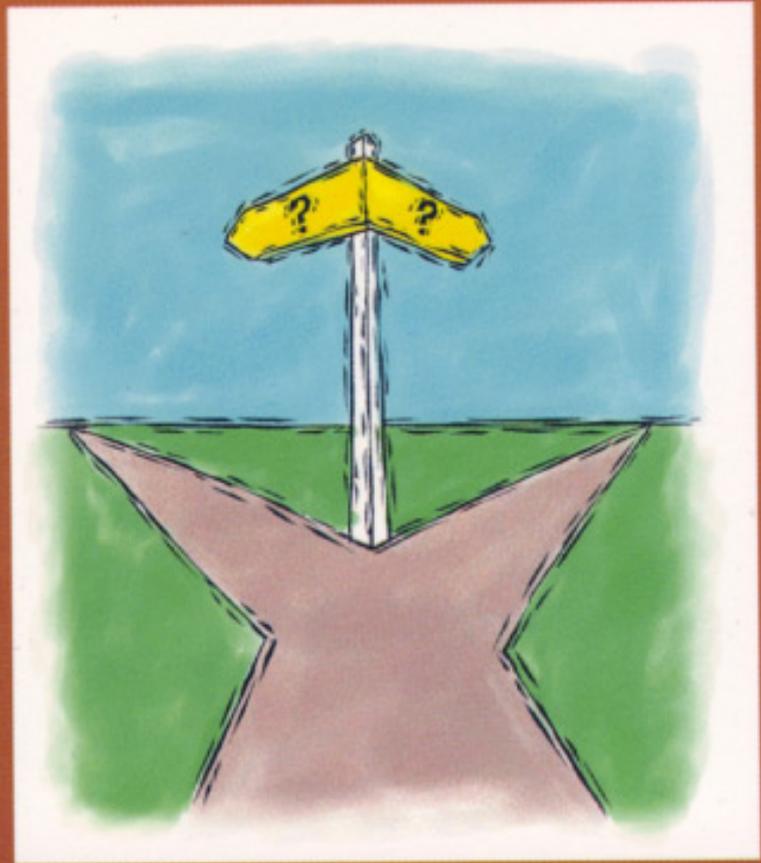


Guidance



How Does God Guide?

By Dick Tripp

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Foreword

We all make decisions every day - what to eat, who to spend time with, and which tasks to prioritise. Good decisions lead to contentment and fulfilled lives. Bad decisions lead to disappointment, pain and inner turmoil. As the Bible says, you reap what you sow.

In 1996, while in Fiji, I made a decision that could have been disastrous. I was enjoying a reef walk with my wife, Helen, when I decided to go for a dive in the channel through the outer edge of the reef. The channel was a rip and I was caught for two hours in the darkness. I could have drowned.

Five Fijians who came out to rescue me on surf skis all tipped out. It took a lot of prayer back in NZ (Helen had rung home to say I was missing at sea) and two large waves sent from God to sweep us back to safety.

In hindsight I had ignored all available cues to guide me. It was dark so I could not see the rip; I felt uneasy as I entered the water; I ignored God's written instruction to obey local authorities (Romans 13:1-4) and I disregarded Helen's concerns. My desire to dive had clouded all other judgement.

So how can we make good decisions?

In this booklet, Dick Tripp gives good advice on guidance. His principles and guidelines will help. Don't be fooled into thinking that a quick eight-step plan will take the decision making away from you. God does not work like that. He wants us to think, to feel, to experience life, and to learn from our mistakes.

But more than that. Dick's approach will help us discern the crucial question: How much do you and I really want to follow the guidance God offers?

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Introduction

There are many instances in the Bible of God guiding people. The way this occurs is varied: dreams, visions, the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the advice of others, or merely the turn of circumstances. In addition, there are clear statements and promises that God will guide his people such as: **"He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way"** (Psalm 25:9) and **"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you"** (Psalm 32:8).

We are also told in the New Testament that one of the marks of true believers is that they do the will of God. Jesus said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"** (Matthew 7:21). John

says, **“The world and its desires pass away, but the [person] who does the will of God lives forever”** (I John 2:17).

Jesus also said: **“If any one chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own”** (John 7:17). You will notice from this last verse that doing God's will is a matter of choice. It is not something that just happens whether I want it to happen or not. In the light of this emphasis in the Bible the questions arise: How can we find God's will? How can we expect God to make it known to us? This booklet is an attempt to answer those questions.

Some initial considerations

It stands to reason that to know God's will we must first have a meaningful relationship with God. Becoming a Christian in the New Testament begins with being reconciled to God and entering into a personal relationship with Him. Jesus made this possible by dying for us on the cross and paying the penalty for our sins. What he asks of us is to acknowledge our need of forgiveness and reconciliation, repent or turn to God, and accept Jesus as our Saviour and the Lord of our lives. When we trust him to forgive and accept us, and surrender to him as Lord, he comes in the person of the Holy Spirit to take up residence within us.

As the Holy Spirit is the one who both gives us the desire to do God's will and enables us to do it, then one of the chief evidences that we have indeed received the Holy Spirit, and been reconciled to God, is that we really want to do his will. Our motivation for this is the gratitude we experience for all that he has given us in Jesus. Guidance is something that grows out of our relationship with him. The better we know God, the better we will be able to discern his will.

It is significant that the Greek verb “to call” occurs about 150 times in the New Testament, and in most cases it is used of God calling human beings. God is **“he who called you”** (Galatians 5:8; 1 Peter 1:15) and we are **“called according to his purpose”** (Romans 8:28). He calls us first to be reconciled to him, and then, being reconciled, to enjoy him in this life and the next, and to live a life that will prove worthy of that calling.

In order that we may have a balanced perspective on the subject of knowing God's will, I would suggest five basic principles.

Five basic principles

Follow what is clearly revealed

We must be willing to do his will in those things he has already revealed, if we are to know his will in those things he has not yet made known.

God has already made known the greater part of his will for us in the Bible. Paul says, **“Everything in the Scriptures is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live. The Scriptures train God's servants to do all kinds of good deeds”** (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

The Bible is full of instruction as to how God wants his people to live. It speaks of our relationship with God himself, the place of prayer and his word in our lives, and how to grow in that relationship. It talks about relationships in the home, relationships with other believers, how we should treat our enemies, our attitude to our boss and employees, what we should do with the gifts God has given us, the virtues we should seek to develop in our characters, our attitude to material possessions, how we should regard this life in relationship to the next, etc., etc. We don't need any special guidance to find out God's will about these things. All we need do is to read the Bible regularly and prayerfully and seek to obey the things that God teaches us from it. Much of God's will has already been made plain. It may not be *easy* to obey but that is another issue. Mark Twain once said, “It is not the things in the Bible that I don't understand that trouble me, but the things I do understand!” God gives us the Holy Spirit for the very purpose of enabling us to obey.

However, though the Bible is full of general principles of behaviour, it obviously doesn't give us specific instructions in many situations we may face. It tells us what our attitude to our work should be (Colossians 3:17,23,24), but it doesn't tell us whether we should be butchers, bakers or missionaries. It gives a minimum of guidance as to who a Christian should marry (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14), if that is our calling, but doesn't tell us who that individual should be. We face decisions constantly which the Bible doesn't give us specific guidance about. However, if we are making a genuine effort to apply to our lives those things he *has* revealed, we can confidently expect him to guide us in more specific issues.

God may use a specific sign as he did to guide the wise men to Jerusalem (the star in the heavens), but it is interesting to note that in this instance he used the scriptures to guide them to from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. God may use miraculous means to guide when it is necessary, but cannot be expected to do so when the Bible and sanctified judgement is enough. As John Stott,

the eminent Anglican clergyman and biblical scholar, has put it: “Generally speaking, it is correct to say that the will of God for the people of God is in the Word of God.”

Most of God’s guidance is unconscious

The writer of Proverbs says, **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths”** (Proverbs 3:5,6—NIV footnote). If we exercise trust and acknowledge him in every area of our lives, his promise is that he will guide us. We don't have to be aware that that is happening.

Again, in a challenging passage in Isaiah, chapter 58, God says to his people that if their concern is for the needy in society, the oppressed, the naked and the hungry, then one of the results will be that **“The Lord will guide you always”** (See Isaiah 58:6-12). In other words, if our motives and goals are right, guidance is something that will just happen. God has promised that. It is a bit like riding a bike. Provided it is moving in the right direction, the steering tends to take care of itself. However, we can't steer a bike that is going nowhere. We will fall off. There are few things I can do to please God more than to trust him. **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (Hebrews 11:6).

Often it will only be as we look back that we see he has been guiding us.

God expects us to use our intelligence

God says, **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle”** (Psalm 32:8,9). Horses and mules need to be forcibly controlled. God expects us, however, to use our intelligence. The New Testament says quite a bit about the use of our minds. We are to love God with all our mind as well as our heart (Matthew 22:37).

I have been personally helped by a comment of Hudson Taylor who founded the China Inland Mission. In his younger days as a Christian, things used to come to him very clearly. The Lord would often guide him in very specific ways. “But,” he said, “now as I have gone on, and God has used me more and more, I seem often to be like a man going along in a fog. I do not know what to do.” In his later years, when he was responsible for the leadership of a thousand missionaries in China, he often found guidance more difficult. Why? Simply because, being as mature as he was in his knowledge of the Bible and the ways of God, the Lord trusted him to make the right decisions.

Maybe this is a mark of maturity. After all, when our children are small we have to *tell* them what is right and wrong. If they have been trained well, then they will be able in maturity to make their own right decisions. A contemporary writer on spirituality, Eugene Peterson, puts this well. He writes:

The early stages of Christian belief are not infrequently marked with miraculous signs and exhilarations of spirit. But as discipleship continues the sensible comforts [those that depend on our physical senses] gradually disappear, for God does not want us neurotically dependent upon him, but willingly trustful in him. And so he weans us.

God calls us to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). An interesting analogy on this same question is given by Stephen Board, Executive Editor of Eternity magazine:

For some time I have been turning over in my mind the styles different people adopt in living the Christian life. A common one is what I would call the script approach. Before you make a move, you check the script. God's wonderful plan for your life reveals itself to you step by step and you place your feet in the steps like an Arthur Murray dance lesson.

The other style I would call the canvas approach. Here God provides us with a space, large or small, on which he can paint "something beautiful for God," to borrow Malcolm Muggeridge's phrase. This seems much more compatible with the parable of the talents, in which the wise person looked at what he had and invested it—but the wicked servant passively withheld investing because the master had provided no script. And wouldn't we all love seeing now what works God has before ordained that we should walk in?

Oh, the script style is the path of security.

In other words, if God gives us wisdom to know what is the best path to take, that is just as much his guidance as giving us some special sign. This may involve hard work in grappling with issues, seeking advice and weighing up the options; but all this is part of our growing up.

God doesn't show us more than we need to know

In this way we learn to trust him. I have found helpful the analogy provided by Peter's deliverance from prison in Acts, chapter twelve. The angel comes to Peter and wakes him up. His chains fall off. We could liken this to conversion when we awake spiritually, and the power of those things that bind us, and keep us from being what God intended, are broken. Peter then follows the angel with no understanding as to how he is to get out of the prison, or where he is going. In fact, initially he thinks he is dreaming.

However, when he reaches the door of the cell, it opens. He keeps following, and when he reaches the end of the corridor the next door opens. There is still the massive gate of the prison. However, when they come to it, it opens too. *But doors do not open till we reach them.*

However much we would like to know things in advance, there is no need for it. God wants us to trust him to open the right doors at the right time. And if we get to a door and it doesn't open, maybe God is asking us to wait as he has some more work to do on us first. Or maybe he is turning us in another direction. We mustn't gaze so longingly on the door that is closed that we miss the one that is open. It may be O.K. sometimes to rattle a handle, but not to kick it down! God will open it in his time, if that is right.

Our task is to follow and trust. It is his responsibility to open doors.

Don't tell God how he must guide

Maybe it is sometimes right to ask God for a sign. There is one instance in the Bible where someone did ask for a sign and specified what that sign was to be. It is in the story of Gideon (Judges 6:36-40). However, I note that in this case God had already made it very clear to Gideon what he was to do. He graciously acceded to Gideon's request, but only to take away any excuse Gideon might have for not obeying. How God guides is his responsibility. Ours is to keep informed and listening.

Oswald Chambers, whose posthumously published writings have been helpful to so many, said:

We are apt to forget the mystic supernatural touch of God which comes with his call. If a man can tell you how he got the call of God and all about it, it is questionable whether he ever had the call. A call to be a professional man may come in that explicit way, but the call of God is much more supernatural. The realisation of the call of God in a man's life may come with a sudden thunder clap or by a gradual dawning, but in whatever way it comes, it comes with the under-current of the supernatural, almost the uncanny. It is always accompanied with a glow—something that cannot be put into words. We need to keep the atmosphere of our mind prepared by the Holy Spirit lest we forget the surprise of the touch of God on our lives.

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With these five basic principles in mind, what guidelines can we use to determine whether we are on the right track on specific issues, where choices have to be made. I would suggest four.

Four guidelines for specific decisions

Does my reading of the Bible give me any guidance on an issue?

God can and does sometimes give particular guidance through our regular reading of the Bible. A verse or passage may speak directly to our need at the moment. We must beware of taking passages out of context, but if we read the Bible prayerfully we can expect this kind of guidance.

We can be sure that God will not guide us *contrary* to any principle that is taught in the Bible.

Do I have peace of mind about a particular decision?

Paul says: **“Let the peace that comes from Christ control your thoughts”** (Colossians 3:15). It is interesting that the word translated “control” here has the initial meaning of awarding prizes in a contest and so comes to mean “to judge, decide, control”. God’s peace is to be a controlling influence in my life. Do I really feel O.K. about something I want to do? There are times when we need to make a move, but if we lack peace about something it may be better to wait. A comment by John Stott on this issue may be helpful:

It is a mistake to be in a hurry or to grow impatient with God. It took him about 2,000 years to fulfil his promise to Abraham in the birth of Christ. It took him 80 years to prepare Moses for his life work. It takes him about 25 years to make a mature human being. So then, if we have to make a decision by a certain deadline, we must make it. But if not, and the way forward is uncertain, it is wiser to wait. I think God says to us what he said to Joseph and Mary when sending them into Egypt with the child Jesus: “Stay there until I tell you.” In my experience more mistakes are made by precipitate action than by procrastination.

Of one thing we can be fairly certain. If God is indeed calling us, we will not rest until we have answered.

Circumstances

Again, this is a question of open and shut doors. We can trust God to order the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We may recognise his hand in events that others may call coincidences. Often the only awareness of his guidance will be “the way things work out”.

The advice of others

We need to trust God to give others wisdom as well as ourselves! In Acts 13:2 we read of an instance where God guided a group: **“While they were worshipping the Lord and going without eating, the Holy Spirit told them, ‘Appoint Barnabas and Saul to do the work for which I have chosen them’”** (Acts 13:2).

This tends to be a neglected area of teaching on guidance. David Pawson, English Baptist Bible teacher, gives a good illustration of this. He knew a young man who did not know whether he was called to the ministry or not. Sometimes he thought about it, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he was sure he ought to and sometimes he was full of doubts. So David said to him, "I want you to speak to the whole church and tell them you don't know whether you ought to be a minister." And he did this at a church meeting. For three months the whole church prayed about it and sought the Lord's will. At the end of three months, the church unanimously said, "Ken, you are needed in the ministry," and he went. He was still not sure himself, but he said, "This is how Saul and Barnabas were called. The Holy Spirit said, 'Separate these young men...' Your will be done."

We need each other. David Womack, Assembly of God pastor in California, gives a timely warning:

Alone I cannot serve the Lord effectively, and he will spare no pains to teach me this. He will bring things to an end, allowing doors to close and leaving me ineffectively knocking my head against a wall, until I realise that I need the help of the Body [the Christian fellowship] as well as of the Lord.

A useful summary

One of the most useful summaries on guidance I have come across, comes from Henry Drummond. He was a Scottish professor who assisted D. L. Moody with his evangelistic campaigns in Britain in the 1870s and who had a very fine ministry to young men. On the flyleaf of his Bible, he wrote 8 maxims for knowing the will of God:

- Pray.
- Think.
- Talk to wise people; but do not regard their decision as final.
- Beware of the bias of your own will; but do not be too much afraid of it. (God never unnecessarily thwarts a man's nature and likings, and it is a mistake to think that his will is in the line of the disagreeable.)
- Meantime do the next thing (for doing God's will in small things is the best preparation for knowing it in the great things).
- When decision and action are necessary, go ahead.
- Never reconsider the decision when it is finally acted upon.
- You will probably not find out till afterwards, perhaps long afterwards, that you have been led at all.

A challenge from the New Testament

Perhaps the most comprehensive passage on guidance in the New Testament is in Romans 12:1,2: **“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”**

“Therefore” in this passage applies to all that has gone before in the letter. Paul has been talking about our total forgiveness and acceptance in Christ, the reality of his love, his gift of the Holy Spirit, our privileges as sons of God, our eternal security and the glory to come. Our response to that should be our total dedication to him (you can't give more than your body!). Often it is our lack of commitment that is the real problem. John Stott says:

An unsundered will is the most serious of all obstacles to the discovery of God's will. If God does not reveal his truth to those who are not willing to believe it, neither does he reveal his will to those unwilling to do it.

I once heard Billy Graham say, “If you want God's will badly enough you can't miss it!”

The second thing Paul tells us to do is to adjust our thinking so we see things from God's point of view, rather than from the way the world sees them. The best way of doing this is to immerse ourselves in the thinking of the Bible.

If we do these two things, then we will be able to test and approve God's will. Note that it is something to be tested. It is not handed to us on a plate.

Final thoughts

If we feel we have missed God's will for us at any point, we mustn't think that is the end of our usefulness to him. Alexander Whyte once described the “perseverance of the saints” as falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up, all the way to heaven! God specialises in using even our faults and failings to mould us and make us into the sort of people he can do something with. If we love him, and it is our desire to do his will, we can be sure he can make something of us that will bring glory to him. Someone has said, “Our God is a God of a thousand options.” However, we only have one life to live. Let us offer it to him. The life that counts for eternity is the life that is centred in the will of God.

On August 23, 1864, Abraham Lincoln wrote a resolution on a piece of paper which he folded and asked his cabinet to endorse with their signatures

without reading. They did so, committing themselves blindly to whatever he had resolved. If our trust in God allows us to make that sort of commitment to him as regards our future, we may well find it is the beginning of a great adventure that will, despite its difficulties, be deeply satisfying. The final outcome is guaranteed. This God is worthy of our trust.

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