



Ambassador Basic Curriculum

Decision Making

AND THE WILL OF GOD

By
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- Use the footnote references to find additional titles to help expand your knowledge.
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Session 1: God's Will

I. Introduction

A. In the next couple of hours I'm going to make some of you very upset.

1. I'm going to question much of what you understand about the "leading" of the Holy Spirit.
2. Some of you will be frustrated.
 - a. You'll feel I'm taking God away from you.
 - b. You may even be a little depressed at first.
3. Some of you will be mad.
 - a. You'll accuse me of quenching the Spirit.
 - b. You'll challenge my orthodoxy.
 - c. Some have even questioned my Christianity.
4. This is a controversial issue.

B. When we're finished, though, you'll be thankful.

1. Because after a careful examination of the Scriptures, after a close look at the way the Apostles made choices, I think you'll see decision making in a completely new light.
2. By the time we're done with our final session, there will be little question about what God's will for your life is.
3. You'll have the tools you need to make sound choices.
4. And many of you will experience a deeper sense of relief and freedom in decision making than you've ever known before.

C. Costly confusion

1. No issue is more important for practical, day-to-day Christian living than making decisions based on the will of God.
2. No issue is filled with more confusion, misinformation, mistaken proof-texting and even downright superstition than knowing God's will.
3. Few things are as misunderstood, I believe, as the role of the Holy Spirit in making decisions.
4. This is costly. J.I. Packer wrote, "Wrong ideas about God's guidance lead to wrong conclusions about the right thing to do."¹
5. Christian folklore
 - a. One of my roles in the Body is to challenge our thinking.
 - b. Sometimes that means questioning popular ideas about spirituality we have come to take for granted as "the Christian way," yet turn out to be error, what I call Christian folklore.
 - c. So in this study I want to...
 - 1) Raise some questions about the way we make decisions as Christians
 - 2) Suggest some refinements that are more biblical and more workable

¹J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1987), 109.

- d. What I'm going to say may make you feel very uncomfortable, at first.
- 6. Summary of what I will do:
 - a. Carefully analyze from the text the conventional wisdom on the issue
 - b. Construct a biblical model of decision-making
 - c. Examine actual cases in the New Testament where this model is employed
 - d. Make some specific applications and then deal with questions

D. The real question: "How is God involved in the process of making decisions?"

1. The prevailing view:
 - a. God has an individual blueprint for our lives. We call this His plan or will for our life.
 - b. We then attempt to find out His decisions so we can make our decisions. We call that finding God's will.
 - c. We do that by using certain techniques to get information from God before we can move forward.
 - d. This allows us to function optimally in the Christian life.
2. Christian lingo:
 - a. "I feel led...." "I think God is telling me...." "God wants me to...."
 - b. "I feel God is calling me...." "I believe it's God's will that I...."
 - c. "I've received lots of confirmation...." "I have a peace about it...."
3. When you hear these statements, you have to ask the question, "How did they know?"
 - a. Implies a kind of sixth sense, that spiritual maturity is being able to better "tune in" and "hear" the voice of God.
 - b. This view spawns slogans like:
 - 1) "I want to be in the center of God's will."
 - 2) "I want God's perfect will, not His permissive will."
 - 3) "The good [my desires] is always the enemy of the best [God's perfect will]."
 - c. This creates confusion, frustration, anxiety, even fear that we're not "tuned in."
 - d. John MacArthur describes different views:²
 - 1) God's will is a trauma, some dramatic event powerfully conveys God's "hints."
 - 2) Some people are afraid of God's will. In John MacArthur's words, "They think God will take a robust athlete, break both his legs and make him play the flute the rest of his life."
 - 3) World's view of an "act of God": flood, tornado, earthquake
 - 4) God's will is lost: "I'm searching for God's will."
 - e. All based on a very important assumption: the blueprint; the road map—God made the decision that we must discover in order to make our decision. Can you relate?
 - 1) God drops little hints, like a Cosmic Easter bunny: "You're getting warmer!"

²The material in "I.D.3d., e.1.)" and also in "II.B.4 & 5." was adapted from John MacArthur's treatment of the topic, *Found: God's Will*, available on tape or in booklet form.

- 2) Frustration: Are we reading the “hints” correctly? (“The flight instruments are broken & we’re completely lost, but we’re making excellent time!”)
- 3) We get very superstitious:
 - a) I think God is leading me, but maybe it’s my own desire.
 - b) The door is closed.
 1. But is it really closed and locked?
 2. Is it an obstacle to faith, a roadblock from Satan, or divine red light?
 - a. “Let’s bind the devil, claim the victory, and barge through!”
 - b. “But maybe we’re just not listening to God.”
 - c) I have an open door. Is this God or Satan’s second best?
- f. Indeed, some Christian teachers on this issue warn you not to do anything unless you’ve heard from God about the decision (e.g., Henry Blackaby, Joy Dawson)

E. I determined to find God’s will. And I looked in what I thought would be the most obvious place: His Word.

1. This seems so very obvious, but it’s often ignored.
2. All spiritual disciplines that are important and essential for productive Christian living are taught clearly. They are not hidden between the lines.

II. What the Bible Teaches about Reading the Signs

I learned five things the Bible does not teach: It does not teach that we get guidance from feeling “led by the Spirit,” having a “peace” about it, open doors, fleeces, or confirmations.

A. The Bible does not teach we get guidance from a feeling (“I felt led.”).

1. This teaching simply is not biblical.
 - a. There’s not a single instance in the Scripture that asserts this, that I know of.
 - b. The “still small voice” of Elijah was a still small voice, not a still small feeling, thought, or nudge.
 - 1) 1 Kings 19:13 “And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”
 - 2) Note that in v. 9 the text says, “the word of the Lord came to him.” In v. 13, though, the text specifies a voice, not a feeling or inner sense.
 - 3) Misreading this text is an example of using biblical terms in non-biblical ways.
2. What does the Bible mean by the phrase “led by the Spirit”?
 - a. Romans 8:12-14 (cf. v. 9): “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die. But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”³

³All Scripture references in this syllabus are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

- 1) Being led by the Spirit in this passage is not referring to individual guidance, but rather empowerment to live holy lives. It refers to the Holy Spirit's work of convicting of sin and "leading" a Christian into righteous living.
 - 2) Note Packer: "What does it mean to be 'led by the Spirit' in personal decision making? That phrase, found in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18, speaks of resisting sinful impulses, not of decision making."⁴
- b. Galatians 5:16-21:
- 1) This section also deals with the role of the Spirit in our lives.
- "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.
- 2) Clearly "led by the Spirit" (v. 18) has to do with righteous conduct and not incidental decision making.
 - a) This is why someone who is led by the Spirit in Paul's sense is "not under the Law."
 - b) They are already fulfilling the law by their righteous conduct.
 - c) It wouldn't make much sense for Paul to be saying, "If you get your directions directly from God, you don't have to keep the commandments."
 - 3) Jerry Bridges sums up the biblical notion in *The Practice of Godliness*:⁵

The apostle Paul describes Christians as people who are *led* by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18). Both of these passages refer to His leading, not in some decision we must make, but in the conduct and character issues of our lives. If we are led by the Spirit, we will put to death the misdeeds of the body, and we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

The Holy Spirit leads us *objectively* through the general teaching of His word. There is where we learn His will for all Christians. But the Holy Spirit also leads us *subjectively* as He impresses certain Scriptures on our minds, applying them to specific situations in our lives. This is His way of showing us what He wants us to give attention to at a particular time;

⁴Packer, 123.

⁵Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), 70-71.

this is the way He leads us to establish a priority of applications.
[emphasis in the original]

- c. Jesus was also “led” or “impelled” by the Spirit into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1).
 - 1) First, whatever was happening here, a good case can be made that Jesus’ experiences were unique since He was the incarnate Son of God.
 - a) This is the only mention of such an occurrence anywhere in the New Testament.
 - b) There is no teaching or even suggestion that we should follow this pattern.
 - 2) Second, this does not seem to be an internal prompting of the sort Christians describe when they use the concept of being “led by the Spirit.”
 - a) The text seems to indicate that the Spirit actually took Jesus to the wilderness rather than “led” Him in the sense that we use the word.
 - b) The words used (*ago, anago*) are the same used to describe Satan taking Jesus to different locations during the temptation.
- 3. Using the “felt led” theology creates all kinds of problems in application.
 - a. It often makes God look capricious, changing His mind from moment to moment as the believer is “led” in different directions.
 - b. Christians do extreme, bizarre things, led on by their feelings of what God wants, making their lives very unstable.
 - c. It gives divine authority to impulses or thoughts that drift through our minds.
 - 1) To say “God is telling me” gives your feelings an authority the Scripture does not justify.
 - 2) It virtually ends debate.
 - d. You can’t argue with the person if God supposedly gave the command.
- 4. Trusting inner feelings is not biblical. It’s confusing at best, and dangerous at worst.

B. The Bible does not teach we get guidance from inner peace (“Pray and see if you feel a peace about it.”). The proof text is constantly misused.

- 1. Colossians 3:15 “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”
 - a. The Greek word for “rule” means to act as arbiter or judge.
 - b. The conventional response is that this sense of peace in your heart is the judge.
 - 1) Peace about the decision equals God’s green light.
 - 2) No peace about the decision equals God’s red light.
 - c. This is a classic example of how knowledge of the Greek can be dangerous if context is not taken into consideration.
- 2. **Note that the word “peace” can have two different meanings.**
 - a. It could mean a sense of inner harmony or emotional equanimity, e.g., “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).
 - b. It could also mean lack of conflict between two parties who were formerly at enmity with each other:

- 1) Two countries are at peace, not war.
 - 2) The same sense is used in Romans 5:1: “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”
 - c. How would we know which sense of “peace” is in view here? The context must tell us.
3. Here is the verse, in context (v. 12-15): “And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. **And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts**, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful.”
- a. “Peace” here means harmony, lack of conflict between people in the church, based on love and forgiveness.
 - 1) I.e., let your commitment to interpersonal harmony among the members of the church be the “arbiter,” “judge,” or ruling principle.
 - 2) There is no hint that this refers to an internal feeling, a divine stamp of approval on a decision.
 - b. Paul is not talking about a subjective guideline, but an objective guideline.
 - c. There’s an outside possibility Paul is referring to inner peace, but only as it results from living in harmony with other Christians.
 - 1) Paul is telling the Colossians that when dealing with each other they should pursue whatever promotes peace.
 - 2) Whether this is internal or external peace makes no difference to my main point. In neither case is Paul giving a guideline to judge various decisions in our lives. That use is foreign to the text.
4. Applicational problems of this view:
- a. In major decisions, some emotional distress is normal.
 - b. Sometimes doing the right thing is unsettling.
 - 1) Moses, Gideon, Jesus in Gethsemane
 - 2) Witnessing: “I don’t feel led.” “You feel **lead** all right, just the wrong kind of lead.”
 - c. Sometimes you do have “peace” (you feel right) about doing something wrong.
 - 1) Ever have a peace about dating a non-Christian?
 - 2) Getting divorced: “I have a peace about it.”
 - 3) Remember, the Mormons have a peace about the book of Mormon.

C. The Bible does not teach we get guidance from open and closed doors.

1. Paul walked through some open doors: “But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Corinthians 16:8-9).
2. But Paul ignored other open doors:
 - a. 2 Corinthians 2:12-13: “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother, but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.”

- b. Acts 16:26-28: “And suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened. And when the jailer had been roused out of sleep and had seen the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!’”
- 3. Conclusion:
 - a. Paul did not read even miraculous divine opportunities as if they were divine directives.
 - b. Paul viewed open doors (even open prison doors!) simply as opportunities that could be acted on or ignored depending on other factors.

D. The Bible does not teach us to seek guidance from fleeces or providential signs.

- 1. Gideon’s fleece (Judges 6-7) was not normal guidance:
 - a. It confirmed direction already supernaturally given (Judges 6:21).
 - b. The fleece itself was a supernatural sign, not like our “Let her answer on the third ring if she’s THE one” variety.
 - c. Fleeces have another problem, illustrated in an episode of *The Simpson’s* show. Homer is deep in prayer over the news that his wife, Marge, is pregnant with their third child.

Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here’s the deal: You freeze everything as it is and I won’t ask for anything more. If that is okay, please give me absolutely no sign. [pause] Okay, deal. In gratitude, I present to you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. [pause] Thy will be done.⁶

- d. If you really want to ask for a legitimate fleece, then ask for a supernatural sign in both directions:
 - 1) A supernatural sign to say “no” (“levitate the table”).
 - 2) A supernatural sign to say “yes” (“levitate the bed”).
- 2. It was an expression of doubt and disbelief, an inappropriate request of Gideon’s that God put up with.
- 3. What about, “If these desires/feelings/ideas are not from you, take them away” or “Stop me if You really don’t want me to do this”?
 - a. This is an example of a request for a circumstantial sign.
 - b. Placing this kind of ultimatum before the Lord is testing God and is wrong (see Luke 4:12).
- 4. There are scattered examples of providential signs used in the Bible (e.g., Abraham, Genesis 24:12 ff.), but there is no indication this is a standard way of making decisions. The fact that this is not taught to us in the New Testament as a proper method of making decisions is a critical point. The only New Testament example

⁶Episode 2F10, “And Maggie Makes Three,” original airdate January 22, 1995.

that comes to mind is the drawing of lots to fill the apostolic vacancy left by Judas in Acts, hardly a common occurrence. Is any body really suggesting that we draw straws or flip a coin to determine God's will for us?

E. The Bible does not teach we get guidance from confirmations.

1. The concept of confirmation by multiple witnesses is mentioned only four times in the New Testament.
 - a. Matthew 18:15-16 "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."
 - b. 2 Corinthians 13:1-2 "This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again, I will not spare anyone."
 - c. 1 Timothy 5:19-20 "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning."
 - d. Hebrews 10:28 "Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses."
2. Each refers back to virtually identical parallel verses in the Old Testament.
 - a. Deuteronomy 19:15 "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed. On the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed."
 - b. Deuteronomy 17:6 "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death. He shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness."
3. In each case, confirmations have a judicial function, either under the law of Israel or in disciplinary matters of the church. No one could be convicted of a crime unless there was adequate testimony against him.
 - a. **There is no evidence in these verses that a convergence of divine hints ("confirmations") is the way God communicates His will to us.**
 - b. Christians are not to read meaning into chance circumstances as if these were divine directives. This is superstitious.
4. Question: "Aren't we supposed to confirm prophecy in the church?"
 - a. No, the church is not told to confirm prophecies ("Do we have a confirmation?" "Yes, I got the same message.")
 - b. We are told to test them. This is an active, thoughtful task of the corporate leadership, not a simple nod of the head by someone in the congregation who "bears witness."

Quick recap: The Bible does not teach that guidance comes from feeling led, having a peace about it, open doors, fleeces, or confirmations.

F. Two observations:

1. First, what the Bible does not teach is sometimes as significant as what it does teach. Should we be teaching as biblical something the Bible doesn't teach?
2. Second, we draw misleading and sometimes dangerous conclusions when we do not use biblical terms in biblical ways.

Let me pause to address a question I know is on your minds.

G. Does God ever give specialized guidance in the Bible? Yes, but a close examination of the biblical record shows...

1. Personalized guidance in the Bible is rare.
 - a. The cases are exceptional. There is no hint that day-to-day decisions—big or small—were made by getting special directions from God.
 - 1) God's specialized directives in Acts, for example, are limited to only 14 from the time of Pentecost.
 - 2) Only one of Paul's three missionary journeys (the first) was specifically directed by God.
 - a) Acts 13:2 "And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"
 - b) This probably came as a prophetic word. Note the preceding verse: "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul."
 - b. Paul's second missionary journey was not specifically commissioned by God. Acts 15:36 "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'"
 - c. Remember:
 - 1) A handful of incidents do not constitute a model.
 - 2) You can't build a biblical model of anything by citing irregular and exceptional events as support.
 - 3) It's a mistake to take the exception and make a rule out of it.
2. Personalized guidance in the Bible is an intrusion. It is not being sought after.
 - a. There is no evidence the Apostles were "waiting on the Lord" seeking special guidance. Instead, God surprised them with it.
 - b. We're not told to seek specialized, supernatural guidance from God. If this is the way we're supposed to make decisions, then why doesn't the Bible explicitly teach us this important skill?
3. Personalized guidance in the Bible is supernatural and, therefore, clear.
 - a. In Acts, the majority (five) were visions, three were from an angel, four times the Spirit spoke, one seems to have been a prophecy, one was the voice of Jesus.
 - b. Why is it clear? God expects it to be obeyed, and you can't obey a command that's not clear.

- 1) 1 Corinthians 14:8: “If the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?”
- 2) Paul blinded on Damascus road: “Rueben, I’m not sure, but I think God may be trying to tell me something.”
- c. There is no evidence that these were inner urges and intuitions.
4. Personalized guidance generally goes against wisdom, that’s why there needs to be a special intrusion.
5. Personalized guidance becomes God’s moral will, a command that must be obeyed.
6. What about Acts 6:6-7? “And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them.”
 - a. There’s no doubt that God gave special direction in this case, as He occasionally did.
 - b. However, there’s nothing about this passage that implies it’s an exception to the pattern I’ve described. We simply don’t know the manner God communicated this prohibition, but it must have been clear (see above) and therefore probably verbal “having been forbidden.”
7. See “God Speaks in Acts” in the questions section at the end of these notes. There I treat in detail each of the 14 examples of special guidance found in that book.

In sum, the biblical characteristics of special guidance are that they are rare, intrusive (unsought), supernatural in character, and clear.

H. We often don’t take our own belief in “God speaking” very seriously.

1. “God said to speak on this, but you can do whatever you want.”
2. This is idle Christian lingo, assigning the voice of God to our stray thoughts.
3. Do you realize how serious that is?
 - a. When the prophets claimed that God told them something, they put their life on the line.
 - b. Stop it! It’s misleading to young Christians and dangerous to older Christians.

I. Summary: The Bible does not teach that we get guidance from God through...

1. Feelings, having a peace about it, open/closed doors, circumstantial signs & fleeces, or through confirmations.
2. Special directions are sometimes given, but the biblical pattern is that they’re rare, intrusive, clear, supernatural, and often go against wisdom.

III. What is “God’s Will”?

Having all those things taken away from me (feeling led by the Spirit, having a peace about it, open doors, fleeces, confirmations), I had to look into the Scriptures to find out what the term “God’s will” actually meant biblically. Like many things, it means different things in different contexts.

A. God’s sovereign will: God’s designs or decrees

1. What God either decrees or allows. It affirms His total control over the events of the universe, down to the tiniest detail.
 - a. Ephesians 1:11: “[God] works all things after the counsel of His will.”
 - b. Romans 9:19: “Who resists His will?”
 - c. Daniel 4:35: “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand.”
 - d. Acts 2:23: “...this man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men.”
 - e. Acts 4:27-28: “...there were gathered together, Herod and Pontius Pilate...to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.”
 - f. Job 12:9: “The hand of the Lord has done this.” Job believed that whoever brings on the affliction, it’s God who allows it.
2. God’s sovereign will, for the most part, is hidden, secret. We can only discover it in two ways:
 - a. We usually know it in hindsight. (“Do you want to know God’s sovereign will for today? I’ll tell you tomorrow.”)
 - b. Some of His sovereign purposes have been revealed in Scripture (e.g., the fate of the lost and the saved, prophecy, etc.).
3. We don’t have access to God’s sovereign will for the purpose of making decisions.

B. God’s moral will: God’s desires

1. God’s moral will describes how men and women ought to live.
2. Some examples:
 - a. 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is...not **willing** that any should perish....”
 - b. 1 Thessalonians 4:3: “For this is the **will** of God, your sanctification....”
 - c. Ephesians 5:16-18: “Don’t be foolish but understand what the **will** of the Lord is...be filled with the Spirit.”
 - d. 1 Peter 2:13-15: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the **will** of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.”
 - e. 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18: “Rejoice, pray, give thanks...for this is God’s **will** for you.”
3. God’s moral will is completely revealed in the Bible.
4. God’s moral will does not connote individualized guidance but is broad and applies to every Christian equally.
5. “What is conspicuous about these verses in virtue of its absence?” These don’t mention anything about God’s individual will for me. It’s not about what I do, but about who I am.
 - a. God’s will is not:
 - 1) Which woman you marry, but what kind of husband you are.
 - 2) Which job you take, but what kind of worker you are.
 - 3) Where you live, but what kind of neighbor you are.
 - 4) What ministry you’re in, but that you serve faithfully.

- b. God's will is YOU!
 - 1) God's "perfect" will? JESUS...Romans 8:28 and 29: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, **He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.**"
 - 2) When was the last time you made a decision based on humility, self-sacrifice, servanthood, selflessness, or the interests of proclaiming the Gospel?
- 6. Other examples:
 - a. 2 Thessalonians 3:5: "And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ."
 - b. Romans 12:2: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

C. God has two wills?

- 1. Some object to the idea that God can have two wills. It sounds like a contradiction.
- 2. But the problem can be avoided when we realize that God "wants" things (wills them) in two different ways.
 - a. God has sovereign decrees.
 - b. God has moral desires.
- 3. Examples
 - a. In 1 Samuel 8:4-22 Israel asks for a king like the other nations have.
 - 1) This is a rejection of God's leadership, a violation of His moral will.
 - 2) Yet it's part of God's sovereign plan to raise up the throne of David.
 - b. We see the same two things working in Acts 2:23: "This Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God [part of God's sovereign will], you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death [a violation of God's moral will]."

D. What about God's "individual" will for me?

- 1. God's sovereign will is secret and His moral will is totally revealed.
- 2. No other "will" exists in the Bible. I found no special category of "God's will" in the Scriptures tailor-made for me that I had to discover before I could make decisions.

IV. My Conclusion: The Individual Will of God, as Commonly Understood, Does Not Exist.

A. Does the Bible teach there's a specific will of God for our lives that we must discover before we can make our decisions? No.

- 1. In terms of my functional day-to-day decision making, there is no personalized "God's will" for me to discover.
- 2. God has not already decided for me.
- 3. Therefore there are no signs I have to "read" and no voice of God I must "hear" in order to make sound, biblical, godly decisions.

4. There is no individualized “perfect will” I must figure out, and no “permissive will” I have to watch out for.
5. While talking to a very young Christian, she used the phrase “God told me” four times in about 60 seconds. When I questioned her about it she said, “Yes, we have a wonderful relationship.” For 2000 years getting private communications from God was never seen as an important part of an optimal relationship with God. Old Testament prophets signed such statements with their own blood, yet such words fall from our lips like water.
6. J.I. Packer:

What shall we say of [the personal guidance model]? The first thing to say is that this idea of guidance is actually a novelty among orthodox evangelicals. It does not go back further than the last century. Second, it has led people to so much foolish action on the one hand, and so much foolish inaction on the other, as well as puzzlement and heartbreak when the ‘hotline’ to God seems to go silent, that it has to be seen as discredited. Third, it must be said that Scripture gives us no more warrant constantly to expect personal ‘hotline,’ ‘voice from the control-tower’ guidance than to expect new authoritative revelations for the guidance of the whole church.⁷

B. No, God doesn’t decide for us. Instead, God has dignified us with the responsibility of making significant choices ourselves.

1. God, like a good father, teaches us how to make good decisions.
2. That’s got to leave some of you feeling depressed, empty, or angry.

C. “But doesn’t God care? I still have to make decisions.” Yes.

D. Next I’ll give you a biblical model for decision making.

1. That’s taught in the Scripture
2. That’s practiced in the Scripture
3. That really works

⁷Packer, 116.

Study Questions Session 1

The purpose of these study questions is to help direct your learning. If you can thoroughly answer each of the questions below, you will have demonstrated a mastery of the material.

- I used the term “Christian folklore” in my opening comments. What did I mean by that term?
- Briefly but accurately describe the prevailing “blueprint” view on decision making that I critiqued in this first session, along with the lingo that is used to characterize it.
- What does Paul mean when he uses the term “led by the Spirit” in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18?
- Is 1 Kings 19:13 an example of being “led” by an inner feeling? Why or why not?
- What are some liabilities of this “felt led” theology?
- What are the two different meanings for the word “peace” in the Bible? Illustrate.
- How is the verse “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (Colossians 3:15) often misinterpreted when applied to decision making?
- Using the context, explain what Paul really means by that statement.
- What do we learn about Paul’s understanding of open and closed doors? Give examples of how he applied that to his own decision making. Why is Acts 16:26-28 such an important example in this regard?
- In what way was Gideon’s use of a fleece a sign of doubt, not obedient faith?
- In what critically important way does Gideon’s fleece differ from the kind of fleeces we’re inclined to put out?
- What is one of the most powerful reasons based on the New Testament that we don’t use circumstantial signs as guides to decision making?
- Where and how do the biblical writers use the notion of “confirmations”? How is this different from the way we often use the notion? What about “confirming” prophecy in the church?
- When specialized guidance is given in the Bible, it usually has four characteristics. What are they? Give some examples.
- What does the term “God’s sovereign will” mean? Give some biblical examples.
- What are the two ways we discover God’s sovereign will?
- Does God’s sovereign will play any direct role in our decision making? Explain.
- What does the term “God’s moral will” mean? Give some biblical examples.
- Considering the verses in the Bible using the term “God’s will,” what is conspicuous in virtue of its absence?
- According to Romans 8:28-29, in what way will God cause “all things to work together for good” in the life of the Christian?
- Does God have two wills? Explain.
- Does the Bible teach there’s a specific will of God for our lives that we must discover before we can make our decisions? Explain.

Session 2: The Wisdom Model

V. Summary: My Observations

The hard work here is going through the paradigm shift, allowing you to see this issue with entirely new eyes.

Let's review. Our model of decision making must include and entail the basic biblical observations on the issue...

A. On the one hand, I did not observe:

1. Any indication there was a blueprint for my life that I must discover to make my decisions
2. Any Scripture telling me to pray for God's decision before I act
3. Any place where I was instructed to "hear from the Lord" before I made significant decisions
4. Any hint of the kind of language we use in making decisions ("I felt led," "God told me," "I'm trying to find God's will about...", "I don't know what the Lord wants me to do," "I had a peace about it," etc.)

B. On the other hand, I did observe:

1. Commands and prohibitions expected to be obeyed
2. Places where critical and important decisions seem to be left up to me (e.g., marriage, ministry, choice of a job, etc.)
3. The rule of freedom of choice in non-moral areas
4. The legitimacy of my personal desires
5. The importance of my conscience
6. The need to make wise use of my time and avoid unnecessary waiting
7. The command to pray for wisdom, not guidance
8. The decision making habits of the apostles and early church

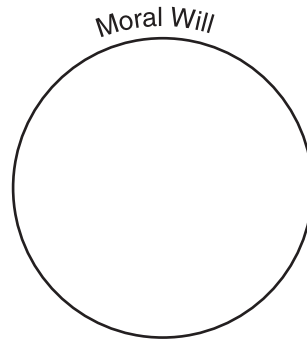
C. Conclusion

1. These observations were stunning to me given current evangelical emphasis on hearing from the Lord in making decisions.
2. I concluded that God doesn't decide for me. Instead, like a good father, He teaches me how to make good decisions.
3. **What is the method God teaches us? The wisdom model.**
4. **The wisdom model's guiding principle:** Using the guidelines of God's Word combined with wisdom, you have the freedom to do anything you want, with God's blessing. Note the three parts I just mentioned:
 - a. God's moral will
 - b. Wisdom
 - c. Personal wants and desires

Here's the model I see practiced by the disciples, a model entirely consistent with each of the above observations. It's the most workable, practical, biblical model I know of.

VI. God's Guidelines for Decision Making

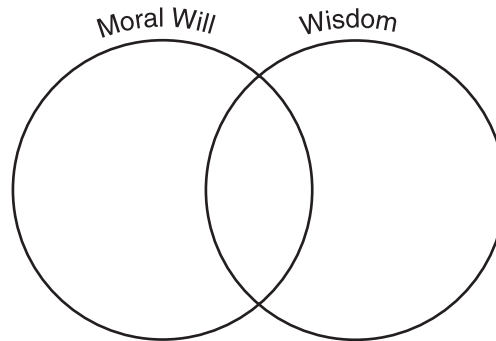
A. The circle of God's moral will—options commanded or prohibited by Scripture. What does God have to say about this issue in His Word?



1. We learn God's moral will through:
 - a. Reading: "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13).
 - b. Careful consideration: "Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Timothy 2:7).
 - c. Diligent study, search & inquiry: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).
 - d. Meditation: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Psalms 1:2).
 - e. Memorization: "Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee" (Psalms 119:11).
 - f. Gifted teachers: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).
2. **Objective: total obedience**
 - a. Remember that God's moral will extends not only to the choices themselves, but also to your motives and intentions.
 - b. You can do a moral thing (becoming a musician) with an immoral motive (anger towards one's parents) or immoral intent (revenge).
3. **Example:** God's moral will and marriage: You have the moral liberty of marrying anyone you want who is...
 - 1) A Christian ("Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" 2 Corinthians 6:14)

- 2) A member of the opposite sex (Matthew 19:4-6 “And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”)”))
- 3) Biblically free to remarry if divorced (many are not; see 1 Corinthians 7)

B. The circle of God’s wisdom. Apply wisdom to the remaining choices.

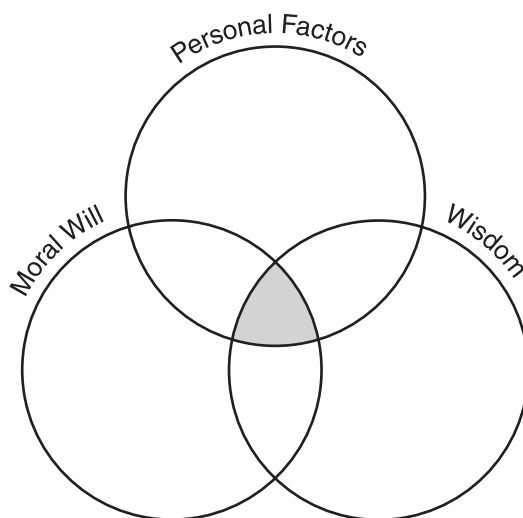


1. Why wisdom? It helps us make good decisions.
 - a. Proverbs 2:9: “Then you will discern righteousness, justice, and equity and every good course.”
 - b. Proverbs 8:35-36: “He who finds me finds life & obtains favor from the Lord. But he who sins against me injures himself, and all who hate me love death.”
2. What is wisdom? Wisdom is the right use of knowledge.
 - a. That which is sensible
 - b. That which is expedient
 - 1) Ephesians 5:15: “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”
 - 2) Colossians 4:5: “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.”
 - c. Wisdom allows us to see all the alternatives and all the consequences so we don’t do something foolish.
3. Where do we get wisdom?
 - a. Pray for it:
 - 1) James 1:5: “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”
 - 2) Even Solomon asked for it: “How shall I lead?”
 - a) 2 Chronicles 1:10 “Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can rule this great people of Thine?”
 - b) God was pleased (see 2 Chronicles 1:11).
 - b. We also get wisdom from counsel, instruction, research, knowledge, and experience.

- 1) How do I make good decisions? Wisdom.
 - 2) How do I get wisdom? Experience.
 - 3) How do I get experience? Bad decisions.
4. Incidentally, wisdom allows for differing views on what is most sensible or appropriate when morality is not an issue.
5. **Example:** Marriage
- a. You have the liberty of marrying anyone you want who qualifies by God's moral will, but you have to live with the consequences.
 - 1) Marry wisely, marry well.
 - 2) Marrying a nag is not a sin; it's just stupid.⁸
 - a) Proverbs 21:9 "It is better to live in a corner of a roof, than in a house shared with a contentious woman."
 - b) Proverbs 27:15 "A constant dripping on a day of steady rain and a contentious woman are alike."
 - 3) Don't marry for beauty and sacrifice discretion.
 - a) Proverbs 11:22 "As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion."
 - b) You get the gold ring, but you get the pig with it.
 - b. Sometimes God's moral will is a guide to our making wise choices. For example:
 - 1) The Bible teaches that wives should be responsive and obedient to the leadership of their husbands and that husbands should be sacrificial in loving their wives (Ephesians 5:22-33).
 - 2) Therefore, wisdom suggests:
 - a) That a woman choose a man she respects and whose leadership she can respond to
 - b) That a man select a woman he can be a servant to through loving and leading in a sacrificial way
6. A problem with the "individual will" model: We get our own personal word from the Lord and then do something contrary to the Word or seriously violating wisdom because we "really believe the Lord is leading in this."

⁸Keep in mind that Solomon is instructing his son, that's why he uses a woman as a negative example. The general rule applies to both sexes.

C. The circle of Personal Factors

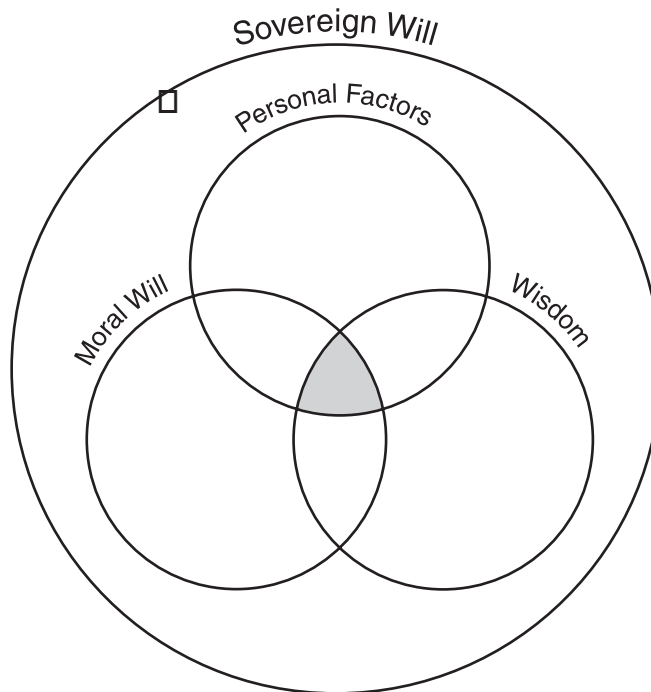


1. Personal desires. Our desires are valid.
 - a. Re: marriage, 1 Corinthians 7:40: “In my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is.”
 - b. Regarding giving, 2 Corinthians 9:7: “Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.”
2. Personal conscience
 - a. Romans 14:5: “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”
 - b. Romans 14:22-23: “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”
3. In actual practice this sequence often moves in the reverse order.
 - a. We first think about what we want, then consider whether it’s wise and moral.
 - b. The important thing is not the order, but the final product. Is your decision morally sound, prudent, and in concert with your desires and personal conscience?
4. What if the “personal” circle doesn’t overlap with the other two?
 - a. Sometimes the only choices available to us are ones we don’t like. What then?
 - b. If we are faced with a moral obligation (e.g., being faithful to our promises), then we must do what’s right, not what we like.
 - c. If we have no moral obligation (e.g., getting married vs. staying single), then we can choose to do nothing.
5. **Example:** marriage. Your personal likes and dislikes should be factored into the equation. What is physically attractive to you? What kind of personality do you enjoy? Ultimately, though the decision who to marry is up to you. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul teaches:
 - a. There are pros and cons to being single.
 - 1) Single people can serve the Lord more effectively.

- a) 7:32 “But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord.”
 - b) 7:35 “And this I say for your own benefit...to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.
- 2) Single people may suffer sexual frustration.
 - a) 7:9 “But if they do not have self-control, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn [in passion].”
 - b) Paul does not mean that two people burning with sexual passion for each other should get married, but that if someone’s inclined to burn with passion, that’s a good sign he should find a spouse rather than fall into sexual sin.
- b. There are pros and cons to being married.
 - 1) Married people enjoy sexual favors.
 - 7:3 “Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.”
 - 2) But married people must split their attentions and energies.
 - 7:33 “But one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”
- c. There are moral obligations constraining each decision.
 - 1) Single people cannot fornicate.
 - 7:1 “Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to [sexually] touch a woman. But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”
 - 2) Married people cannot get divorced.
 - a) 7:10 “But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.”
 - b) 7:39 “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”
- 6. Objection: What about Abraham in Genesis 24:12 ff.?
 - a. There we see Abraham (corresponding to God the Father) sending his servant (corresponding to the Holy Spirit) to choose a wife for his son, Isaac. Isn’t that biblical evidence for the alternate view?
 - b. Answer: No, because the Bible doesn’t offer this as a method. At best, it’s an inference, a universal principle one derives from an historical event. The question: Is this a legitimate application?
 - c. I think not because:
 - 1) First, following the pattern precisely seems ludicrous. One must either be consistent in a literal application or in a spiritualized application.

- a) A consistent literal application: God gives guidance to parents who then choose a mate for their children according to the will of God. This is a pattern for arranged marriages.
 - b) A consistent spiritualized application: Abraham (the Father) sends his servant (the Holy Spirit) to choose a bride for his son (Jesus). Since the only “bride” Jesus gets is the church, this would be typology for election, not decision making about marriage.
- 2) Second, why use this biblical example as the proper pattern for us and not other OT examples of choosing a mate?
- a) Find an attractive prisoner of war, bring her home, shave her head, trim her nails, and give her new clothes. Then she’s yours (Deuteronomy 21:10-14).
 - b) Go to a party and hide. When the women come out to dance, grab one and carry her off to be your wife (the Benjaminites, Judges 21:19-23).
 - c) Cut 200 foreskins off of your future father-in-laws enemies and get his daughter for a wife (David, 1 Samuel 18:27).
 - d) Purchase a piece of property and get a woman as part of the deal (Boaz, Ruth 4:5-10).
 - e) Have God create a wife for you while you sleep. Note: This will cost you a rib (Genesis 2:19-24).
- d. By the way, think of the massive practical problem of the view that God has chosen one person for you to marry and you have to hear from God properly to get it right.
- 1) What happens if someone gets it wrong, either through disobedience or through spiritual neglect?
 - 2) When guy #1 makes a mistake and marries the wrong girl, she now is unable to marry the man God actually chose for her (guy #2). So guy #2 has to find someone else (God’s “second best”). When he finally gets married, he must marry the wrong girl (girl #2), since the right one is already taken. But now Girl #2 can’t marry the guy God chose for her so guy #3 must marry someone else who then can’t marry the person God chose for her, etc.
 - 3) Just one mistake can mess up the whole world!
 - 4) In the movie “When Harry Met Sally,” Sally (Meg Ryan) says, “You’ll have to spend the rest of your life knowing that someone else is married to your husband.”

D. The circle of the Sovereignty of God. Where does this go in our diagram?



1. God's sovereignty doesn't directly affect our decisions; it affects our attitudes.
2. When God intervenes in ways we cannot control, we can trust the circumstances and the results to Him because He is sovereignly in control.
3. This gives us:
 - a. Freedom: In the process of my free will decision making, God fulfills His sovereign purpose.
 - b. Rest: We make our plans with an attitude of humble surrender, trusting Him with the final result: "If God wills..." If it doesn't work out, fine.
 - 1) God's sovereignty encourages an attitude of utter dependence and trust.
 - 2) James 4:13-16: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow... Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil."
 - 3) Psalms 138:8: "The Lord will accomplish what concerns me."

E. Does knowing God's will require a sixth sense? No.

1. Rather spiritual maturity is:
 - a. Growing in our understanding of the Word
 - b. Growing in our wisdom
 - c. Growing in our submission to God's revealed will and His sovereign designs
2. The result: Peace
 - a. This is not a sense of peace as God's signal you've chosen what He wants.
This is not supported in the Bible

- b. Instead, it's a peace that says: "I feel good about the decision I made."
- c. What if you have no peace? Then you may be violating wisdom. Look further.

The exception...

F. Intrusive special revelation?

1. There may be times when God does want you to follow a special plan, like he did on rare occasions in the Bible.
2. Remember the biblical pattern though.
 - a. This does not come by some internal feeling of being led.
 - b. Rather, God's direction comes uninvited, it's clear, it's supernatural, it may be contrary to wisdom, and it becomes morally obligatory when given .

G. The Wisdom Model in summary:

1. In the absence of a clear, definitive, special command of God, make the wisest, most expedient choice.
2. Guidance is simple. If God has not given you a direct command in Scripture, do the wisest and most desirable thing.
 - a. Sometimes the process is quick.
 - b. Sometimes the process takes a long time.
 - c. It all depends on the circumstances of each decision.
3. Note Packer:

The basic fault here is disregard of a principle that is writ large in Scripture - too large perhaps for some to see. The principle is that the right course is always to choose the wisest means to the noblest end. Namely, the advancing of God's kingdom and glory. Moral law delimits the area within which the choice must be made...God given wisdom..., then leads us within these limits to the best option...God enables us to discern this by prayerfully using our minds, thinking how Scripture applies, comparing alternatives, weighing advice, taking account of our heart's desire, estimating our capabilities. Some call this common sense. The Bible calls it wisdom. It is one of God's most precious gifts.⁹

VII. Role Models in Scripture

Did the Apostles follow this method?

A. Paul planning his mission to Rome (Romans 1:9-15)

1. Paul's specific plans:
 - a. Were not commanded or prohibited
 - b. Were consistent with revealed moral will for Paul (1:14): "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish."
 - c. Were based on planning and goals:

⁹Packer, 109-110.

- 1) To provide spiritual ministry to the Roman believers (1:11): “For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established.”
- 2) To encourage the church in Rome and be encouraged by them (1:12): “That I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.”
- 3) To obtain spiritual fruit from them (1:13): “I have planned to come to you...in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.”
- 4) To win unbelievers to Christ (1:14-16)

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

2. In the process Paul:

- a. Prayed for an opportunity and trusted the outcome to God (note the word “perhaps”) (1:10): “Always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”
- b. Did not interpret his delay as a “red light” from God, but rather as a matter of timing (15:22-24):

For this reason I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while.

3. Paul’s attitude: Keep trying until successful, “by the will of God.”

- a. “Always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you” (1:10).
- b. I take Paul to be referring to God’s sovereign will here, in the context.

B. Legal disputes (1 Corinthians 6:3-6)

1. Note the details: “Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. **Is there not among you one wise man** who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?”
2. Paul does not appeal for a decision from God, but for wise deliberation between brothers who ought to be able to decide on their own.

C. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29)

1. This pivotal council dealt with the “Galatian problem” which threatened to divide the early church: Do Gentiles have to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law to be justified by a Jewish Messiah (v. 5)?
2. How did the Apostles solve the most pressing theological challenge of the first century church?
 - a. They pooled their spiritual and intellectual resources by consulting the Scriptures (v. 15-18), looking at their circumstances (v. 8-9), observing what God was doing in their midst (v. 8-9), and weighing the significance of signs and wonders confirming the message of grace (v. 12). They argued and debated (v. 6), and then come to a conclusion (v. 19-22).
 - b. There was no attempt to “hear from God.”
 - c. They did not expect Him to give them a special message even for these dire circumstances. Instead, they believed that God’s will would be expressed through the process of their deliberations:
 - 1) “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (15:19).
 - 2) “It seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you” (15:25).
 - 3) “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials” (15:28).
3. Their method epitomized Proverbs 16:9: “The mind of a man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.”
4. There are many other examples like this in the Scriptures.
 - a. Acts 15:34 “But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.”
 - b. Acts 15:22 “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.”
 - c. 1 Thessalonians 3:1 “Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone.”

D. Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 15:36)

1. “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”
2. This trip was not initiated by any special direction from God, but on wise consideration of the needs of the young Christians.

E. The care and feeding of Hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1-6)

1. Acts 6:1 “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.”
2. The group—not the leadership—selected among themselves (v. 3): “Select from among you, brethren, seven men.”
3. They used specific qualifications (v. 3) choosing men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”

4. There is no hint in any of these passages that these decisions were to be made by seeking the specific will of God on these matters or “hearing from God,” etc., and there was no delay.
5. Rather, the believers solved this problem based on their own judgment and agreed on it together (v. 5): “And the statement found approval with the whole congregation.”

F. Choosing leadership in the church (Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9)

1. In these two passages Paul gives explicit instructions for appointing leaders to rule the church .
2. Paul does not instruct them to subjectively “hear from God,” find out God’s “individual will” for each church, put out a fleece, or be “led by the Spirit” in making their choices.
3. Instead, Paul gives a list of objective criterion, specific qualifications to guide the decision.

G. “Called” to ministry?

1. The word “call” is used in four ways in the New Testament (other than simply “referred to,” “beckoned,” or “named”).
 - a. **The “general call,”** an invitation to faith
 - 1) Matthew 22:14 (*kletos*): “Many are called but few are chosen.”
 - 2) Matthew 9:13 (*kaleo*): “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners”
 - b. **The “effective call,”** used mostly by Paul. God’s work of bringing a person to faith, and the holy life they are then to walk in. “The Called” are sinners who have responded in faith to the general call of God.
 - 1) Acts 2:39: “As many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.”
 - 2) 2 Timothy 6:12: “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.”
 - 3) 1 Corinthians 7:15: “..but God has called us to peace.”
 - 4) Philippians 3:14: “I press on for the goal of the upward call of God.”
 - c. **Referring to spiritual gifts:** Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1: Paul was “called” as an apostle (*kletos*--invited)
 - d. **Referring to supernatural revelation:** In only three instances out of 218 uses of a form of the word *kaleo* does the writer refer to specific, supernatural, individualized revelation:
 - 1) Paul & Barnabas’ first missionary journey (Acts 13:2)
 - 2) Vision calling Paul to preach gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16:10)
 - 3) Of Abraham, Hebrews 11:8
2. Do we need to be “called” to ministry? What is the biblical justification for this requirement?
 - a. First, what specifically is this “call” and how would you know you had one? What Bible verses instruct us about what to look for?
 - b. Second, where does the Bible teach we need an individual call? Isn’t the Great Commission enough (Matthew 28:19-20)?
3. Problems with the idea of being “called” to ministry
 - a. People sit around doing nothing while they wait for a call.

- b. Or they get involved in ministries they're not gifted for or that violate other obligations because they fancy themselves "called."
4. **Biblically, God does not distribute ministry by "calling," but by gifting.**
- a. 1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...wisdom...knowledge...faith...healing... prophecy...discerning spirits ...tongues....interpretations
 - b. Romans 12:6: "And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: prophecy... service... teaching... exhortation... giving... leading... mercy
 - c. Ephesians 4:11-12: "He gave some as apostles... prophets... evangelists... pastors... teachers... for the equipping of the saints, for the work of service, to the building up of the Body of Christ...."
 - d. 1 Peter 4:10-11: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."
 - e. The pattern here is:
 - 1) Employ it
 - 2) In service
 - 3) As a good steward
 - 4) To God's glory
 - f. Ask:
 - 1) What are my spiritual gifts (what am I aware of that I can offer at this point)?
 - 2) What's the best way to be a good steward of this ability?
 - 3) How can I use my ability to God's glory and in His power?
 - 4) If leadership is involved, do I have the character qualifications of Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3?
5. Simply put, ask: What am I capable of contributing to the Body at this point in time and what is the most effective way of doing that in my present situation?
6. Matthew 28:18-20: "Do I need any more of a call than that?"
7. Example: How God "led" me to Christian radio, and later to found Stand to Reason. (Note: This is not a justification by experience, but an illustration of how these biblical principles worked out in my life.)

VIII. Conclusion

A. Summary guidelines:

- 1. Unless God gives you an unmistakable directive, do the wisest thing you know of. Don't look for the directive, it will come if it's needed.
- 2. We spend too much time trying to superstitiously squeeze an answer out of God rather than learning how to make decisions God's way and then doing it.

B. Does God have a plan, a purpose?

1. Yes, but...
2. It's part of His sovereign will.
3. It's not something you have to discover in order for it to be fulfilled.

C. “But this method is complicated. It’s a lot easier just to have God tell me.”

1. God wants you to grow up as a Christian (Ephesians 4:13-15):

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God...mature man.... As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine.... But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.

2. Dr. Carolyn Simon put it so well during an interview for the Mars Hills Tapes:

God’s intentions for us are not blueprints. And so we can live our own lives well in various ways within the range of possibilities that God’s intentions mark out for us. This is not only freeing, it is ennobling.¹⁰

I think she’s right.

Study Questions Session 2:

The purpose of these study questions is to help direct your learning. If you can thoroughly answer each of the questions below, you will have demonstrated a mastery of the material.

- Describe the “guiding principle” of the wisdom model.
- Explain how to use the circle of God’s moral will in decision making.
- Give some examples of how we learn God’s moral will.
- What is wisdom?
- What are some ways we get wisdom?
- Explain how to use the circle of wisdom in decision making.
- What two kinds of personal factors are important in the decision making process?
- Explain how to use the circle of personal factors in decision making.
- Explain how to use the circle of God’s sovereign will in decision making. What New Testament verse talks about this concept?
- Summarize the wisdom model briefly.
- Explain how Paul’s decision to visit Rome is an example of the wisdom model.
- Explain how the wisdom model is expressed in the decisions recorded in these verses: 1 Corinthians 6:3-6, Acts 15:1-29, Acts 15:36, Acts 6:1-6, and Timothy 3:1-13.

¹⁰Dr. Carolyn Simon, Mars Hills Tapes #30, Jan/Feb 1998.

- Does God distribute ministry in the church primarily through “calling” or by some other method? Explain.

Suggested Reading:

Decision Making and the Will of God, Friesen, Gary, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980). An excellent, virtually complete, fair, in-depth analysis of the textual issues regarding decision making. Far and away the best book I’ve seen on the topic yet. It’s a longer work because the author actually does exegesis, a skill missing from most popular books on this issue. The book’s one drawback is that it doesn’t discuss the relatively rare cases of incidental, special direction given by God in the life of some Christians. Extensive space, however, is devoted to application.

Hot Tub Religion, Packer, J.I., (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987). See chapter on “Guidance.” A sound, terse summary of the wisdom model by a preeminent Christian thinker.

Decision Making and the Will of God

Summary Session #1: What Is God's Will?

Often we assume that God has made our decisions for us and we must learn His decisions before we can make our own. That's what we mean when we say we're trying to "know" or "find" God's will. We don't know what the Lord wants in this specific situation, but we want Him to show us so we can decide and move on.

Key question: Does the Bible teach there's a specific will of God for our lives that we must discover before we can make our decisions?

I. The Bible Doesn't Teach that Guidance Comes from:

A. Inner feelings ("feeling led")

All "specialized" guidance in the New Testament came as a clear, abrupt, supernatural intrusions, not through inner impressions.

B. Having a "peace" about it

The "peace" in Colossians 3:15 is referring to external harmony between Christians based on love and forgiveness, not an internal feeling that functions as a divine stamp of approval on a decision.

C. Open doors

Paul viewed open doors simply as opportunities that could be acted on (1 Corinthians 16:8-9) or ignored (2 Corinthians 2:12-13) depending on other factors.

D. Fleece & providential signs

Gideon's fleece in Judges 6 was clearly inappropriate in the context. Further, Gideon requested a genuinely supernatural sign, not our "Let her answer on the third ring if she's THE one," variety.

II. How the Bible Uses the Phrase "The Will of God":

A. God's sovereign will:

1. What God either decrees or allows. It affirms His total control over the events of the universe, down to the tiniest detail (Ephesians 1:11; Romans 9:19; Daniel 4:35).
2. God's sovereign will, for the most part, is hidden. We usually know it in hindsight or through what has been specifically revealed in Scripture (e.g. the fate of the lost and the saved).
3. We don't have access to God's sovereign will for the purpose of making decisions.

B. God's moral will:

1. How men ought to behave and act (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 5:15-18; Ephesians 5:16-18; 1 Peter 2:13-15).
2. God's moral will is completely revealed in the Bible.
3. It is broad and applies to every Christian equally.
4. It does not connote individualized guidance.

Conclusion: Instead of deciding for us, God teaches us how to make good decisions. He dignifies us with the responsibility to decide. In session two I'd like to suggest what I think is the biblical model for decision making taught in the Scriptures and modeled by the disciples.

Decision Making and the Will of God

Summary Session #2: Wisdom Model

The basic premise of the “Wisdom Model” is that we have freedom to choose anything we want within the dual parameters of God’s moral will (revealed in the Bible) and wisdom, with God’s full blessing. The Scriptures make no other restrictions than those unless there is an individualized command by supernatural special revelation.

I. God Doesn’t Decide for Us. Instead, Like a Good Father, He Teaches Us How to Decide. Our Decisions Should Be...

A. In submission to God’s revealed moral will

1. We are not allowed to choose any alternative that will violate Scripture.
2. God’s moral will governs not just the ends we pursue, but also the means to the ends, our attitudes, and our motives.
3. We learn God’s moral will from the Scripture through reading (1 Timothy 4:13), search & inquiry (1 Peter 1:10-11), diligent study (2 Timothy 2:15), careful consideration (2 Timothy 2:7), meditation (Psalms 1:2), memorization (Psalms 119:11), and gifted teachers (Ephesians 4:11).
4. Problem: Sometimes we fancy we’ve received special guidance from the Lord and then violate some clear directive of Scripture in order to pursue it.

B. With wisdom (that which is sensible and expedient)

1. God commands us to pray for wisdom (James 1:5).
2. Wisdom helps us make good choices (Proverbs 1:1-6, 2:9, 8:35-36).
3. Wisdom comes from many sources: the Bible, counsel, research, experience, etc.

C. Being sensitive to the personal element

1. Our personal desires are valid considerations.
2. Also, our conscience is an important guide in some matters.

D. In humble surrender to God’s sovereign intervention

1. God has the privilege, though not the obligation, of intervening in any of our plans.
2. God uses obstacles, roadblocks, problems, and circumstances to redirect our paths.
3. We respond by making wise choices as new factors become evident, with an attitude of dependence and trust in God (James 4:13-18, Proverbs 3:4-6, Psalms 138:8).
4. In the process of our free will decision making God fulfills His sovereign purposes.

II. Conclusion: The Wisdom Model in Action

1. **First**, determine which options, if any, are excluded in a biblical examination of goals, means, and motives.
2. **Second**, apply wisdom and personal desires to the remaining choices. Examine circumstances, research facts, weigh alternatives, gather information, seek counsel.

3. **Third**, make decisions with an attitude of humble surrender to the Lord: “If God wills....”
4. **Fourth**, adjust to new circumstances as they arise using the same method.

Role Models in Scripture: Paul’s decision to go to Rome (Romans 1:8-15), the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Paul’s advice on marriage (1 Corinthians 7), Paul’s second & third missionary journeys (Acts 15:36, 18:23), dealing with the problem of the Hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1-6), the problem of Christian lawsuits (1 Corinthians 6:1-6), etc.