



# **Decision Making**

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## **AND THE WILL OF GOD**

By  
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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."<sup>1</sup>
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
  - 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

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

**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 because we’re not tuned in.
  - d. John MacArthur describes different views:<sup>2</sup>
    - 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!”
    - 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)

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<sup>2</sup>The 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.

**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.”<sup>3</sup>
    - 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.”<sup>4</sup>
  - 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.

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<sup>3</sup>All Scripture references in this syllabus are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup>Packer, 123.

- 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*:<sup>5</sup>

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; 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."

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

- 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.
  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 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:
- Paul did not read even miraculous divine opportunities as if they were divine directives.
  - 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.**

- Gideon’s fleece (Judges 6-7) was not normal guidance:
  - It confirmed direction already supernaturally given (Judges 6:21).
  - The fleece itself was a supernatural sign, not like our “Let her answer on the third ring if she’s THE one” variety.
  - 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.<sup>6</sup>

- If you really want to ask for a legitimate fleece, then ask for a supernatural sign in both directions:
  - A supernatural sign to say “no” (“levitate the table”).
  - A supernatural sign to say “yes” (“levitate the bed”).
- It was an expression of doubt and disbelief, an inappropriate request of Gideon’s that God put up with.
- 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”?
  - This is an example of a request for a circumstantial sign.
  - Placing this kind of ultimatum before the Lord is testing God and is wrong (see Luke 4:12).
- 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 that comes to mind is the drawing of lots to fill the apostolic vacancy left by Judas in Acts, hardly a common occurrence.

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

- The concept of confirmation by multiple witnesses is mentioned only four times in the New Testament.
  - 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.”

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

- 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 two identical 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.<sup>7</sup>

**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

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### 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.

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<sup>7</sup>Packer, 116.

- 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...

#### A. I did not observe:

1. Any indication there was a blueprint of my life 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. Rather, 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

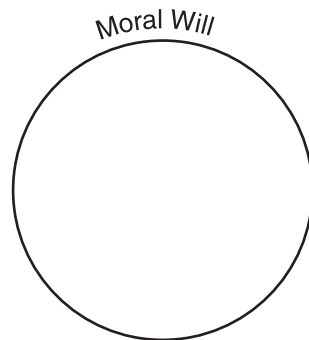
#### C. Conclusion

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. **The wisdom model's guiding principle:** Using the guidelines of God's Word and 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.

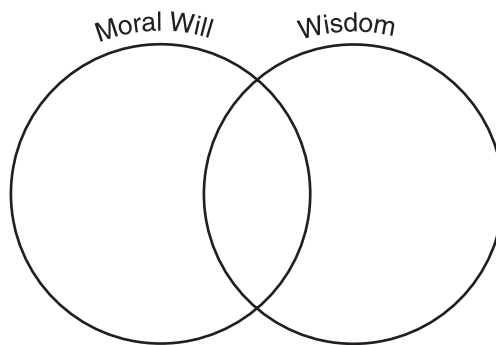
## VI. God's Guidelines for Decision Making

### A. The circle of God's moral will—options commanded or prohibited by Scripture.



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. Search & inquiry: "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1 Peter 1:10-11).
  - d. Diligent study: "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).
  - e. Meditation: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Psalms 1:2).
  - f. Memorization: "Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee" (Psalms 119:11).
  - g. 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.**



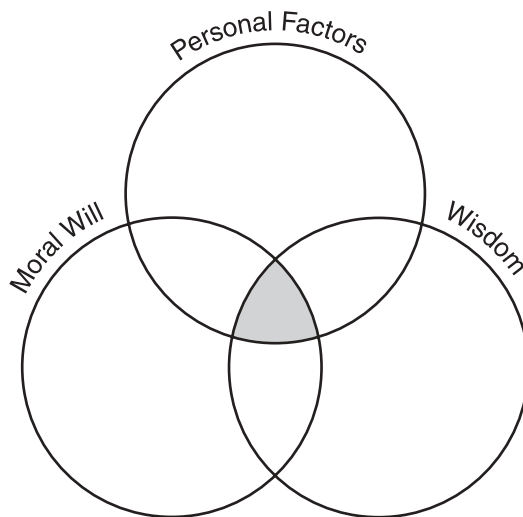
1. Why wisdom? It helps us make good decisions.
  - a. Proverbs 2:9: “Then you will discern righteousness, justice, and equity and every good course.”
  - b. Proverbs 8:35-36: “He who finds me finds life & obtains favor from the Lord. But he who sins against me injures himself, and all who hate me love 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? From 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.<sup>8</sup>
      - a) Proverbs 21:9 “It is better to live in a corner of a roof, than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”

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<sup>8</sup>Keep 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.

- 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.”

### 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?

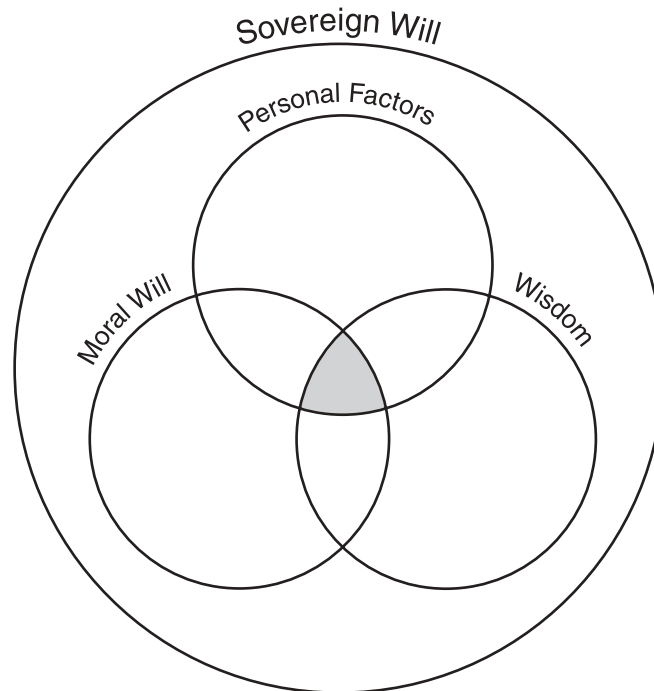
c. I think not because:

- 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 women 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 of through spiritual neglect?
- 2) When guy #1 makes a mistake and marries the wrong girl, she now is unable to marry the man God actual 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," 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.<sup>9</sup>

## **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:
    - 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

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<sup>9</sup>Packer, 109-110.

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.<sup>10</sup>

I think she's right.

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

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

**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. Fleeces & 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.

## **Decision Making and the Will of God** **Questions & Appendices**

### **Questions**

#### **Question 1: Are you saying the Holy Spirit doesn't speak to us at all?**

That depends on what you mean by the word "speak." The Scripture identifies different ways the Holy Spirit subjectively works in our hearts.

The Spirit teaches, convicts, comforts, and leads us out of sin. The Spirit renews us, giving us godly desires. I also believe God even gives us ideas we have the freedom to act on.

Since He imparts spiritual gifts I don't deny the subjective element that's involved in their exercise. My challenge here, though, is not about people who have certain spiritual gifts,<sup>11</sup> but about how Christians are to understand decision-making, regardless of their gifts.

These are all ways one could say that God speaks to us. He "speaks" to us when He comforts us, teaches us, convicts us, or leads us out of sin. There is an ineffable sense in which God communicates with us to give us comfort, wisdom, insight, and understanding as we pursue ministry and Christian living. But I prefer the words "teach," "convict," and "comfort" because these are the biblical terms and are less confusing.

Note that none of these involve propositional revelation, which is what we normally mean by the word "speaking." I wouldn't say my spouse "speaks" to me when she hugs me, though I may infer from this that she loves me. When my wife speaks, there is propositional content. When she hugs, there is comfort. The two are entirely different.

There's nothing mysterious about this. Revelation for the Christian comes through objective sources like the Bible or prophetic utterance: God speaking. God can also be personally experienced in very profound, intimate, and emotionally powerful ways, but that's not speaking. No information is communicated directly.

We would do well, I think, to keep these concepts distinct, as the Scripture does. However, it's clear to me that Christians usually use the phrase "the Spirit speaks to us" in ways the Bible just doesn't support. I do not think the Bible teaches anything like what some have called a "conversational relationship" with God.

Regarding this concept I have three comments. First, the Bible simply doesn't teach we must "hear" God before we can make decisions. Where are we presented with the idea that we must listen for a privatized message from God? Where does the Scripture assert this as a teaching? It's just not there.<sup>12</sup> (For my response to Jesus' comments "My sheep hear my voice," see question 3.)

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<sup>11</sup>Since I am not a cessationist regarding spiritual gifts, I acknowledge there may be unique ways God "speaks" to those with special supernatural gifts. Such gifts by their very nature are unique in kind, function, and distribution. These lay outside of our analysis and are not subject to the biblical concerns I've mentioned. The Bible says very little (virtually nothing) about the nature of their operation.

<sup>12</sup>When the text says, "Listen to the voice of the Lord," it usually is using the word "listen" synonymous with the word "obey," much like a mother would use it when she says, "Listen to me when I tell you to do something."

Second, there is no advantage to actively listening for God's voice. If God wants to say something He will. No one has to be quiet and "tuned in" so he doesn't miss the opportunity. I know of no place in Scripture where God has attempted to speak and He wasn't heard because people weren't listening.

Third, not only is it not necessary, it's dangerous. When we give attention to our inner life, we're going to "hear" something, even if it's only the flow of our own thoughts and desires. Here's the danger: This teaching allows us to assign divine authority to our own thoughts. There is no biblical justification for this and perils abound.

Instead, we should seek God's "voice" in the only place Scripture tells us to: the Word. The Bible is the only form of God's voice we are ever explicitly told to heed and understand. Spiritual maturity is not the ability to discern God's voice. It's the ability to understand and apply Scripture in every circumstance.

**Question 2: What about when I pray for help and I immediately get an insight that bears fruit? I also know of some musicians who truly believe God gives them songs. Aren't those examples of God speaking?**

I'm thoroughly convinced that God is a very present help in time of trouble, confusion, and distress, not merely as a source of comfort, but also as a source of insight, creativity, or sudden awareness to answers to hard questions or difficult problems. I've often prayed when stymied by a computer malfunction, or even when I've lost my keys (and found them soon after my prayer). I'm convinced that God was involved in all of that. I have a friend who tells of how God helped him fix his plumbing in response to a prayer! And of course there are countless times I've relied on the help of the Holy Spirit when trying to find clear, memorable ways of communicating difficult concepts in teaching. Sometimes God responds to such prayers subtly, and sometimes quite dramatically. Clearly, God's Spirit is at work at times like this.

Yet there is a very important difference between, on the one hand, receiving revelation ("God said to me...") and, on the other hand, receiving creative "inspiration," gaining helpful insight in unraveling a problem, or experiencing the outworking of a spiritual gift. Special revelation is extremely rare and carries with it a very unique authority. By contrast, creative inspiration or insight is quite common, especially for the Christian actively depending on God and leaning on Him for help (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Since I think God is directly involved in both, but through an entirely different means, I think it best that different language be used to describe each. There's a difference between saying "God gave me this song," and "My gift or my inspiration or my ability come from the Lord." If God really gave the song, presumably the words are His and not ours, and we are not free to change them through editing or rewrites, partly because they're God's words and not ours, and partly because the concept of improving God's song is a contradiction in terms. (Also, as some have pointed out, when someone claims "God gave me this song" one rightfully expects better music than the song often delivers.)

However, if we see God's role as the spiritual force behind our gifts and accomplishments, we can pray for help, wisdom, inspiration, and creative solutions to vexing problems expecting God to answer without at the same time being committed to saying "God gave me the words for this play," or "God told me what I had to do to fix my computer," or car or bathroom fixture, as the case may be.

**Question 3: Then what did Jesus mean when He said, “My sheep hear my voice and follow me”?**

John records four mentions by Jesus of His sheep hearing or knowing His voice (10:3, 4, 16, 27). Verse six is key to understanding this passage. Here John explicitly states that Jesus’ remarks about hearing His voice are a figure of speech.

Jesus begins by talking about shepherds and sheep (10:1-6). Unlike the thief and robber, the legitimate shepherd enters by the door and calls His own by name. They then follow Him as He leads them out. Jesus’ point is lost on those listening, though, so He explains the details of the illustration.

He is the door of the sheep (v. 7). Those who pass through Him find salvation and abundant life (v. 9-10). He is also the good shepherd who, unlike the hireling, lays down His life freely for His sheep (v. 11-13, 15, 17-18). The shepherd and the sheep know each other (v. 14). When His other sheep hear His voice, they also become part of His flock (v. 16).

Once again, the Jews fail to completely understand (v. 19-21). What is the problem? Jesus’ answer is crystal clear: “You do not believe because you are not of My sheep” (v. 26).

Two key questions need to be answered from the text of John 10. First, what does it mean to hear Jesus’ voice? Second, what causes us to hear His voice?

It’s critical to remember John’s clarification: Jesus was using a figure of speech. The word “voice” can’t mean voice. A thing is never a metaphor of itself. It’s a picture of something else. Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase “hear my voice” represents. What is it?

In context, Jesus’ meaning is unmistakable. He says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me and I give eternal life to them” (v. 27-28). Note the sequence: They hear His voice. They follow Him. Then He gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus’ voice is a figure of speech for the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to our salvation. It results in salvation, it’s not the result of salvation.

Remember, the Jews have no trouble actually hearing Jesus. They know what He’s saying. They hear His instructions just fine. Their problem is responding. The voice being referred to here is not the whispers of private direction given by God, but the effective call of the Holy Spirit bringing us to Christ.

Why don’t the Jews “hear” in the sense that Jesus means, that is, respond and believe? Jesus tells us plainly. They don’t “hear” because God is not “speaking” to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son. That is Jesus’ unambiguous teaching.

Now the second question: What enables us to hear? Jesus says the Father is the cause, sovereignly enabling those sheep He’s given to Jesus to hear and respond. This “hearing” is not for believers after salvation, but for non-believers prior to salvation. It’s not dependent on the quality of our relationship with God, but on the Father’s choice.

The current emphasis on hearing the voice of God is completely foreign to the text of John 10. To Jesus, hearing God is not a skill to be developed. It is not an advanced discipline opening the lines to personalized assignments from the Father. It’s not a fruit of a deepening love relationship with God. It’s a figure of speech.

Hearing Jesus' voice is not getting a special assignment, it's getting saved. It's the result of the Father drawing the non-believer into Jesus' arms.

**Question 4: Jesus said He did the things the Father told Him to do. If Jesus, our model, received direct guidance, shouldn't we expect the same?**

The principal question is this: Is Jesus our model in everything? The correct answer is no because Jesus was not only the perfect man and humble servant, but also the Messiah and incarnate Son of God. We imitate His human perfections, but not His prerogatives of divinity or messianic office.

What about in the case mentioned? I think it's helpful to quote the entire passage exactly. Here is the complete citation from John 5:17-23:

(17) But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

(18) For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

(19) Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. (20) For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. (21) For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. (22) For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, (23) in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

Note first of all verse 18. The Jews, understanding Jesus' comments to be a clear claim to deity, seek to kill Him. The word "therefore" in verse 19 indicates that what follows is meant to buttress this singular claim.

Note also the three phrases in parallel construction: "For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things...", "For just as the Father raises the dead...", and "For not even the Father judges anyone...."

These verses are a complete unit. If the Father showing Jesus "all things that He Himself is doing" is an example for us to model, then we're also to give life to whom we wish, judge the world on the Father's behalf, and demand that all people honor us as they honor the Father.

Obviously, that is not Jesus' teaching here. In context, these verses have to do with the divinity of Christ. He is unique as the incarnate Son of God and therefore has unique obligations, unique abilities, and a unique relationship with the Father.

Verses 26-27 clear up any question on this score: "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man." The phrase "Son of Man"

is a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13 that Jesus used often. As Messiah, Jesus has a singular role.

Because Jesus is unique, He never directs His disciples to follow His example in John 5:17-23. No subsequent writers—Peter, John, Paul, Luke—ever mention it. We are not to imitate those things pertaining to Jesus’ divinity or His Messianic office.

This same principle applies to Jesus’ comments in John 8:26, 28: “I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world....When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

Remember, John 8 is one of the great passages on the deity of Christ. The Jews ask, “Who are you?” (v. 25). Jesus eventually answers: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am” (v. 56). Jesus is arguing that He is utterly unique. He is from above, not below, and not of this world (v. 23). He is the only Savior (v. 24). He lives in perfect obedience to the Father (v. 29). He is a free man—a son—not a slave (v. 35). He has proceeded forth from the Father (v. 42). He is the great “I AM” (v. 58).

Note also that Jesus said the Jews were also “hearing” from their Father, Satan: “I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father” (v. 38). Are we to understand that the Jews were having conversations with Satan getting direct commands from him? Or did Jesus mean rather that they were doing his deeds (see v. 39)?

One final point. Even Jesus did not expect it was enough merely to claim to speak for God. Instead, He appealed to corroborating witnesses: John the Baptist, prophecy, miracles (e.g., John 10:25, 37-38; 14:10-11).

### **Question 5: What about in the Old Testament? It seemed like God was always intervening with special direction.**

Yes, we do see what appears to be a lot of special intervention during certain periods of Israel’s history. The question is this: How are we to apply those passages today? Here are a couple of observations.

First, even in the lives of the patriarchs, this kind of guidance is exceptional. We see scattered occurrences separated by years of apparent silence. It does not appear this was their normal way of making decisions.

Second, as time goes on and Scripture is given, we see fewer interventions. The written Word gives instruction governing decisions. When those instructions are not enough, God intervenes in a clear, supernatural way to give specialized direction, just as in the New Testament examples.

Third, Kings made most of their decisions based on the Law, not on special divine directives. This was one of the reasons the Law had been given, to help people make decisions and enable kings to govern in an orderly fashion. Most of the exceptional cases of guidance were for decisions regarding battle plans, though even here it was not always the case.

Fourth, in 1 Samuel 10:7 Saul receives the Holy Spirit. Samuel then tells him to do what the occasion requires and God would be with him. The same was true for Solomon.

Though at times it seemed he had direct access to God, he still asked for wisdom in order that he might lead the people (2 Chronicles 1:10).

Finally, it's true that the Jews needed a pillar of fire, etc., to assure them of God's presence. They also used the Urim and Thummim or cast lots to make decisions. Is this an appropriate method to make decisions in the New Testament economy? I don't think so. That's why we don't see examples of this in the church age (the casting of lots in Acts 1 was before Pentecost, and questionable even then), and they are never mentioned in the Epistles.

**Question 6: Didn't God say, "Be still and know that I am God"?**

Yes, it's from Psalm 46:10: "Cease striving and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth." This verse says nothing about hearing from God, though. As the NASB translation makes clear, "be still" doesn't mean "be quiet and listen to the inner voice of God," but rather to stop striving and rest in God's sovereignty. There are many places where the phrase "know that I am God" appears in the Hebrew Scriptures to communicate the sovereign power of the Almighty. We are to meditate on His attributes, not listen for His voice. That's the sense in this passage, too.

**Question 7: What does the phrase "Wait on the Lord" mean?**

"Waiting on the Lord" does not mean we delay all action unless and until we've "heard from God." Instead, it refers to an attitude of trust & reliance on God during trying and difficult times (see Psalm 27:14). It can also refer to resting during the waiting period during which God sovereignly delays answering our prayer.

**Question 8: Aren't you putting God in a box?**

This is a very important question and needs to be carefully considered.

Please hear me clearly. I'm not saying what God can or can't do. He can intervene in any way He chooses. However, we must base our teaching and conduct on what the Scriptures actually teach, not on what might be possible with a sovereign, all powerful God.

In one sense, all theology puts God in a "box," that is, it describes the borders of the person and character of God. This theology that allegedly "limits" God, though, is based on God's own self-revelation, not on our private ideas of what God should be like. When God describes Himself and His ways, these are not "limits," but truths.

I've made my case regarding biblical decision-making based on what it looks like the Bible teaches, which is the real issue after all. If I'm right and the Bible actually teaches what I think it does, then I am not putting God in a box. Rather, I'm identifying the patterns God Himself has chosen to work by. I'm showing what seems to be the pattern of Scripture itself—especially in the New Testament, which is the most reliable guide for the church today. The Bible simply does not encourage Christians to seek personalized guidance or assignments from God.

J.I. Packer notes: "God may reveal Himself and give guidance to His servants any way He pleases. It is not for us to set limits on Him. But it remains a question as to whether or not we are entitled to expect 'hotline' disclosures on a regular basis. The correct answer is no. All the biblical narratives of God's direct communications with men

are exceptional on the face of it, and the biblical model for personal guidance is quite different.”<sup>13</sup>

Here’s another point: It’s perilous to construct doctrine from historical material alone. It’s more sound to first develop one’s theology from the less ambiguous material in the Epistles. Then one can look for applications of those principles in the historical texts like Acts, the Gospels, or the Old Testament.

However, there is no support for the doctrine of hearing the voice of God in the place where all essential disciplines of Christian living must appear: the Epistles. Search for verification in the writings of any disciple. You’ll find nothing but silence. Why are the Apostles unanimously reticent on a capability that’s allegedly at the core of the Christian life?

Incidentally, which view is more limiting of God, the view that God is free to speak whenever He wants and He’s capable of making Himself heard even when we are not listening for Him (my view), or the view that we can only hear God when our inner selves get really quiet—so our own thoughts don’t drown Him out—and we listen intently for His voice?

Remember the basic points of this teaching. First, God can intervene any way He chooses. Second, in the Scriptures—especially in the New Testament—special intervention seems to follow a particular pattern (as noted in Session 1, II, G). Third, we are never encouraged to seek this special, personalized guidance. Fourth, the biblical pattern is that we make decisions based on God’s moral will and wisdom. Fifth, it is a serious thing to claim that God has given you a message. Even Jesus and the Apostles didn’t do this without corroboration.

**Question 9: This seems so rationalistic, so worldly. Is such guidance personal?**

The most compelling response I can give is simply this: If the wisdom approach is biblical, then it’s not worldly or rationalistic. The real issue is not how this approach seems to us, but whether the Bible teaches it. If it does, then no charge of worldliness succeeds.

Why would someone assume that simply using one’s mind is a worldly thing? The apostles apparently didn’t think it worldly or rationalistic. As I pointed out, in many cases the apostles explain their decisions with frankness, giving the attending reasons for their decisions. Yet for a very good reason they did not regard this process as carnal, impersonal, or humanistic: God was involved in every step of the decision-making process, though He was not deciding for them most of the time.

Certainly the Bible characterizes our relationship with God as personal. As I mentioned, there is a sense in which the Holy Spirit “speaks” to us. There’s also a sense in which God “has a plan for our lives.” But these concepts have morphed into something the biblical writers never intended.

When you raise a child you would not assume that teaching him to feed himself would somehow distance your relationship. However, though continuing to spoon-feed him into adulthood might be more “intimate” or “personal” in an odd sort of way, it would hardly be more desirable.

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<sup>13</sup>Packer, 117.

So, if by “personal” you mean, “Does God make personal choices for me by revealing his detailed blueprint for my life?” then I’d say the answer is no. If you mean, “Does this way of making decisions allow God into the process and bring me closer to Him? Does it allow me to build a personal relationship and give me the information I need so I can make godly decisions, fulfilling God’s purpose in my life?” then the answer is yes, very much so.

There’s another concern with this challenge. The question reflects what I think is an unbalanced and ultimately anemic view of Christianity. This indeed puts God in a box, locking Him into a spiritual realm where feelings rule and thinking, research, and reasoning are suspect because they are part of the material, physical (some Christians would say “fleshly”) realm. Other phrases that characterize this thinking are: “I want to turn off my mind and listen to the Spirit,” “All of God, none of me,” or “Let God speak to them. It’s not our job to judge.”

This isn’t Christianity; it’s Platonism. Such thinking is characterized by the attitude that the ideal for believers is to get personalized messages from the Lord. In the absence of God speaking (usually represented as our inability to hear) we’re stuck with the booby prize: the Bible. One caller actually said this to me on the radio: “Then all I have left is just the book!” How sad.

God is intimately involved in the whole process, giving us 1) His Word, 2) His Holy Spirit to illuminate His Word, 3) a new nature with the desire and ability to obey His moral will, 4) grace enabling us to trust Him, and 5) wisdom as we ask for it, 6) counselors and gifted people in the Body to assist us.

God works sovereignly to 1) open doors by making opportunities, 2) answer prayers related to our decisions, 3) bring to completion those plans that are within His sovereign will, 4) respond to our obedience to His moral will by producing spiritual fruit, and 5) work through all to accomplish His purposes in and through us.

In all we exercise trust, faith, and dependence on the Holy Spirit in our 1) confidence that God is in control of all, 2) obedience to His moral will and application of biblical principles, 3) prayer for wisdom, and 4) thanksgiving and submission to His sovereign will in the outcome of our plans.

### **Question 10: What should we pray for?**

I don’t think it’s productive to simply pray “God’s will be done” on non-moral issues. It’s similar to saying, “God, do what you want,” which doesn’t seem to be the point of intercession. The exception would be a prayer of surrender to what you already know to be right (as with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane).

God wants us to pray specifically, but biblically. Some things to pray for would be wisdom (James 1:5), understanding God’s revealed will in the Bible, opportunities to choose from, good counsel, your desires (what you want), spiritual strength to do what’s right, and a submissive spirit to God’s sovereign decision.

Sometimes when we pray about something we get a flood of ideas. I believe many of those things are from God. But we can’t just assume that. We need to judge them individually. That’s easier if a lot of “God is telling me” language doesn’t get in the way. If it works out, give the glory to God. If it doesn’t, then take responsibility for your own bad idea.

Pray like this: “God, you are Lord over my life today. And you can do with me what you want. Please help me to be sensitive to the leading and guiding of your Holy Spirit today in the sense that I apply godliness to the specific things I have to face. Help me by your Spirit, to know, specifically, how I can be the kind of person that you want me to be.”

This is a very different kind of prayer from, “Lord, I want to know your perfect will for this situation. Please tell me what you want me to do.” The first prayer reflects biblical teaching, the second does not.

**Question 11: What if it’s just my desire? My human reasoning is flawed and my flesh gets in the way.**

First, your desires are valid elements in the process, as I’ve pointed out.

Also, according to 1 Corinthians 2:16 you have the mind of Christ. You have an increased ability to make sound decisions because you have a new dimension of spiritual discernment due to the new birth. It’s not flawless yet, but certainly capable of making godly decisions, as Paul is quick to point out in 1 Corinthians 6:3-6 (“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 is 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?”).

There’s another problem. The process of hearing God’s voice to make a decision is subject to the same liabilities of the flesh, maybe even more so because there are more subjective elements involved. There’s no guarantee with either method that the flesh won’t get in the way. The real question is, “What method is taught and practiced in the Scripture?” Following the biblical pattern is the safest way to avoid problems with the flesh.

**Question 12: Why does the “blueprint method” seem to work many times?**

When it works, it’s usually because the person is employing the wisdom method in disguise, with a lot of added grief, doubt, guilt, uncertainty, and misdirected prayers.

**Question 13: Doesn’t the Holy Spirit speak to us about the correct interpretation of the Bible?**

Some think getting a word from God is a substitute for careful Bible study. But it’s bad advice to pray for the Holy Spirit to give you the right interpretation of a text.

Paul said, “All Scripture is God-breathed,” (2 Timothy 3:16), *graphe* in Greek. The writings are inspired and authoritative, not the interpretation we think the Holy Spirit is giving us. This is why the words should be our focus, not our feelings.

If you think God is telling you something through Scripture that is not connected to the meaning of the words in their context, it can’t be of God because God chose to communicate through language, not around it.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is our teacher, but that means He illuminates what’s already there. All teachers work from a body of information, clarifying it and passing it on. The Holy Spirit does not give new information not already evident in the inspired words. The

curriculum, so to speak, is then standardized for all Christians. Every person has equal access to the meaning. There are no private messages in Scripture.

God took pains to give us an objective revelation in the words of the Bible to protect us from subjectivism. When Christians opt for an anointed “reading between the lines” instead of sound exegesis, it actually shows disrespect for God’s objective revelation.

## Appendix 1

### God's Special Directives in Acts

In Acts we have a focused look at a relatively short period of Bible history (30 years) in which there are radical manifestations of supernatural activity. Acts offers a best-case scenario for providing an inductive argument for the view that Christians ought to be receiving assignments from God—private, subjective revelations of God “speaking” to them. What do we find?

I went through Acts verse by verse looking for concrete examples of specialized guidance. Here is a list of every time God gave a special directive of any sort.

An angel rescues the Apostles from prison and tells them to preach the Gospel (5:19-20). Philip is sent to the Gaza road by an angel (8:26). Philip is directed to the Ethiopian eunuch by the Spirit (8:29). While traveling on the Damascus road, Saul hears the audible voice of Jesus directing him to Damascus (9:4-6). Ananias has a vision in which the Lord instructs him to visit Saul (9:10-16). Cornelius is instructed by an angel in a vision to send for Peter (10:3-6). Peter is instructed by the Spirit to visit Cornelius (10:19-20). Peter is ordered by an angel to follow him out of prison (12:7-8). Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the Holy Spirit on their first missionary journey (13:2). The Holy Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (16:6-7). Paul is directed through a vision to Macedonia (16:9-10). Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him to preach the Gospel in Corinth (18:9-10). Paul is told through prophecy not to enter Jerusalem (21:4). Jesus tells Paul in a vision to leave Jerusalem (22:18, 21).

How does God communicate these special directions? The majority (five) are communicated through visions. Three times an angel is the messenger. Four times the Spirit speaks. One is a prophecy. One other is the voice of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

At first glance this list seems formidable, but the initial impression is misleading. The events represent a very small amount of activity considering the 30 year time span of Acts. God's specialized “assignments” to the leaders of the early church are limited to only 14 from the time of Pentecost.<sup>15</sup>

Two are jailbreaks. Two are about Saul's conversion. Two are about Cornelius' conversion. Two are about the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion. Two are about Paul's stay in Jerusalem (“Don't enter” and “Get out”). The remaining four are about Paul's missionary journeys (initially commissioned, directed away from Asia, directed to Macedonia, told to preach boldly in Corinth).

Notice a couple more significant facts. First, there is no mention in the entire biblical record of the early church when God gave an assignment through some inner “sensing.”

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<sup>14</sup>There are five other examples of supernatural revelations that are predictive in nature, but do not dictate any direction—they give no assignments. In fact, in one case (Agabus' prophecy of imminent famine) the Christians determine on their own to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren in Judea. These examples can be found in Acts 11:27-30, 20:23, 21:11, 23:11, and 27:22-26.

<sup>15</sup>I did not include the casting of lots in Acts 1:15-26 for two reasons. First, this was not an example of the Holy Spirit speaking with an assignment from God. Second, opinions are divided whether this was directed by God or merely the disciple's misguided effort. The text doesn't indicate. Many think Paul was Judas' replacement.

Completely absent from the text are phrases like, “I feel led...,” “I think God is telling me...,” “I feel God is calling me...,” “I believe it’s God’s will that...,” “I’ve received lots of confirmation...,” “I’m sensing the Lord’s direction...,” or “I have a peace about it...”

The kind of language often used to describe the way God’s assignments are given is completely absent from the biblical record. There is no record of knowledge of God’s will based on “sensing” or internal promptings--not a single one. The rare times God gave special directives, He communicated in a clear and supernatural way. More than half the time He used a vision or an angel. This last is especially odd, given the contemporary references to “hearing the voice of God.”

Here’s another observation. In many Christian circles if you said, “God spoke to me,” it wouldn’t even raise an eyebrow. Announce you had a vision, though, and heads would turn. Admit angels were visiting and that might invite an exorcism. Yet there are abundant biblical precedents for the last two and virtually none for the first.

Second, there is no evidence that any of these directives are sought. There is no indication of any Christians, including Apostles, “waiting” for God’s direction. In the New Testament we find no pleading with God or laboring in prayer for God to show them His will or give them His assignment.

But there’s yet another serious problem.

### **No Divine Assignment**

For balance we must also note other important decisions not directed by God. There are many examples in Acts when the disciples make decisions marking significant events in the life of the early church. They are the kind many would think require a word from the Lord. They entail decisions about the how, when, where, why, and who of ministry. Yet there is no evidence of any directive from God, and no indication the disciples even sought one. They simply weighed their options in light of circumstances and then chose a judicious course of action consistent with the prior general commands of the Lord.

Notable examples include Philip’s ministry in Samaria (8:5), resolving the complaint about the Hellenistic widows (6:1-6), and Barnabas and Saul establishing a teaching ministry for a year in Antioch (11:26). Elders are appointed in the new churches (14:23). The Jerusalem council resolves the problem of the Judaizers and the Galatian heresy (15:7-29). Paul embarks on his second and third missionary journeys (15:36, 18:23). Paul sets up shop as a tentmaker and starts a ministry in Corinth (18:3). Paul establishes a discipleship training program for two years at the school of Tyrannus (19:9). Paul has a healing ministry on the island of Malta for three months (28:9-11).

None of these decisions were a result of a special “assignment” from God. Rather, each was a unilateral decision made by the disciples who used wisdom to respond to the circumstances confronting them.

And these are just the tip of the iceberg. Altogether I found 70 such instances in the book of Acts alone, contrasted with the 14 occasions of specialized direction during that same time.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>The full list of 70 examples can be found on the Stand to Reason web site at [www.str.org](http://www.str.org) under “Divine Direction in Acts.”

Even more can be found in the Epistles. Paul chastises the Corinthians for not working out their own legal differences (1 Corinthians 6:3-6). He does not counsel them to seek a decision from God. Instead he asks, “Is there not among you *one wise man* who will be able to decide between his brethren?”

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives the most thorough instruction to be found in the Bible on the issue of marriage. He details pros and cons of single life over married life. He solemnly notes the moral obligations of both. He then leaves the decision in the hands of the believer. There is no hint in this passage that a believer must “hear from the Lord” even on the weighty matter of choosing a spouse.

Peter gives explicit instruction about the use of spiritual gifts in ministry (1 Peter 4:10-11). He doesn’t say to wait for one’s calling—nor does any other passage of Scripture. Instead, given that each believer has a spiritual gift, Peter enjoins him to employ it in works of service as a good steward, doing all to God’s glory.

It’s simply mistaken to claim the early church was consistently “led” by the Spirit in this sense. There is neither a biblical directive nor a biblical pattern of receiving such assignments from God.

## Appendix 2

### Wisdom from Proverbs on Decision Making

#### Man plans; God works through the plans:

Proverbs 16:9: “The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.”

Proverbs 19:21: “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.”

Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord.”

#### Trust in God’s sovereignty:

Proverbs 21:30: “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord.”

Proverbs 27:1: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”

Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

#### The importance of knowledge:

Proverbs 13:16: “Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool displays folly.”

Proverbs 19:2: “Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, and he who makes haste with his feet errs.”

## Appendix 3

### Moral and Wisdom Principles for Choosing a Wife

Here is an example of how I applied the wisdom model to the issue of choosing a wife. It's a list of guidelines from Scripture one needs to consider when choosing a bride (women will need to make a few adjustment concerning husbands, but you get the idea). In addition to the moral consideration of choosing someone who is a committed Christian (2 Corinthians 6:14-18), men should also asked the following questions. Is she:

- Someone you can endeavor to love as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25)?
- Already beginning to show respect for you as the head of your relationship (Ephesians 5:33)?
- Showing a willingness to be subject to your leadership (Ephesians 5:24)?
- Someone you as a husband can be subject to in the fear of the Lord (there is a type of submission that works both ways: Ephesians 5:21)?
- Someone you can joyfully fulfill your sexual responsibilities to (1 Corinthians 7:3-5, Proverbs 5:15-20)?
- Someone you can live in peace with (1 Corinthians 7:15)?
- Someone you can provide for adequately (1 Timothy 5:8)?
- Someone who allows you to exercise your spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:10)?
- Prudent (Proverbs 19:14)?
- Not contentious or vexing (Proverbs 21:9, 25:24, 27:15, 21:19)?
- Someone who will be an industrious, contributing member of the household, fulfilling domestic duties, hospitable and kind, with a positive outlook on life, and possesses strength and dignity (Proverbs 31:13-27)?
- Someone who fears the Lord (Proverbs 31:30)?
- Chaste and respectful (1 Peter 3:2)?
- Kindhearted, not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead (1 Peter 3:8-9)?
- Someone you are happy to be with (1 Corinthians 7:40)?
- Committed to the priority of fulfilling her God-given role and responsibilities as a wife?
- An excellent woman (Proverbs 30:10)?