocates.

6.2 Boston’s pastoral application of God’s will

It was Boston’s understanding of the will of God, as it unfolded in providence in his own life that made him the man he was and led him in his ministry. Boston’s

introspective character helped many people who were experiencing affliction as is evidenced by the popularity of *The Crook in the Lot*. As Watson testified, ‘Without doubt, he was in body the weakest, and in life the most tried, minister to be found in Scotland.’¹¹³¹ It was precisely because of this, that he was able to pastorally apply Scripture about God’s will with genuine empathy and acute understanding, and often from heartfelt experience. The years he spent comforting his wife in her distress led to similar care being exercised towards his parishioners, as he assured them of the love of God and reminded them that everything that came from God’s hand was necessary for their good and his glory. The death of six of his children and the appalling life expectancy of children and people in general in his Etterick parish, coupled with their abject poverty, provided Boston with ample opportunities to minister to the afflicted. Boston’s life was spent wrestling with and submitting to God’s sovereign will, and although he ministered to his flock’s temporal afflictions, he did so with an eternal perspective, knowing that ‘no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9). Submission to the will of God was not a one off act for Boston; it was a continual learning process.

Through the pastoral applications of Boston’s ministry, this thesis has demonstrated that the doctrine of God’s will is profitable for daily life. Although the doctrine of the will of God can be complex, there is a need to acknowledge that it is essentially practical and useful, and this should be the primary recognition as opposed to notions of it being controversial or problematic. Boston utilized his doctrine of the will of God in his private life frequently and on the whole, successfully. There were times when Boston drew erroneous conclusions from his observation of providence, these seemed to flow from his tender conscience but could add to his melancholy. Similarly, the expectation concerning his parishioners’ ability to ‘read’ providence after his example may

¹¹³¹J. Watson, *The Scot of the Eighteenth Century: His Religion and His Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 201.

have been too high. Nevertheless, Boston's frequent pastoral applications of God's will throughout his ministry across numerous sermons would have shaped his parishioners, and the inhabitants of Etterick must have found this emphasis helpful given their loyalty to Boston and the growth of his flock.¹¹³²

We identified four leading areas of pastoral concern where Boston applied his doctrine of the will of God. These were, i. the need to acknowledge that God is God, and all that this encompasses regarding his sovereignty and Lordship, ii. the recommendation to observe providence knowing that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass, iii. a realization that affliction and trials are governed by God's hand and are incorporated into his plan for the sanctification of his people and the glory of his name, and lastly, iv. Boston pleads with his people, from the very depths of his heart, to submit to the will of God, in its revealed form as expressed by God's commands in Scripture, and in its ordaining form, that the lot of each and everyone is known and orchestrated by God. These four points are the direct result of Boston pastorally applying his doctrine of God's will. We cannot grasp all that God does nor identify reasons for his actions but God knows all things and does all things well, else the Apostle Paul's words, 'and we know that for those who love God all things work together for good' (Romans 8:28), are void of truth. The submission Boston exhorts his people to obtain is not a resignation to hopelessness or inaction. It is a submission that brings us full circle to acknowledge that God is God. The four specific issues identified above are expressed by Boston in his personal reflections, sermons, published works and private correspondence, from 1702 onwards. This highlights the continual importance of the doctrine of God's will for Boston in every area of life and suggests its practical emphasis.

¹¹³²Boston's first communion at Etterick had 57 participants, Boston, *Memoirs*, 244. His last communion had 777, (464).

6.3 Some observations

The first and possibly most important result of this thesis has been in identifying that to understand Boston correctly it is necessary to understand his doctrine of the will of God as it unfolds in providence. It is an unmistakably central part of his life and theology. Secondly, through the lens of Boston we have revealed the practical impact of the Reformed doctrine of the will of God. No-one will deny that God's will can be a complex subject but one has to ask if its reputation for being a difficult subject has grossly overshadowed its use for beneficial and practical pastoral care. Is this possibly a result of academic theology focusing on the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of God's will rather than on the biblical and practical aspects?¹¹³³ We have already identified that some books dealing with the subject of God's attributes fail to discuss a single biblical text, and others very few. Boston's doctrine of the will of God was not simplistic but it was thoroughly biblical and accompanied by copious references to Scripture, and because of this Boston had no reservations about pastorally applying the doctrine. Boston for example, does not belittle what anyone suffers, their suffering is real and it hurts but he is able to point them to Christ who suffered more than anyone, yet this was according to the will of God. If this happened to God's Son, his beloved, the one in whom he was well pleased, then we can submit ourselves to the Father's hand knowing that he does all things well.

Another result of this investigation has shown that certain aspects of the will of God prove more useful within pastoral ministry than others. The pastoral applications of predestination and election are little in comparison with God's Sovereignty and providential care. This is not to say that election and predestination are not pastorally helpful or practical. On the contrary, it is really in the pastoral and practical domain that election and predestination ought to be predominantly discussed, given their placement and context within Scripture. I do not believe election and predestination are revealed in Scripture in order to work

¹¹³³Cf. Keepers.

out systems of salvation or for understanding why some are saved and others not. We cannot stress metaphysical ideas to the detriment of biblical revelation. Scripture already *reveals* why some are saved and others are not and it is a matter of faith (Acts 15:9; 16:31; Rom. 3:22; 5:1; 9:30; 10:9; Gal. 2:16; 2:20; 3:8; 3:11; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim. 3:15; 1 Jn. 5:4-5; etc), all other thoughts are speculation.¹¹³⁴ The very few references to divine election and predestination that assure believers of the love of God for them should not be used as a starting point for formulating systems of theology. We conclude that election and predestination ought not to be taken out of their contexts in which they remain comforting and helpful pastoral tools, albeit in the narrow area of assurance.

Thirdly, related to the previous point, discussion around the subject of God's will has often tended to polarize either God's sovereignty or mankind's freedom. The Reformed tradition has often found itself defending God's absolute sovereignty, for example, against Arminianism. Similarly there have been debates surrounding Open Theism which has sought to emphasize human freedom. It needs to be acknowledged that there is a tension in Scripture, which speaks of God's absolute sovereignty but also of mankind's freedom and responsibility. The Bible speaks of God's definite plan and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23) and of God predestinating and choosing people before the world began (Eph. 1:4-5), but these are alongside verses which say that Jesus stands at the door and knocks and whoever opens the door he will accept (Rev. 3:20) and that Christ is the Saviour of all men, especially those who believe (1 Tim. 4:10). We must not silence one strand of thought to emphasize another. This is where Calvin was wise; stating both sides of a paradox without relieving the tension. Some people will not be satisfied with this conclusion but we cannot know the incomprehensible will of God in any more depth than it has been revealed in Scripture. Boston believed that God's will was sovereign and that he 'ordains whatsoever comes to pass' but he was at the forefront of defending the right to preach the Gospel to all men in the

¹¹³⁴Even though Romans 9 places God's reason for salvation in his secret will, his revealed reason is still faith.

knowledge that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him may receive eternal life. Boston followed Calvin in maintaining the tension of God's sovereignty and mankind's freedom. I believe Calvin and Boston managed to do this because they were at pains to be faithful to Scripture.

6.4 Final word

This thesis on Thomas Boston's doctrine of the will of God and its pastoral application has therefore revealed some important findings. The historic Reformed tradition has a doctrine of God's will that is not only biblical and robust but is of paramount importance for practical Christian living. The doctrine of God's will has profound value within a pastoral context. I think Boston was right to adopt the historic Reformed doctrine of God's will as an accurate reading of Scripture, and I believe that the way he took what was dogmatic and applied it practically is an abiding lesson for pastorally applying Reformed theology. In our present age where individualism is in vogue and autonomy stressed, I cannot help thinking that Boston's personal and pastoral emphasis on submission to the will of God is not only valid for contemporary society but also necessary. Failure to do this is to reject following Christ (Matt. 26:39; 6:10; Jn. 6:38) and to refuse to acknowledge that God is indeed God. We have demonstrated a new awareness that providence as the unfolding of God's will was such an influential aspect of Boston's life and ministry, and is significant for understanding him fully. We have revealed Boston's doctrine of the will of God and how he utilized it for pastoral application within his ministry. Boston died of a scorbutic disease (scurvy) on the 20th May 1732. The fact that almost three hundred years later new editions of his books on doctrine and pastoral care are still being printed speak to his significance and the need for future engagement with his theology.

Appendix 1 - Terminological proposals regarding God's will

What we say and how we say it, identifies what we believe, so it is critical to choose our words to explain God's will with due care and attention. Value judgments need to be made about each term used to explain the will of God, in order that what we want to say about God's will is understood by the actual words we use to say it. Let us go over the terms we have engaged with in this thesis, assessing their necessity and usefulness in our present day.

I believe I have shown that to simply speak of God's will, is not useful to clearly express what we mean by that term. A number of words may be used to add clarification to what we actually mean when we speak of God's will.¹¹³⁵ I think it would be best if we limited the term 'God's will' to, i) speak about how God wants us to behave according to his revealed law in Scripture, his will reflecting what he knows to be good for us. ii) A term of expression used to denote human submissiveness to God's ways. For example, 'it was the Lord's will' or 'the will of the Lord be done.' iii) As a general subject heading, i.e., we have been discussing 'God's will.'

I would suggest the Reformed distinctions of 'revealed' and 'secret' to describe the doctrine of God's will are the two most helpful terms for clarifying discussion on the subject. Not only are they simple, self-explanatory terms, but they reflect the testimony of Scripture that God has revealed some things to his creation, and hidden other things from them. Of near equal worth are the terms 'ordains' and 'permits' in relation to God's decree. You may ask why God 'ordaining' something is better than saying God 'wills' something? The answer is, 'ordains' speaks about God's official ordering of a thing to occur in advance, it does not necessarily mean he approves of it or desires it, which the term 'will' can more

¹¹³⁵The need for clarity on this issue is highlighted by Wright's discussion of God's will in Calvin and the issue of secondary causation. Wright concludes that Calvin's belief that God is First Cause of all things 'jeopardises' the integrity of human action. The whole discussion focuses on what 'God wills' or 'wishes,' with little attention paid to the distinctions between what God wills, ordains, and permits. Wright, 40-42. Cf. König.

likely communicate. Therefore God can ordain Christ's death whilst disapproving of his murder having prohibited murder in his law. 'Permission' is another useful term because although what God permits proceeds from his singular will, it further underscores the fact that some of what God ordains to occur he does not approve of according to his holy, righteous self, and his revealed law. A result of my proposals would mean that God ordains everything (nothing has existence apart from God), permits some things (he allows his rational creatures to disobey him in their freedom) and wills other things (reveals to mankind how it is they are to live their lives).

I would suggest the above terminology helps to clarify a description of God's will. This can be summarized as follows:

- a) God ordains all things. His ordaining all things includes all of creation with their appropriate natures, good and evil, and every event.
- b) God is the first cause of all things.¹¹³⁶ As the first cause, everything created derives its origin from God, all existence and being are God's good gift, and whatever beings do, whether good or evil, they would not be able to do without existing, including the use of all secondary causes.
- c) God permits evil. Although God's permitting is an active willing on God's part, he does not cause evil, in the sense of performing sin, nor cause others to do it in separation from secondary causes, and neither with violence being forced on the freedom of the creature (2 Sam. 24). The use of the term 'permission' makes a distinction in God's will similar to Aristotle's 'efficient' and 'final' causes.
- d) God's will reveals to mankind how they are to live their lives. It also expresses his desire for, and what he values as being, good. Hence a verse such as 2 Pet. 3:9, which speaks about God not wanting anyone to perish but to come to repentance, reveals what is good for mankind, repenting and not perishing.

All of these distinctions originate in the 'one' will of God; he is the first cause of all that he ordains, he ordains what he wills, and he wills what he permits, so his

¹¹³⁶Although Augustine refrains from using this term, Calvin frequently uses it and therefore it is necessary to distinguish the elements which compose God's will, to clarify matters when describing God's will.

‘will’ is executed in different ways and the terms ‘ordain,’ ‘first cause’ and ‘permit,’ help to distinguish these aspects. God’s will is therefore single with distinctions. What this achieves is a contemporary expression of removing culpability of sin towards God. In saying that God ordains all things and is the first cause of all things, it is then far more intelligible to say that God does not ‘cause’ evil, but permits it. The desire to comprehend that single incomprehensible will cannot but result in a definition of multiple parts.

Given the close association of ‘cause’ with ‘blame’ in contemporary language, I think the best course of action is to avoid the term whenever possible. Even if one adopts Aristotle’s fourfold scheme of causation one would have to clarify which of the four ‘causes’ is being referred to, not to mention the need for explaining the other three uses of the term, to distinguish the present use of any particular one. There rarely arises an occasion when the term ‘cause’ is the best way of expressing what we mean in relation to God’s will.

That said, I think it is helpful to speak of God as the ‘First Cause’ and of ‘secondary causes,’ for when ‘cause’ is prefixed with either ‘first’ or ‘secondary’ it becomes obvious that the person using those terms is not talking about blame but something deeper, something that expresses a multiple of causes is in existence. I believe ‘First Cause’ is useful and necessary to stress that every action, good or evil, every component in a chain of consequences, and even existence itself, relies upon God as First Cause. It is a term that for me, expresses the truth that there only exists two things, God and that which he has created. The use of ‘secondary causes’ is helpful to distinguish the actions of God’s created rational beings from God, and to establish the order that exists within God’s creation. The latter makes natural consequences possible (it rains, the ground gets wet) and stops the creation dissolving into chaos. I believe I have steered a course which enables meaningful discussion on the doctrine of God’s will to proceed and

develop, whilst acknowledging the complexities that exist in speaking about such a profound subject.¹¹³⁷

¹¹³⁷Descriptive complexities exist in the academic world of theology, it is no wonder they appear when people preach on the subject. In *The way to life and the way to destruction unfolded*, 308-397, Mt. vii. 13-14. (1731), Boston says, 'Hereupon God foresaw the fall of man, how all mankind would be ruined in Adam by the breach of the covenant of works. And nothing being future, but all present to him, he saw and considered the whole race of mankind as lost, sunk as sinners into a gulph of misery, irremediable by any created hand whatsoever. This was the ground on which the mystery of God was raised; this gave occasion to the mystery and plan thereof in the eternal counsel.' Boston, *CW*, X.436. Whether wisely or unwittingly, Boston gives evidence of the complexity of the doctrine of God's will in the passage above. Boston says God 'foresaw' the fall of man but that all things are 'present' to him and nothing future, and God foreseeing what was present before him gave occasion for his plan in the 'eternal counsel.'

Appendix 2 – Examples from the Memoirs which illustrate Boston’s practice of using his doctrine of providence

- p.11 – Boston’s conclusion of his observation of providence when he sees an open coffin is that God is speaking to him concerning life’s frailty.
- p.13 – All the trials of life he faces are viewed as issuing from the providence of God.
- p.15 – Boston retrospectively views God’s plan of providence in his life as equipping him for his ministry.
- p.16 – Boston’s observation of providence in his own trying circumstances leads him to acknowledge the grace of God in his life.
- p.18 – Boston attributes the ordering of his education to the providence of God.
- p.19 – The learning of short-hand writing Boston attributes to the providence of God since it became so beneficial in his ministry preparation.
- p.28 – Boston views providence as the source of leading him in various employments.
- p.30 – Providence leads Boston from one employment to another.
- p.32 – Boston views providence as the reason why he spent a period of time at home.
- p.33 – Boston observes the work of providence retrospectively in his student years.
- p.39 – Boston views his rejection of the post at Dunse as a hard exercise in submission to the providence of God.
- p.41 – Providence teaches Boston not to set his heart on a particular place to be a minister.
- p.47 – Boston tries to ‘read’ providence in order to determine where God wants him to become a minister.
- p.64 – Boston seeks to submit to the providence of God when a period of ill health looks likely to end in his death.
- p.72 – Boston observes that providence has organized his circumstances so as to relieve him of certain anxieties.
- p.73 – Boston tries to observe providence in order to be led where to preach.
- p.76 – Boston attributes to providence the time he came across Flavel’s work on providence which greatly helped him.
- p.80 – Boston observes providence and applying his observations to his circumstances he finds guidance.

- p. 83 – When Boston submits to the providence of God regarding his call to Simprin it brings him peace.
- p.85 – Boston seeks to submit again to the providence of God regarding his call to Simprin.
- p.87 – Boston uses his observation of providence to guide him in life.
- p.89 – Boston acknowledges that God directs his providence to our lives in areas where we need to be challenged.
- p.94-5 – Boston retrospectively observes God’s providence in his life and rejoices in God’s guidance of his life.
- p.95 – Providence declared ‘a rock of comfort’ to Boston as he faces his trials.
- p.99 – Boston uses providence to guide him to certain texts to preach on.
- p.102 – Boston ‘reads’ providence (that is, circumstances and weather conditions) to decide on when to travel.
- p.121 – Boston uses his doctrine of providence to give thanks to God because of his current situation.
- p.134 – Boston applies his observations of providence to comfort his own heart.
- p.137 – Boston views his own trials as coming from God’s providence.
- p.142 – Boston achieves peace during the near death of his father when he submits to the providence of God.
- p.148 – When Boston submitted to the providence of God it reduced his unnecessary fears.
- p.150 – Boston uses his observation of providence to decide when to do things.
- p.153 – Boston looks for what lessons God is teaching him through his trials which are sent by the providence of God.
- p.168 – Boston positively applies his observations of providence to give God thanks in his situation.
- p.182 – Boston puts certain trying circumstances down to providence and because of that he manages to be thankful for them.
- p.184-85 – When Boston is deciding on whether he is called to Etterick he repeatedly observes providence to ascertain an answer.
- p.197 – From Boston’s observation of providence he admits it looks unlikely he will be called to Etterick.
- p.198 – Boston both observes and applies the providence of God to his life.
- p.205 – Boston ‘reads’ providence into the incident of the forgotten presbytery meeting.

- p.208 – Boston seeks to submit to the providence of God and when he did things turned out well regarding his call to Etterick.
- p.212 – Boston understands that the provisions for his family are the work of the providence of God.
- p.221 – Boston is greatly encouraged to note that God in his providence leads him to subjects to preach upon.
- p.227 – The preaching of the Fourfold State in sermon form is observed by Boston as an act of providence.
- p.229 – Boston notes that he does not want to trust in circumstances so as not to make a Bible out of providence.
- p.235-36 – Boston rejoices greatly in God despite difficult trials because he believes they issue from the providence of God.
- p.237 – Boston observes that trials prematurely cut short do not produce the fruit that providence intended.
- p.240 – Boston deeply desires to submit to God’s providence noting that his trials come from God’s hand.
- p.242 – Boston observes the providence of God at work in his friendships.
- p.248 – Boston resigns his will to God’s in faith when providence confused him and this helped to ease his heart.
- p.251 – Boston views providence leading him in his ministerial work.
- p.254 – Boston seeks to ‘read’ providence in the matter over whether or not to publish his sermons.
- p.256 – Boston submits to providence even though it brought him sorrow to his heart.
- p.261 – Boston trusts in the providence of God hoping to something of the secret design contained within his present circumstances.
- p.265 – Boston attributes the unfolding of providence as the reason for his decision to confirm an oath.
- p.268 – Boston views the smallest details of life as having a design governed by providence to try the patience of God’s children.
- p.277 – Boston uses providence to lead him in the ordering and timing of his ministry.
- p.279 – Boston goes ahead with the publication of some of his works when he sees God’s providence leading him to it.
- p.281 – By observing providence Boston is lead to times of prayer and fasting.

- p.282 – Boston describes the normal way in which providence works in his life by bringing situations to a low point before adding great blessing.
- p.289 – The meeting of a stranger who helps Boston is ascribed to providence.
- p.291 – Boston relies upon the providence of God to make certain decisions.
- p.293 – Boston understands that it is God’s providence that leads him out of trouble.
- p.297 – When impending disaster turns out to be a false alarm, Boston views this episode as a ‘kind providence’ sent by God.
- p.300 – Boston looks to providence to lead him in his preaching.
- p.304 – The providential death of a young mother of four leads Boston to preach on Zech. 12:12.
- p.308 – Boston observes providence and declares that it is ‘sweetly surprising’ regarding his management of affairs.
- p.310 – Boston is lead by providence when seeking a place for his son to stay in Edinburgh while he studies.
- p.312 – Boston speaks of his desire to be led by providence in all matters of life rather than lead his own affairs.
- p.315 – Boston is openly happy when he knows he has followed the providence of God.
- p.316 – Boston speaks in a church assembly after being prompted by providence to do so.
- p.318-19 – Boston observes and confirms the ‘practical usefulness’ of providence when his daughter is healed of a nose related injury.
- p.321 – Boston observes a trial whereby an number of his elders die as a trial issuing from the providence of God.
- p.328 – Boston can at times view the design of providence as a rebuke, both to himself and the whole parish.
- p.333 – Boston attributes the death of some close friends to the providence of God and concludes from his observation of providence that he should not publish the Fourfold State.
- p.335 – Boston wrestles with not wanting to disregard providence as he considers to publish the Fourfold State.
- p.337 – Providence seems to compel Boston to undertake certain tasks.
- p.340 – Boston attributes surprising circumstances to providence.
- p.343 – Boston understands favourable situation as blessings of God’s providence.

- p.346 – Boston trusts that Holy Providence always leads his affairs.
- p.350 – Boston attributes meeting Mr Hog to a kind providence.
- p.352 – Boston retrospectively observes why providence has delayed the publication of some of his work.
- p.354 – Amidst all the trying circumstances surrounding his decision to publish the Fourfold State Boston testifies to the leading of providence.
- p.356 – Boston understands the providence determines the number of those who are attending an Assembly.
- p.359 – Boston observes that providence is guiding the course of the Assembly.
- p.360 – In deciding what to preach on Boston looks to providence for guidance.
- p.361 – Boston gains insight into the direction of church affairs which he attributes to providence.
- p.364 – Even in Boston’s unfulfilled desires he observes providence at work.
- p.370 – Boston has difficulty in observing providence regarding his going to Penpont.
- p.371 – When Boston becomes lost he attributes to providence the way he was guided home safely.
- p.371 – When Boston recalls God’s providence in his life since childhood, it causes him to be thankful.
- p.372 – Boston attributes his discovery of the importance of the Hebrew accents to providence.
- p.374 – Boston observes providence turning a potentially difficult situation into one of comfort and order.
- p.375 – Even when Boston makes alterations to his house he is guided by his observation of providence.
- p.377-78 – Visitors and letters from friends are viewed as kind providences.
- p.379 – Boston understands that all people are under the providence of God.
- p.384 – Boston views his painful illnesses as issuing from the providence of God.
- p.385 – Boston observes providence and understands years later why he acquired certain books years before.
- p.388 – Boston attributes to kind providence his being led to preach.
- p.393 – When Boston is lead to produce a productive workload by being kept homebound due to illness, he observes the kindness of providence.
- p.394 – Providence guides Boston into useful circumstances.
- p.397 – The provision of Boston’s family needs are attributed and trusted to the

providence of God.

- p.399 – Boston grows in his understanding of how God works in his life via his observation of providence.
- p.405 – Providence is seen to be the means of provision in the Boston household.
- p.406 – When Boston and his family are preserved from an earthquake, this is put down to the providence of God.
- p.408 – Boston is led to a case of adultery and he observes that this is providence teaching both himself and his congregation to be humble.
- p.413 – Again, Boston attributes to providence the guidance he gets on selecting texts from which to preach.
- p.414 – Boston seeks to be sensitive to the providence of God in his pastoral visits.
- p.415 – When Boston looks for accommodation when attending the Assembly, he observes providence and is led to a place to stay.
- p.416 – Providence directs every aspect of Boston's work and life which causes him to be very thankful.
- p.418 – Despite being confused at times Boston gives thanks for providence for wonderfully leading him in life.
- p.420 – Boston observes providence directing the course of one his meetings.
- p.423 – Boston views his personal trials as a part of God's providence for his life making up for his lack of public persecution.
- p.427 – All of Boston's everyday affairs he observes are guided by providence.
- p.437 – Boston knowing that providence guides all his affairs in life, seeks to submit to the will of God in all things.
- p.438-9 – Boston observes that a time of bitter illness is the work of providence.
- p.440 – Boston observes that a quick dispatch of one his essays is due to providence.
- p.443 – Boston observes providence guiding him in his ministry and through trying circumstances God is blessing him.
- p.446 – Boston observes that providence seemed to always bring about trials when he preached at Penpont.
- p.477 – Boston observes the Bible always matching up with providence and leading the people of God.
- p.448 – A delay in Boston's life is viewed by him as providence teaching him patience.

- p.449 – When Boston is seriously ill he observes the providence of God bringing him help.
- p.453 – Boston attributes a good journey to the providence of God.
- p.454 – Boston observes that providence simultaneously tries and delivers him in life.
- p.457 – Boston has hope because providence leads him to certain passages of the Bible.
- p.461 – Boston observes that providence leads God’s children in ways that they would not choose for themselves but are nevertheless good for them.
- p.463 – Boston uses the circumstances of providence to help lead his decisions.
- p.464 – Boston observes the Lord determining a blessing for his people via providence.
- p.465 – Boston observes that providence can bring short-term trials to people which can result in long-term blessings.
- p.467 – Boston observes that providence can look set to be against a certain work before turning and blessing it mightily.
- p.469-71 – How Boston attributes to providence the curious incident of the pea.
- p.472 – The observation of the leading providence in Boston’s ministry causes him to rejoice in God’s mercy.
- p.475 – Boston was pleased after observing how providence had kept him from loving money and secular affairs.
- p.499 – Boston observe providence working his wife’s illness, that although it causes great trials at times it also produces great blessing.
- p.501 – Boston observes that health and infirmity are due to providence.
- p.502 – Boston laments the fact that he does not always trust God’s providence.
- p.503 – Affliction is an ordinance that comes from the providence of God.
- p.504 – Boston observes the way of providence that God’s children are brought into seeming disaster before he turns things around to greatly bless.
- p.506 – Around the year 1729 Boston observes how providence has brought many trials into the lives of his close friends.
- p.508 – Boston comforts others by telling them that in glory we shall all observe that providence acted in our favour at all times.
- p.509 – Initial disappointments in Boston’s life are later acknowledged to be wise conducts of providence.

p.511 – In the observation of providence the Christian can be clearly guided by God.

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