

**Xenos Christian Fellowship**  
**Christian Ministry 3: Moving Into a Ministry Lifestyle**  
**Week 9 – Staying On Course: Principles of Spiritual Guidance**

**Introduction**

A famous evangelistic tract begins by saying, “God loves you, and he has a wonderful plan for your life.” We have learned that God’s plan revolves around receiving his love and giving his love away to others. Tonight, we want to delve more deeply into how we can discern God’s specific plan/will for our lives (e.g., educational path; career path; marriage; where to live; ministry focus; etc.).

In this lecture, we’ll explore biblical principles that can help us discern God’s will and guide us into making sound decisions.

**Three Foundational Considerations**

**1. God is willing and able to guide you.**

Many, many passages teach this.

- God is our shepherd (Ps. 23) and Jesus is the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10). And we are like sheep, stupid and prone to wander, so we need his regular guidance.
- God explicitly states many times that he will guide his people (e.g., Ps. 31:3; 32:8; Isa. 58:11; Prov. 3:6).

**Qualification:** We want to avoid the extreme positions that Christians often take on this issue. At one extreme is “Christian Deism”—the view that God is not personally involved in guiding our lives. At the other extreme is “super-spirituality”—the view that God personally guides in even minor areas by personal prompting, visions, etc.

**2. God’s will for your life has two primary focii:**

*A. Moral/ sanctification*

**(Rom. 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.**

God's will centers around transforming our values and lives so that they are in accordance with his moral will. Since this is how God designed us to live, his moral will is also ultimately fulfilling!

**(Rom. 8:29) For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren;**

Because we have been given a new identity (God's children & younger brethren of Jesus), God desires that each Christian become more and more like Jesus in our character and lifestyle.

**(1 Thess. 4:3) For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.**

This is an example of God's moral will for all Christians.

### *B. Ministry purpose*

**(Eph. 2:10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

God has fashioned us to do certain things for which he has prepared us. In order to walk in these good works, God must guide us into them.

**(Rom. 12:2a,3-8) 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 . . . (3) For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. (4) For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, (5) so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (6) And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy. . . (7) if service. . ., or he who teaches. . . (8) or he who exhorts . . ., he who gives . . ., he who leads. . ., he who shows mercy. . .**

God has a particular role for us to play in the body of Christ based (in part) on the way he gifts each of us. With this role comes the opportunity to exercise our gifts in meaningful and fulfilling ministry. God's guidance for the Christian must bring these factors to bear (see below).

### *3. Sometimes God reveals his will specifically, but not always.*

**In Acts 8:26-40, an angel of the Lord directs Philip to "go to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." Once there, the Spirit tells Philip to "go up and join this chariot."**

**In Acts 10, God reveals his will to Cornelius and Peter.**

**In Acts 16:9ff, Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia saying “come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul concluded that God had called him to “preach the gospel to them.”**

**On the other hand, Paul can speak of being “perplexed” as one of the sufferings of Christ that Christians commonly experience (2 Cor. 4:7).** So God always guides his children (Ps. 73:24), but he reveals his will to us at his discretion, not ours. This is because, in part, spiritual maturity involves making many decisions based on biblical priorities (see below) without special guidance.

Those are 3 "foundational considerations" which we must always remember as we seek God's guidance. Now we will look at practical guidelines for discovering God's will: "Key Principles of Guidance" and "Road Signs."

## **Practical Guidelines for Discovering God's Will**

### **1. Key Principles of Guidance**

*A. Scripture—the primary means of guidance.*

**(Ps. 119:105) Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.**

God's Word is the primary “light” by which he guides us in life.

God will never lead us to disobey his Word (Jer. 14:14; 23:32; 23:35,36).

- *Soak yourself scripture through reading, memorizing, and meditating on it.*

**(Psalm 1:1-3) 1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.**

God promises to guide our lives into fruitfulness and spiritual prosperity as we meditate (memorize and ponder) passages from his Word. Regular biblical reading, memorization and meditation deepens both our personal communion with God and our familiarity with his ways—both of which are invaluable in discerning his will.

**(1 Corinthians 2:12,13) (12) Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we**

**might know the things freely given to us by God, (13) which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.**

One of the main reasons God gives us the Holy Spirit is so that we may understand and apply what he has revealed through his Word (vs. 12b – “. . . things freely given to us by God”). This passage both emphasizes the importance of scripture and assures that God will help us to understand and apply it as we focus on it.

**B. Prayer—Pray regularly for God's guidance and for the heart to follow his will.**

- Many passages teach us to ask God for guidance (e.g., Ps. 25:4,5; 27:10; 143:8,10) and warn us of the danger of not doing this (e.g., Josh. 7,9). Not praying for God's guidance may betray a self-willed attitude.

**“How many of you who are concerned about God's will spend five minutes a day asking him to show you his will?”<sup>1</sup>**

Bill Hybels recommends asking God regular what the next step is for our character, our family, and our ministry.<sup>2</sup>

- Many passages teach us to pray for God to give us the heart (e.g., desire, willingness, strength) to follow his will (e.g., Ps. 86:11; 119:35,36; 141:3,4). Jesus prayed in this way in the Garden of Gethsemane, and urged his disciples to do the same thing (Matt. 26:36-41). Not praying for this may reveal a self-confident attitude, like Peter in Matt. 26:33-35.

**C. Acting—Act on God's moral will that you already know about.**

**(James 1:22-25) – 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves . . . 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.**

Stated positively, biblical meditation must be accompanied by obedience to what God tells us in his Word in order to live a blessed life (which includes his guidance).

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Norton Sterrett, quoted by Paul Little in *Affirming the Will of God*.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not To Pray* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 121.

**(Heb. 3:7-11) Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS . . . THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, ‘THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART . . . (THEREFORE) THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.’”**

Stated negatively, disregarding God’s will when he reveals it results in forfeiting further guidance.

**(Matt. 13:12\*) “For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”**

“Him who has” refers to those who respond obediently to the light they have received—they get more light. “Him who does not have” refers to those who reject the light they have received—they get less light.

Are you in revolt in an area already revealed? God will often withhold further guidance until you end this controversy.

*e.g. Fornicator wanting guidance on where to go to school.*

**D. Willingness—Be willing to do God's will *before* you know it.**

**(John 7:17\*) "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."**

God requires willingness to do his will before giving us confirmation of or further knowledge of his will.

**(James 1:5ff, 6-8) 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. (6) But let him ask in faith without any doubting , . . (7) For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, (8) being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.**

“Doubting” here refers not to weak faith, but to ambivalence to doing God’s will. It is being “double-minded,” which in Jas. 4:8 refers to people who want to satisfy worldly lusts more than to do God’s will. This attitude betrays an unbelief in God’s goodness for you, which must be resolved first. Many times, you must struggle before God in prayer to admit that you don’t have this attitude and then adopt it.

**Are you committed to sanctification and serving God in ministry as your highest priorities?** Without these priorities, you probably won't get

a whole lot of guidance, because God wants to guide you primarily in these two paths!

**Conclusion:** *If these “principles of guidance” are core convictions and habits in your Christian life, you can rest assured that God will give you the personal guidance you need and that he will get you where you need to go.* For most of us, the absence of one or more of these principles is the reason why we are experiencing chronic confusion.

## 2. “Road Signs”

“Road signs” are *additional factors that helpful in discerning God’s will.* But remember, the principles of guidance and foundational considerations above must come first. When Christians neglect these important principles, they can easily misinterpret road signs and be led astray. These road signs are listed in general order of importance.

**A. Spiritual Expedience:** This is a synonym for biblical wisdom, “sanctified common sense” which asks: “What decision will most glorify God based on biblical principles and priorities?” The Bible’s strong emphasis on wisdom (e.g., Proverbs; James), plus numerous biblical examples of this as the basis of decision-making,<sup>3</sup> indicate its central importance.

**(Prov. 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.**

This passage describes a life lived according to biblical wisdom/spiritual expedience, and it promises that God will guide the one who lives this way into his will.

**(Titus 1:8) . . . but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled . . .**

Paul emphasizes being “sensible” (*phroneo*), which is probably another synonym for biblical wisdom/spiritual expedience. This is a qualification for eldership, and is emphasized by Paul for all Christians (Titus 2:5,6,12).

**Use a “Pro’s and Con’s” list, but... be sure to prioritize the "pro's" and "con's" in the light of scripture.**

### B. Spiritual counsel

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<sup>3</sup> See many examples of this kind of decision-making in Paul’s ministry: why he decided to go certain places (Rom. 15:18-24; 1 Cor. 16:5-9; 2 Cor. 2:12,13); how he chose church leaders (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1; Acts 15:22; 16:1).

Wise counsel can give you additional light on Scripture, spiritual expedience, and possible implications of a decision. Proverbs says that spiritual counsel is a key part of biblical wisdom:

**(Prov. 11:14; 24:6) "In the abundance of counselors is victory."**

**(Prov. 12:15; 13:10,18) "The wise man listens to advice."**

**(Prov. 15:22) "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed."**

**(Prov. 19:20) "Listen to advice."**

**(Prov. 20:5) "A plan in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding draws it out."**

**(Prov. 20:18) "Plans are established by counsel"**

**(Prov. 27:17) "Iron sharpens iron"**

**“Any serious endeavor to know God’s will should not be an isolated effort, but one shared with other Christians. If my commitment to Christ is inseparable from my commitment to other believers, then I must not expect to fully understand his will apart from being in relationship with other Christians, and I should expect that he would (often) convey his will to me through others. I should regard any attempt to resolve an important decision without the counsel of other Christians as a short-circuit of my relationship with Christ.”<sup>4</sup>**

**Qualification:** *Seek mature counsel* (grounded in the Word and committed to God), preferably *from people who know you well*.

- Give them *full* information—not partial.
- Seek counsel from *multiple mature Christians* on major decisions.
- Avoid people who you know will only see it your way (“ear ticklers”).

**Remember:** *The advisor is not responsible for the decision—you are.* Advisors beware: some people like others to make their decisions for them.

### **C. Personal desires**

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<sup>4</sup> M. Blaine Smith, *Knowing God’s Will* (InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 113.

**Avoid the extremes of *asceticism* (“Whatever I want, the opposite is God's will”) and *selfishness* (“If I want it this badly, it must be God's will”).**

Which do you tend towards? Lean the other way!

In general, consider personal desires *more* in major life decisions (e.g., marriage; major ministry commitment) and *less* in the responsibilities associated with major life decisions (e.g., aspects of marriage responsibility or parts of a major ministry commitment that you don't enjoy).

*Enjoying an area of ministry often indicates gifting or burden* (e.g. “I really like working with kids.”).

#### **D. Gifts/ministry burdens**

Since God gives us spiritual gifts to play a special role in ministry, the faithful exercise of our gifts should be an important factor in our decision-making. For example, if you are strongly gifted to preach the Bible, you would want to make life decisions that free you to do this as much as possible, and avoid life decisions that would limit or prevent you from doing this.

See Week 3 for more on identifying your spiritual gifts.

#### **E. Intuition**

This includes leadings, prompting, impressions spontaneously emerging in our mind, especially during prayer and biblical meditation.

If they are from God, they will be consistent with the Word, with who you are (See Bill Hybels questions in *To Busy Not to Pray*, pp. 134-137) and with an attitude of servanthood.

When they line up this way, assume they are from God and follow them. You'll often be amazed at how fruitful they are!

The more you are in the Word, understand your ministry role, and are committed to servanthood, the more this area will come into play.

#### **F. Inner peace**

This is a certain kind of intuition—a deep seated calmness from God about a direction you've chosen to take.

When this is present it, confirms and strengthens our resolve to follow God's will.

**Qualifications:**

- *We are not talking about a constantly tranquil state.* Our emotional fallenness, the fact that we're in a battle, and taking scary steps of faith will produce inner turmoil sometimes.
- *When peace is absent, re-evaluate your decision* (i.e. especially in moral areas or matters of conscience).
- Also, consider: "Is this decision giving me inner peace because I am getting away from a painful situation, or is it giving me inner peace because God is using the decision to move me toward a great situation."

INSTRUCTORS, if you have time, this discussion question is designed to prime the pump for the section below on delegated authority.

Discussion: You are musically inclined and believe you have been led by God to be involved in that type of ministry in your home group. You ask your home group leaders if you can provide some music for the group. They think about it, and say "No thanks."

Now you wonder what to do? Should you continue to press them because you really feel led by God? Should you rally the troops to see if there is a consensus that music is needed in home church?

**G. Delegated authorities**

**This includes parents, husband, state, employer, church leaders.** This includes parents, husband, state, employer, church leaders. Within their legitimate sphere of authority, it is God's will for us to follow their directives.

**Qualification:** *We do outgrow authority or change them at times. We may have to disobey if against the written word of God* (not against your feelings, or "what you believe in your heart").

**If we choose to go against a delegated authority, we should ask "Why am I resisting/leaving this delegated authority?" "Are you aware of any character issues that God is teaching you through this person?" "Have you learned the lesson?"** Can you cite changes in your character? If you can't specifically note the

progress God has made in your life through the situation, then you're probably on the run.

Please note: there are more papers on this subject on the web and it is covered thoroughly in Servanthood class.

## H. *Circumstances*

**Circumstances play a relatively minor role in making major complex decisions.** They explain the options presently available. They play a major role in confirming after a decision is made.

**Fleecing (see Gideon, Judges 6).** Note that God had already told Gideon his will. This was for confirmation and encouragement. This is not the norm, so don't expect God to do it for you.

In the area of guidance, circumstances are generally more helpful when unfolding events narrow the range of options.

**Qualification:** *Open or closed doors do not necessarily mean "YES" or "NO."* With Paul, they were not all yes/no. **Compare 2 Cor. 2:12,13 and 1 Cor. 16:8,9.** Also, avoid reading too much into circumstances or the timing of circumstances.

## I. *Results*

We can often learn valuable lessons from the outcome of our decisions by asking these questions:

- What kind of results occurred—biblical or carnal?
- Why did the decision lead to good/bad results?

Results are also often helpful in determining gifted areas.

**Qualification:** *Results don't in themselves confirm or deny the wisdom of the decision* (pragmatics are not the only considerations).

- *Biblically correct decisions may not yield immediate or external results.*
- *Results which followed past decisions do not guarantee the same results from similar decisions now* (e.g., church growth methods).

**DISCUSSION:** Instructors, this is a good place to stop and discuss the assignment that was due by this lecture (see the end of the week 2 lecture notes).

## Concluding Advice

- *God does not lead mechanically.*

Because God is personal and we are personal, he leads us personally, not mechanically. Therefore we should avoid any such attempt to find a formula, and be open to let God lead us in the way he chooses.

Because God guided me in a certain way does not mean that he will always guide me that way, nor that he will guide other Christians in that same way. Apply this to yourself and in working w/ others.

**(Francis Schaeffer) “Thus we face a balance--by living in a personal relationship to God, and by not living as if God were not there. But this does not mean that I must find God's leading in a mechanical and legalistic way, and perfectly in every case, or God will cast me off.**

**I personally could not live for twenty-four hours without looking to the leading of the Lord, and this is how I live my life, not in theory, but in practice. But I also know the freedom I have of knowing there is no mechanical formula given in the Scripture, but that it must be a day-by-day closeness to God...And I have the freedom of knowing that if I honestly miss this way somewhere, God will still deal with me gently.”<sup>5</sup>**

- *God's leading may not be obvious before we decide—but if we have sincerely sought his will (as per above), we can trust that he is guiding us.*

Many times we can perceive his guidance before the situation. At other times, we may be able to look back in retrospect and see his guidance. During those times when we must make a decision even though God's leading is not clear, we can be confident that because we have presented ourselves to him to be used as his instruments (Rom 6:13), he is guiding and leading our lives.

This is an important perspective to maintain, because it guards against destructive introspection and/or indecisiveness when God's guidance is not clearly perceived in advance of a decision. Since we have presented ourselves to God, and since we know that he is guiding us, we can step out in faith when the situation calls for a decision.

- *Teach others the importance of discerning God's will for their lives—don't teach them to follow you!*

This principle is important to observe in our work with younger Christians if they are to become “independently dependent on the Lord.” When discussing important life decisions, it is important to tell them that God can guide them if

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Letters of Francis Schaeffer* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1985) p. 164.

they ask for his guidance and if they have the willingness to do his will even before they know what it is. In this way, we teach them to do what they do out of conviction that it is God's will, not merely because we told them to do it.

- *Take seriously the importance of seeking God's will, but also trust that God is gracious to the disobedient when they turn back to him. .*

**(Packer) “ . . . When a Christian wakes up to the fact that he has missed God's guidance and taken the wrong way . . . Is the damage irrevocable? Must he now be put off course for life? Thank God, no. Our God is a God who not merely (forgives and) restores, but takes up our mistakes and follies into his plan for us and brings good out of them . . . (See Joel 2:25,26) . . . The Jesus who restored Peter after his denial and corrected his course more than once after that is our Savior today and has not changed. God makes not only the wrath of man turn to his praise but the misadventures of Christians too.”<sup>6</sup>**

**(Schaeffer) “While disregarding God's leadership may result in loss, we should never feel that our lives are destroyed. God is a God of grace, and this means that when we turn back to him, he will continue to lead us from there and to bless us and use us.”<sup>7</sup>**

### Memory Verses

**Rom. 12:2\* God's will for our life revolves around our sanctification and his role for our lives in his purpose here on earth.**

**Jn. 7:17\* Learning God's will is predicated upon our first being willing to do his will, even before knowing what it is.**

**Matt. 13:12\* As we are responsive to God's will in our lives, he will continue to unfold his will in the other areas. The reverse is also true.**

### Assignment

Read chapters 4 and 5 of *Loving God's Way* and answer the questions at the end of each chapter.

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<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 241.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Letters of Francis Schaeffer* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1985) p. 163-164.