

## The Traditional View: An Outline

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In the original version of *Decision Making and the Will of God*, I presented the traditional view of guidance through a fictitious seminar. Following the meeting between Pastor Bill Thompson and Ted Bradford, I devoted the next three chapters to Pastor Thompson's presentation. In this edition, I present the same material in outline form. (I will flesh out some of the points of this outline in my critique in Part 2.) My assumption is that the traditional view is widely understood and that a summary outline is adequate for the purposes of this book.

Of course, the longer version is readily available in the quarter million copies now in print of the first edition of *Decision Making*-some of which may be found in church or school libraries or (alas!) used bookstores. The scholarly documentation in the doctoral dissertation is still available also.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Premise: For each of our decisions, God has an ideal plan that he will make known to the attentive believer.

1. Rather than asking "What is best for me?" or "What will bring me the greatest amount of happiness?" the Christian will always ask "What is God's will for me in this decision?"
2. Given God's desire and ability to communicate, the believer can have confidence that God's will can be known with certainty in any situation.
3. Failure to discern and/or obey God's leading results in anxiety, frustration, and discouragement that come from living outside the center of God's will.

### II. Definition: The phrase "will of God" is used in three ways in the Bible.

1. God's *sovereign* will = God's secret plan that determines everything that happens in the universe (Daniel 4:35; Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Revelation 4:11; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 9:19; 11:33-36; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28;). Because God's sovereign will is secret, it does not directly affect our decision making.
2. God's *moral* will = God's revealed commands in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live (Romans 2:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; plus all other direct commands in Scripture). Where God has spoken in the Bible, the believer must obey. But God's moral will does not directly address many specific decisions faced by an individual.
3. God's *individual* will = God's ideal, detailed life-plan uniquely designed for each person (Colossians 1:9; 4:12; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17; 6:6; Proverbs 3:5-6; 16:9; Psalm 32:8; Genesis 24). God's guidance for decision making is given through the indwelling Holy Spirit who progressively reveals God's life-plan to the heart of the believer through a variety of means. *This is the aspect of God's will that is usually of greatest concern to those facing life's decisions.*
  1. Some writers use the visual image of a target to describe the "very center of God's will." Within the larger circle of God's moral will, finding the "dot" in the center is essential to making correct decisions in daily life.

[Insert Figure 3 (p. 36) here].
  2. Choosing apart from God's perfect will ("missing the dot") will likely result in experiencing God's "second best," or living within God's "permissive will."

*Summary:* We gain clarity in understanding biblical usages of the phrase "God's will" by comparing and contrasting the individual will with the sovereign will and moral will of God.

[Insert figure 4 (p. 38) and figure 5 (p. 39) here.]

### III. Proof: How I can know that God has a plan for my life

1. *Reason:* We know that God knows all things; that He is a God of order (1 Corinthians 14:40) who makes plans; that He loves His children individually and cares for our welfare. Therefore, it just makes sense that He would have an individual will for each life. This idea is supported by biblical images of God as our King, our Shepherd, and our Father (Matthew 6:26; 11:21-22; Psalm 23).
2. *Experience:* Historical examples (Martin Luther, John Wesley, William Carey, David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, Adoniram Judson) show the effectiveness of following God's individual will.
3. *Biblical example:* Many persons in the Bible show obedience to God's individual will, such as
  1. Jesus (Hebrews 10:7-9; John 4:34; 5:36; 6:38; 7:17; 8:26, 42; Luke 22:42)
  2. Paul (1 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Romans 1:14; Acts 13:1-2; 16:10; 16:6-7)
  3. Philip (Acts 8:26-29)
  4. Ananias (Acts 9:10-11)
  5. Peter (Acts 10:20)
  6. Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28)
  7. Joseph (Genesis 50:20)
4. *Biblical teaching:* Several verses directly teach that God has a perfect individual will for each believer.
  1. Colossians 1:9-10: a prayer for "knowledge of His will."
  2. Romans 12:1-2: an exhortation to "prove" what God's will is.
  3. Proverbs 3:5-6: a promise that God will "direct the paths" of those who trust in Him.
  4. Isaiah 30:21: a promise of direction to the right "way."
  5. Psalm 32:8: a promise of instruction and counsel in "the way you should go."
  6. Ephesians 2:10: direction into specific "good works"
  7. Genesis 24: an example of guidance in finding the right spouse.

### IV. Process: How I can discover God's individual will

1. Erroneous expectations that bring confusion in finding God's will.
  1. "God will unveil his plan all at once-like a course syllabus." No, God usually unfolds His will progressively, step by step-more like a scroll.
  2. "If I tell God I don't want to go to Japan as a missionary, that's where He'll send me." This picture of God as a "celestial killjoy" is a caricature. The place of greatest joy is in the center of His perfect will.
  3. "God only reveals His will to people with special 'callings'-like ministers and missionaries." No, God's vocational call is for every believer.

4. "Only mature Christians can discern God's will." No, a young believer who has an open heart and is well-taught can know God's will too.
  5. "If God wants me to do something specific, I can expect a heavenly flash of lightning-like Saul on the Damascus Road." No, God normally speaks through the "still small voice" of His Spirit as He did with Elijah.
  6. "God is only truly concerned about my major, life-shaping decisions." No, His will includes the details of life that lead up to (and away from) the "big decisions."
2. Reliable road signs that bring assurance in finding God's individual will.
    1. *The Word of God*: Since the individual will of God is always found within the moral will of God, the Bible is the place to start. It provides perfect guidance and God's will is always in harmony with it. The Bible should always be interpreted according to the author's intent; beware of "reading into" a passage a message that is not there.
    2. *Circumstances*: Since they are controlled by God, circumstances can point to His will. He uses "open and closed doors" (though sometimes a door that is closed only means that we should wait). And God uses "fleeces"-a providential sign, determined beforehand, that indicates a "yes" or "no" from Him. (Example: "Lord, if you want us to sell our home, please have someone inquire about it next week without our advertising its availability.") Putting out a circumstantial fleece (Judges 6:36-40) should be done only rarely, with great care and much prayer.
    3. *Inner witness of the Spirit*: Guidance is an important ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18). He leads through inner impressions in one's heart and gives confirmation through a settled, supernatural sense of peace (Philippians 4:7; Colossians 3:15; see Nehemiah 2:12).
    4. *Mature counsel*: Proverbs 24:6 underscores the value of wise counselors who can help one discern God's will.
    5. *Personal desires*: If one avoids the two extremes of automatically distrusting one's own desires (because they are tainted with sin-Jeremiah 17:9) or of automatically equating them with God's will (insisting that "He will give me the desires of my heart"-Psalm 37:4), one's own inclinations can be useful (since God is working in us to desire what He desires-Philippians 2:13).
    6. *Common sense*: Church leaders are expected to be wise, prudent, and sensible (Acts 6:3; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8), so common sense is a valuable asset in knowing God's will. One must remember, though, that divine guidance-like that received by Noah, Abraham, Joshua, and Philip-may appear foolish to others.
    7. *Supernatural guidance*: God has led through audible voice, angel, vision, prophecy or miracle (Acts 8:26; 9:3-6; 10:3,10; 13:2; 16:9-10). He does not promise such guidance, but there is nothing in the Bible that rules it out.

#### V. Certainty: Confirming God's individual will

1. Certainty comes by *agreement of the road signs*. One sign is not enough to confirm God's will, but when the three main signs agree (Bible, circumstances, and inner witness of the Spirit), you may be confident that you have found God's will.
2. Certainty comes through *prayer* (James 1:5; 4:2). Prayer makes your heart willing and helps you to hear God's still small voice.

3. Certainty comes through *communion* (Psalm 32:8-9; James 4:8; John 10:1-16). The closer you are to God the more you will instinctively recognize His voice and understand the guidance He is giving us. [JOHN 10:1-16 FITS HERE ALSO. DO TRADITIONAL VIEW ADVOCATES USE THIS PASSAGE?]
4. Certainty comes from the *results* of the decision. God will bring peace and blessing from His individual will and thus confirm the correctness of your decision. If you erred, God may use a closed door to redirect you to the right path.

## VI. Common (if not Frequently Asked) Questions about finding God's will (according to the Traditional View)

1. *"Why do some books talk about only two definitions for God's will instead of three?"*

*Answer:* Some books combine the moral will of God and the individual will of God. There are similarities since both are desired by God and must be discovered. However, the distinction between them is important because of the differences. God's moral will is fully revealed in the Bible for all believers, but God's individual will is revealed to the believer's heart and is specific for each believer.

2. *"How do I know what college courses I should take when God has not revealed what my vocation should be?"*

*Answer:* God's guidance is revealed one step at a time. As you choose your courses, you should follow the road signs to finding God's will. God will insure that they harmonize with His future guidance for you.

3. *"How can I distinguish my personal desires from those coming from the Spirit?"*

*Answer:* God-given desires will not contradict the Bible and will have His distinct stamp upon them. They will often be wise and holy beyond what you could have generated on your own. Sooner or later as you wait on Him, the difference will become clear. Hunches that surface unexpectedly will either fade or grow stronger with time, and God's hand in them will become obvious.

4. *"Does God have an individual will for individual churches?"*

*Answer:* The experience of the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-4) indicates that God has an individual will for local churches. Knowing this should help a church to be unified when all members are listening to Christ, the Head, and following His direction.

5. *"Could I use spiritual counsel as a 'fleece'?"*

*Answer:* Counsel is helpful in finding God's direction, but don't make the mistake of automatically equating such advice with God's will. This would be misuse of the legitimate value of counsel rather than a correct use of a fleece.

6. *"What if God calls you to do something that you do not know how to do?"*

*Answer:* Usually God prepares people before He sends them. But sometimes He uses believers because of their availability rather than their ability. In such cases, God will give the ability to accomplish the task He has guided you into-like He did for Gideon, Amos, and Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9).

7. *"What do you do when you are not certain of God's individual will, but have a deadline?"*

Answer: When the deadline comes, you must admit your failure to discern God's will, pray for the outworking of His sovereign will, and then make the decision that you think would most please God. If you have made a mistake, then you should go back and start over again with the decision.

8. *"What do you do when two options appear to be equal?"*

Answer: Understand that they only seem equal. God knows that one choice is superior in its future implications. That is why He chooses one as His will for you. Be sure to look at both options very carefully. In such cases the inward witness of the Spirit is very important. Submit the whole issue to the umpire of God's peace (Colossians 3:15). Picture each option in your mind as you pray and then listen carefully to God's still small voice in the form of His peace concerning the correct choice.

#### **VI: Summary: Principles of Decision Making (The Traditional View)**

1. *Premise:* For each of our decisions God has a perfect plan or will.
2. *Purpose:* The goal of the believer is to discover God's individual will and make decisions in accordance with it.
3. *Process:* The believer interprets the inner impressions and outward signs through which the Holy Spirit communicates His leading.
4. *Proof:* The confirmation that one has correctly discerned the individual will of God comes from an inner sense of peace and outward (successful) results of the decision.

#### **Endnote**

1. Garry Lee Friesen, "God's Will as It Relates to Decision Making" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978), pp. 7-148.

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