

# HOW TO DETERMINE GOD'S WILL IN THE DECISIONS OF LIFE<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION:

Many believers struggle as they try to determine God's will in specific situations. Prospective college students wonder which school they should attend. A young man may be unsure of which girl to marry. A Christian looking for a job wonders how to decide which of several companies he should work for. A Bible college graduate debates in his mind which church he should pastor, out of several which want him as their pastor. Many believers struggle with the so-called "questionable activities", trying to determine whether they should engage in a particular behavior or a controversial activity that is not specifically mentioned in the Bible e.g. should a Christian watch "Soap operas" or questionable movies, smoke, listen to rap music, go to clubs, etc.?

## SHOULD WE TRUST OUR FEELINGS OR INWARD IMPRESSIONS?

Unfortunately, when faced with such decisions, many believers rely only on their feelings. We call that subjective judgment. A student wants to quit college because he says he believes it's "God's will" for him to do so. Yet, when pressed as to how he decided it was God's will, he may ultimately have to admit that he simply "feels" that's the right thing to do. One obvious problem with decision-making on that basis is that feelings can lie! Yet many people determine God's will almost exclusively by their feelings and inward impressions, and in some cases, even on dreams and visions. Such a basis is a very dubious way to determine truth &/or God's will!

## SO HOW CAN WE DETERMINE WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO?

The goal here is to show Bible-believing Christians a biblical, objective way of determining God's will—in everything from whether or not to go to a club, to which company they should work for. Hopefully the Bible truths and principles given here will give you a solid compass to find your way in the many decisions you will face in life.

## BASIC PREREQUISITES TO DISCERNING GOD'S WILL.

Prerequisites are things that are required beforehand. For example, a university normally will not allow a first year student to sign up for a course designed for a final year student. The student must first take other "prerequisite" courses and complete them satisfactorily, before he is allowed to take the advanced course. So it is in determining God's will. Certain basic, fundamental things must be true in a person's life before he/she will be able to determine God's will. Here are some prerequisites:

- **SALVATION** – **Jn. 9:31** "God hears not sinners." Now of course God knows everything, hears everything, etc. However God has not obligated Himself to hear-i.e. with a view to answering-the prayer of an unbeliever. Sometimes God graciously does answer an unbeliever's prayer. But He has not obligated Himself to do so, such as He has for His children. To those who know Christ as Lord & Saviour though, God has given gracious, specific promises in regard to prayer. (e.g. Mt. 7:6-8; I Jn. 5:14-15; etc). So before we can expect God to answer prayers for guidance, we need to make sure we are actually one of his children!
- **DEDICATION** (i.e. commitment) – **Rom. 12:1** - We are to "*present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice.*" If we have not done so, if we have not "sold out" to Him, we are probably not in the best position to know God's will. Scripture indicates that God's intimate fellowship and direction is reserved for those who are wholly dedicated to Him (Ps. 4:3; 25:14).
- **SEPARATION** – **Rom. 12:2** - "*and be not conformed to this world...*" Before a person can determine God's will for his life, he needs to be in a condition to be used by God i.e. he needs to be separate from the "world," and its sinful habits and lifestyles. It makes no sense to pray about what God wants you to do with your life while you are engaging in blatant, known sin. God will not likely be answering such prayers for guidance while you are in that condition!

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<sup>1</sup> Written/compiled by Mike Edwards while Baptist Chaplain at the University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea, October 1995 [revised May 1997, PNG, 2008, 2011, 2012, St. Vincent, West Indies & 3/14, & 3/21 Madison, Ohio. Note: Virtually all of the content, headings, subtitles, etc. contained here has been taken verbatim from two sources: "*Daktar, Diplomat in Bangladesh*" by Dr. Viggo Olsen (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1973), *Appendix A*, pp. 347-349; & "*How Can I Know the Will of God,*" by Dr. Stewart Custer (*Faith for the Family*: BJUP, Jan/Feb., 1974). Additional thoughts & Scripture passages have been added by me. -mwe

- **TRANSFORMATION** – **Rom. 12:2** - "...*be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...*" There should be a transforming work going on in a believer's life, as he/she grows in godliness. Before God calls a person to greater opportunities, that person needs to be faithful in the smaller responsibilities that God is presently entrusting to him. The parable of the "*talents*" is a classic example of this principle (Mt. 25:14-30). Notice there that God rewarded those who were faithful in small things by giving them greater opportunities and responsibilities: "*you have been faithful in a few things, I will make you a ruler over many things*" (vv. 21, 23). For instance, if a person isn't willing to witness to a classmate or a friend, there isn't any need for that individual to pray about whether God wants him to become a foreign missionary. If we aren't faithful in small responsibilities it's doubtful that God is calling us to bigger ones. (cf. Jer. 12:5)

## **FOUR BASIC STEPS IN DETERMINING GOD'S WILL.**

Once you have met the above-mentioned preliminary requirements, you are ready to determine God's will. The following steps have been a great help to many:

1. **ERASE & PRAY** - **Ps. 139:23-24**. Olsen comments: "*Make a conscious mental effort to erase your own desire as though you were erasing a blackboard clean, so that God can imprint upon your mental chalkboard His will and plan for you. Then pray, asking God to finish the erasing process...guide you, reveal His plan to you, and give you wisdom to decide correctly.*"<sup>i</sup>
2. **READ & REMEMBER**. "*Read pertinent portions of the Scripture, for God already has revealed His will about hundreds of subjects. Obtain a topical concordance so that you can quickly and easily find Bible passages which deal with the subject at hand.*"<sup>ii</sup> Remember, God never gives a command in His word that is beyond our ability to obey. If we are acting on God's Word, we can do amazing things. Peter walked on water (Mt. 14:28-30), something which is normally completely impossible for any human being to do. He was able to do it because he was acting upon God's Word (since Jesus is God and had commanded Peter to do so). His failure came when he began to look around at the storm and the wind instead of believing and acting on God's Word. So first of all, in seeking to know God's will, we must diligently look in God's written word for guidance and direction. Keep in mind that there are two types of information and guidance available from the Bible:
  - a) **Straightforward Bible truths**. "*Thou shalt not steal*" (Ex. 20:15); "*Don't lie*" (Eph. 4:25); etc. Where God has given clear commands, there is no need to even pray about the matter! For example, should a Christian girl marry a non-Christian guy? God's will is easy to determine. The answer is *NO!* (II Cor. 6:14-7:1). It doesn't matter how handsome, athletic or thoughtful he is, God says "*not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers!*" For a Christian committed to following God's Word, that's the end of the story! However, some Christians don't like God's clear answer and like Balaam (Num. 22-24) go back to God again and again seeking a different answer. And they may like Balaam eventually get a different answer. But it will not be God's *PERFECT* will, but rather His *PERMISSIVE* will, which will end in disaster, as it did for Balaam (cf. Num. 31:16; II Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). If the Bible clearly speaks to an issue you are wondering about, that is the end of the matter...*or at least it should be!*
  - b) **Basic Bible principles**. While Scripture speaks clearly on many subjects, it's obvious that it doesn't mention every practice or situation we encounter in the twenty-first century. However there is no need to despair. Where there are no straightforward truths, there are very often clear *principles* that will help us to know God's will.

For example, should a Christian smoke? The answer would clearly seem to be no. *Why?* Because I Cor. 6:19-20 states that a believer's body is God's temple and so we should take good care of it. Since smoking causes cancer, emphysema, and many other diseases, obviously Christians should seek to avoid or break the habit. Does it matter what we listen to on the radio, our CD player or MP3? Does God care about what we read, watch on television, view on DVD or access on our laptop or cell phone? *Absolutely!* Phil. 4:8-9 says that we are to think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely & of good repute. Music, books, magazines, TV programs, images &/or DVD's that don't fit that biblical principle, should be avoided. Does it matter whether we habitually eat too much and are overweight? *You bet!* (cf. Dt. 21:20; Prov. 23:20; 28:7; etc.)

c) **WHAT ABOUT THOSE "QUESTIONABLE" ACTIVITIES?** Sometimes friends will ask a Christian to do something that he is not sure that he should participate in. In such situations the believer may sincerely wonder what he should do! Thankfully, God hasn't left us without help. Though the Bible doesn't list everything that a Christian should or shouldn't do, there are key questions that we can ask ourselves which will help us. Before engaging in something that you're uncertain about or going somewhere that you are not sure you should go, ask yourself these helpful questions.<sup>iii</sup>

- "Will this action bring any glory to God?" I Cor. 10:31.
- "Will this action or activity bring impurity or useless harm to my body, which is the temple of God's Spirit?" I Cor. 6:19-20.
- "Would I want to be found doing this, if Christ were to return at this moment?" I Jn. 2:28.
- "Will my doing this offend and cause another Christian brother or sister to stumble in their spiritual life?" Rom. 14:21
- "Will this activity hinder or hurt my spiritual growth or progress?" Heb. 12:1
- "Can I imagine Jesus doing this, or deciding this way?" I Jn. 2:6
- "Could I do this activity in Christ's name?" Col. 3:17
- "Will this action or behavior glorify God, and be a help, rather than a hindrance, to non-Christians around me?" Mt. 5:16
- "Will doing this be profitable (helpful) to me, and cause me to be edified (built up) in my Christian life?" I Cor. 6:12; 10:23.

Running your decisions through the above grid will help you make correct decisions based on God's Word. And if any of the above questions give you doubts, then it would be strongly advisable to avoid the activity being considered. The reason: Romans 14:23 which declares that believers should avoid becoming involved in things of which you have sincere doubts.

3. **CONSIDER & THINK-Acts 13:1-7.** While you are praying and seeking God's will there is also a third step you should take: *Use your head!* Think! Get your brain involved in examining objective realities!

a. **Look at the circumstances-Esther 4:13-14.** From the human viewpoint it seemed that Esther was "lucky" to win what amounted to a beauty contest. But it wasn't luck but God's providence that put her into the position of queen, in order to save God's chosen people-as her Uncle Mordecai made clear to her. So too, for the believer today there are no accidents. The sovereign God controls our circumstances and affairs. And sometimes those very circumstances may point in a certain direction.

b. **Look at your spiritual gift-Rom. 12:6-8.** The Bible seems to clearly teach that every believer is given a spiritual gift (I Pet. 4:10-11). Some spiritual gifts were temporary and operated during New Testament times only.<sup>iv</sup> Other spiritual gifts have continued on until today, and each believer appears to have one of them. It makes sense then, in seeking to determine God's will, to look at what spiritual gift you have been given. Your gift may clearly equip you for one responsibility and not another.

c. **Look at your interests, abilities & talents.** God has given each of us interests and abilities. These may point in a particular direction. For instance, if you want to be a missionary nurse and you are debating between three possible countries to serve in as a missionary, but only one has a mission hospital you could work in, it would seem sensible to go to the country that has a hospital so you can use that talent and ability.

Olsen advises: "*Think and meditate over all aspects of the question at hand. If many factors are involved, draw a line down a piece of paper and list the factors pro and con. Prayerfully meditate over your list until the decisive factors become clear.*"<sup>v</sup> After having made such a list for each possible choice (e.g. school, job, etc.) go back and be honest with yourself. Review your lists, throwing out those things on either the plus or minus side which are not really legitimate. Once you have done so, usually I think you will find that one potential choice will emerge having many advantages and few disadvantages, while the others remain a mixture of both good and bad.

d. **Get godly counsel and advice. Prov. 11:14; 12:15; 15:22; 20:18 & 24:6.** Before making any decision, talk to **godly** Christians and seek their opinions. Especially talk with people who are not afraid to challenge your thinking. Some close friends only tell you what they think you want to hear. That is not the kind of counselor you need when making important decisions. Talk to your pastor and other mature Christians who will give you honest, biblical opinions.

4. **DECIDE & CHECK.** Col. 3:15 "Don't let the matter ride indefinitely and miss God's guidance by default. *Decide!* Check for peace of mind. If you decide correctly regarding God's will or plan for you, He signals you, 'Correct decision there,' by a wonderful sense of inner peace. If you have decided wrongly, the peace of mind will not come. And what if peace does not come? Then you must return to step number one and start all over again. The trouble usually lies right there-you never really erased your own will in the first place."<sup>vi</sup>

If there is a place for "*inward leading*," this is where it comes into play. Throughout the gospels we find people coming to Jesus to touch Him or His clothing, with an inward conviction that He would heal them, raise their loved ones from the dead, etc. (e.g. Mt. 9:18-22, 32-33). There *IS* a place for inward leading, but it must not be exaggerated, as it is by many today.

Rom. 8:16 says that "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit...*" In the context, Paul is referring to a person gaining/obtaining assurance of salvation. Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit does have a part He plays in giving us guidance, for He is the comforter, counselor, "*paraclete*" the one called alongside to help. The part that I believe the Holy Spirit plays in this is to reinforce the decision we have made by giving us the peace of mind and heart mentioned in Colossians 3:15. It literally reads: "*Let the peace of God rule* (i.e. umpire, referee) *in your hearts.*"<sup>vii</sup>

## 5. **GET THIS IN THE RIGHT ORDER!**

**The order is so important:** 1) Guidance through truths and principles from God's Word, 2) followed by an honest examination of one's gifts, talents and abilities and the seeking of godly counsel, 3) then the making of an intelligent decision, 4) followed lastly by an inward confirmation. *Many Christians today attempt to do it in the wrong order!* First they look for an inward impression. Then they secure an easy approval from sympathetic friends before finally trying to find a Bible verse or two to justify their chosen course of action. That's a totally backward & wrong way of going about it! May God help and direct you as you seek to not just *determine*, but more importantly, *do* His will! The goal for the Christian has been well stated:

***"THE WILL OF GOD-  
NOTHING MORE, NOTHING LESS, NOTHING ELSE!"***

### **References**

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i. Olsen, p. 348

ii. Ibid.

iii. All of the questions with the exception of "i" have been taken from Olsen, p. 348

iv. There were several main purposes for such temporary gifts: 1) To inaugurate the "*Church Age*" and assist in the starting up of the Church & the identification of who could be part of the Body of Christ (Acts 1:4-5, 8 cf. Rom. 9-11; Acts 2, 10, 19, etc), 2) To confirm that the Holy Spirit, which believers had been commanded to wait for, had indeed come (Jn. 7:39; 14:16; 16:7 & Acts 1:4-5 cf. 1:8), 3) To validate the authenticity & credibility of the true apostles & prophets (Heb. 2:3-4; II Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19 & Acts 14:3 cf. 14:6-18), and 4) To serve as a final warning sign to the unbelieving nation of Israel that Christ was the true Messiah & that they needed to repent or else judgment would come (I Cor. 14:20-22 cf. Acts 2:1-13). That judgment *did* come in A.D. 70 when the Romans sacked Jerusalem, killed a million Jews & destroyed the Temple. Obviously such miraculous "sign" gifts would cease to operate when: a) The apostles died, b) Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews scattered &/or c) They would stop naturally by themselves as the Word of God declares (I Cor. 13:8). Such gifts *did* in fact stop by the end of the first century, as both church history and the writings of the early church fathers attest.

v. Olsen, p. 349

vi. Olsen, p. 349

vii. "*BRABEUO* – properly, to act as an umpire (*brabeus*), hence, generally, to arbitrate, decide, Col. 3:15, 'rule'... representing 'the peace of Christ' as deciding all matters in the hearts of believers..." (W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Fleming H. Revell Company: Old Tappan, NJ, 1966], vol. 3, p. 307)