

Finding God's Will

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THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The guidance of the Holy Spirit is a controversial topic on which believers hold a wide variety of opinions. It is common to hear Christians defend their decisions by saying “the Lord directed me.” Sometimes we say explicitly that the Lord told us to do something, while at other times we speak of the Lord “opening doors” or “laying a thought or a matter on our heart.”

We are so used to hearing these words that we do not often stop to consider what is being claimed. Ministers often tell us that the Lord “laid” a particular text upon their hearts and that is why they are preaching it that morning, at church meetings we hear men speak of the Lord calling them into the ministry, and at prayer meetings the leader may exhort those present to pray “as the Lord leads you.”

We are perhaps ready to admit that there may be problems here. After all, most of us have encountered people who claim to have been led by the Lord into some business venture that seems highly risky, even unethical; or to undertake some ministry for which the person appears highly unsuited. I have a minister friend who referred to the married woman with whom he had an affair, as “God’s gift to him.” He was claiming by this statement that God had led him into that relationship which betrayed both his wife and his ministry. It is clear that minister was wrong. But, then, how do we know that some other minister got his text directly from God for that Sunday morning, or that the Lord really did tell another young man to become a minister?

Now I absolutely believe that God is at work in people’s lives, and that the Holy Spirit dwells in all believers. However, I also believe that direct, mystical guidance is not promised us in Holy Scripture—indeed, we are told to find guidance for living in very different ways than to expect it to be given us directly by the Holy Spirit’s speaking. Further, we are never told in Holy Scripture how to know whether God is speaking to us, or whether it is the Devil (who, after all, is accustomed to disguising himself as an angel of light) or our own inner voice and desires.

Let us begin to address this issue by looking at what Scripture has to say about the will of God. The Bible uses the word “will” and the idea of the “will of God” in two different ways.

God's Plan

Sometimes God’s “will” means God’s counsel—His sovereign plan according to which all things unfold in the world. This may mean from the divine point of view such as in Ephesians 1:11, “...according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his own will,” or from the point of view of mankind such as in 1 Peter 4:19 “...those who suffer according to God’s will.”

God's Commands

At other times the Bible uses that word and idea to refer to the revealed will of God or His commands such as in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 "...it is God's will that you should be holy." While the Bible uses the term "will" and the idea of the will of God in these two ways, evangelical Christians use the idea in three ways. The problem is that the third way—that of "finding God's will" by mystically discovering what God wants us to do—does not appear in Holy Scripture.

What people often mean when they speak of "finding God's will" is that there is a plan that God has for our lives which we will live if only, at every fork in the road, we make the right choice. When we make the wrong choice and are "out of God's will" (meaning not that we have broken some commandment but that we have made a choice God didn't intend for us to make) then we think we are off the path God planned. It thus becomes very important to learn what choices God wants us to make: where to go to college, whom to marry, what job to take, where to live, what house to buy, etc.

But, how are we to know the right choice? The Bible does not reveal which job offer to take or what man or woman to marry. It is at this point that this expectation of immediate guidance, given directly to the soul by the Lord, comes into play. And it is for this reason that people believe in such guidance so strongly. If we have to know what choices to make, then we think somehow God must tell us.

This is exactly the view of divine guidance widely held in the Ancient Near East during the time of the Old Testament writings. The ancient world was thoroughly absorbed in the pursuit of knowing the will of the gods so that man might choose wisely. In early pagan religions, divination (the science of discovering the intentions of the gods ahead of time) was a highly developed science whose practitioners were some of the most important members of any court.

However, the Bible forbids divination. Deut. 18:10: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens...etc." The Bible does not teach that our lives depend for their good and blessing on inside information obtained in this way. Its view of guidance is completely different than that of the pagan religions.

It is certainly true that God has communicated directly to men by means of visions, dreams, voices from heaven, and other means. But to whom were such revelations given? Not to ordinary believers but to prophets, apostles, and the like.

Gideon is one example of an Old Testament saint who sought special guidance from the Lord by placing a fleece on the ground for two consecutive nights. One night he asked the Lord to keep the fleece dry and the ground wet, the next night he asked for the opposite. He did this to assure himself of the rightness of what he was about to do, and his prayers were answered. But in recording this, the Bible is far from saying that we will be given the same guidance. Gideon was about to kill large numbers of human beings in the prosecution of a holy war. It was a different situation from that which most Christians face in their lives, and he had a very different office than anyone in the modern church.

I grew up hearing a great deal about such "fleeces." When people needed to know what God wanted them to do, they would say they were "laying out a fleece." But, of course, they did no such thing. They would tell the Lord that whoever called them next was the one they should marry, or if the coin turned up heads they should go to college. However, these are eventualities that would ordinarily occur.

It was the casting of a lot that convinced the 18th-century preacher John Wesley that he should print his sermon against the American evangelist George Whitefield and the doctrine of sovereign grace. This sermon did significant harm to the unity of the Great Awakening, but Wesley felt that the lot was proof that his views were true and Whitefield's were false. If you want to lay out a fleece, do what Gideon did! And you will find the dew on both the fleece and the ground for two nights running.

Christian ethics, the living of a holy life, the doing of the right thing never in Scripture requires us to know information that God has about the future. Rather the Bible has a very different doctrine of guidance and of decision-making. The basic ingredients of the Bible's doctrine of guidance are these:

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

In 2 Tim. 3:16-17 Paul says that the Scriptures "thoroughly furnish the man of God for every good work." When the Bible is properly understood, a Christian man or woman has all the principles of conduct for him or her to make a wise and godly decision. The Bible is sufficient and therefore rules over whatever impressions we may otherwise gather from our circumstances. David, for example, chose to keep God's law in not killing Saul even when he might have concluded from the circumstances—Saul being placed at David's mercy on two separate occasions—that the Lord had given Saul into his hand (1 Sam. 24; 26).

There is a comprehensive ethic taught in the Scriptures. It covers behavior, motives, attitudes, customs, habits, and every other aspect of human activity. Every decision we ever make is addressed in a variety of ways in the Scripture. With what choice may I best love the Lord with all my heart or my neighbor as myself? With what choice do I best hunger and thirst for righteousness? With what choice do I best place the interests of others above my own?

Much of what passes for guidance in the evangelical church today is actually very dismissive of Scripture. A husband and wife make the choice for the schooling of their child by waiting for the leading of the Lord as if God has not spoken in such clear ways in His Word as to give parents all the information they need to honor Him. A young man or woman chooses a partner for marriage because of feelings they are sure come from the Lord, when the decision must be made in defiance of various teachings of the Bible, the will of parents, or the counsel of the elders.

The first place to seek God's will is in Scripture, but it is true that we must consider how to apply these Scriptural truths. That requires...

EXERCISING PRUDENCE AND SOUND JUDGMENT

We may define sound judgment as a biblical mind evaluating circumstances. You see this practiced often in the Bible.

Paul decided to remain in Corinth because the Lord spoke to him in a vision telling him that He had many people in that city to be called to faith in Christ, but that is the exception, not the rule. In most cases Paul seemed to make his decisions based on judgment of the circumstances. He remained in Ephesus because he says, "a great door for effective work has opened to me. . ." (1 Cor. 16:9). In other cases he moved on because there was no such door for effective work. There is no hint in these cases that he received a vision. Indeed, it seems visions and special revelations were given to him when God intended him to do what sound judgment would not have led him to do.

SEEKING GODLY COUNSEL

In Proverbs we read of another ingredient in a biblical doctrine of guidance—the need for godly counselors. Proverbs 15:22 tells us, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” We see so narrowly and are greatly affected by our own biases and prejudices. But consulting a circle of wise men and women will give us much more insight than we could ever gain on our own. In 1 Kings 12, King Rehoboam failed because he followed only the counsel that agreed with his own tendencies, or, in other words, he did not really seek counsel at all.

Even the apostles practiced this rule. The Jerusalem council involved the collective decision of many minds thinking together, arguing back and forth and coming at last to a considered judgment (Acts 15).

PRAYING

As with everything else in the Christian life, we are to depend for right choices and decisions upon the help of the Lord. Psalm 25:5 says, “Show me your ways,

O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior and my hope is in you all day long.” If you read this entire Psalm, it is very clear that the Psalmist is not simply interested in discrete bits of information needed for the making of decisions, but rather that the Lord would write His Word upon his heart, purify his heart, and grant him a sense of constant dependence upon the Lord. Right thinking, wise choosing, and godly living are the very blessings prayer is appointed to convey. Then there is also a great deal of practical direction to be found through prayer. If a course of action is agreeable to God's Word, has the support of godly counsel, and seems in all respects prudent, but is not possible for want of resources or opportunity, we must pray. If God gives us what we need, surely we can say that we are encouraged to proceed. If, on the other hand, a godly course of action is planned but in answer to our prayers, that course of action is denied us in some way, are we not dealing with the Lord in that as well?

What is more, the life of prayer keeps us in a godly mind, a mind that blends with outward life while keeping at the Lord's side, the very kind of mind that is best suited to a consecrated life.

RESPONSIBLY EXERCISING THE LIBERTY GOD HAS GIVEN

Taking the Bible as a whole, it is clear that God has left to us a vast liberty of choices and decisions. He does not tell us how to earn a living, how much education to obtain, whom to marry, where to live, or what church to attend. His Word directs us to a point in regard to all of these choices, but only to a point.

Now, it is true that once we confess God's absolute sovereignty over every detail of our lives, we immediately recognize that the Lord does in fact direct our steps in many more ways and more profoundly than we often realize. Acts 17:26 tells us He has “determined the times set for us and the exact places where we should live.”

But this lies beneath and behind our own thinking and choosing. God leaves us free to make those choices, and He weaves the free exercise of our wills into His eternal plan. Insofar as the choices we make are not contrary to His Word, we are at liberty to choose many different things according to our likes, preferences, or pleasures. God has left us free to exercise genuine freedom. He commands only that we choose wisely and well, according to His Word, though we are reminded that even when we do not, we do not escape the divine will or frustrate His plan.

TRUSTING IN GOD'S BLESSINGS

When we walk with the Lord, seeking always to do His pleasure, He promises to bless us. That is all we need to know. The blessing may come in the form of trial or in the form of prosperity. That is God's business, not ours.

This is the view of guidance we are given, for example, in Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." You see, it doesn't say, "Find out what the paths are supposed to be and walk in those." It says, "Follow the Lord, remain near to Him, trust His Word to guide you aright, and you can count on the Lord blessing your life no matter what course He may have decided it will take."

The danger here can be illustrated through the life of an individual I knew who was stricken with a fatal disease. The person shared with me and others that the Lord had revealed by means of a strong impression that healing would take place. Even as severe physical deterioration gave us every indication that the doctors' prognoses were correct, my friend continued to act and speak as though healing would occur.

The death of this individual came about, contrary to what the so-called guidance had indicated. As I look back on this event, I see how this view of guidance prevented my friend from a significant work in the Christian life—namely to die well, giving glory to God who gives and takes away, and to leave this world confessing before all that "the Judge of all the earth does right" and that, in Christ, "to die is gain!"

It is wise to seek the best medical advice and treatment available, to pray earnestly for healing and strength, and to call upon the elders to pray. But, a time comes when it becomes an act of submission to accept that God intends for you to die. Prayers should then shift their focus and seek the grace to die well, asking the Lord to draw near. If the Lord's love is shed abroad in a Christian's heart, anything can be faced with grace, faith, hope, and love.

I do not seek any diminishment whatsoever of the mystical dimension of our faith. The nearness of God is our good, as the Psalmist puts it. His prayers open opportunities before us in some cases and close them in others. Each day is a matter of walking with God and dealing with Him in respect to everything in our daily lives. We ask Him for His provision and change our plans as our prayers are heard or our requests denied.

You see! Indeed this is faith—to live with advance knowledge is not. To trust the Lord to keep His Word to us—no matter what our circumstances may be—to rest content to live by His Word come wind, come weather, that is faith!

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