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Books quoted in this presentation:

Decision Making and the Will of God – A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View

Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson

Team Ministry – A Guide to Spiritual Gifts and Lay Involvement

Larry Gilbert

Circumstances and the Role of God

John Boykin

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Some statements and observations from Decision Making and the Will of God, A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View by Gary Friesen.

Regarding the question, “Does God have a plan for my life?” (*individual plan*)

“We...may now turn to biblical examples that some construe to indicate an ideal plan for all believers. Examples in Scripture must always be handled with care. For many of the events recorded in the Bible are included primarily because they were unique occurrences, or at least highly unusual. What must be determined in each case is whether the example referred to was intended to illustrate normative Christian behavior or experience.

(For instance) Should believers today practice the holy kiss (I Corinthians 16:20)? Should one expect a light and a voice from heaven to accompany a call to the ministry (Acts 9:3-4)? God spoke to Balaam through a donkey (Numbers 22:28-30). Should each believer keep one in his back yard just in case? These suggestions may be extreme, but they remind us that while scriptural examples have real value, they must be interpreted with great care.

The scriptural examples adduced by the traditional view in support of an individual will invariably cite instances where God gave guidance, supernaturally revealed, that was much more specific and detailed than the moral will of God. The Old Testament is replete with accounts of men and women who received direct guidance leading them to take on a certain vocation (leader, prophet, king, etc.), or do a certain thing (e.g., Jonah 1:2).

Paul received numerous divine directions which are recorded in the book of Acts. He was called, literally, to be an apostle by vocation (Galatians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; Acts 9). He was sent out as a missionary (Acts 13:1-2). During his missionary work he was directed to specific places of ministry and away from others (Acts 16:6-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11). Peter was told to go to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:17-20) after Cornelius was directed to find Peter (Acts 10:5). Later Peter was led out of Herod’s prison (Acts 12:7-8). Philip was directed to a desert road (Acts 8:26) to join a particular chariot (Acts 8:29), from which he was dispatched to the town of Azotus (Acts 8:39-40). Ananias was ordered to find Saul of Tarsus after the Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:10-16). There can be no doubt that these occurrences consisted of guidance that was more detailed and specific than the general moral

commands of Scripture. The question is whether such examples prove that God has an individual will for every believer.

Consistently Sporadic

The traditional view has some weaknesses at this point. The first weakness is that the number of recorded cases is not sufficient to constitute normative experience. In the first thirty years of the church's history covered by the book of Acts, there were at most fifteen to twenty instances of direct, personal guidance. Many of these directions were given to the Apostle Paul. Yet within the framework of his total ministry, relatively few of his decisions were determined on the basis of such leading. Most of the time he had to weigh the apparent merits of various options before settling on a course of action. In other words, when he had a decision to make, he had to decide (cf. Acts. 15:36; Acts 20: 16; Romans 1 : 10-13; 1 Corinthians 16:4-9; 2 Corinthians 1 : 15-2:4). The cases of direct guidance are the exception to the rule, even in Paul's case.

The second weakness of arguing for an individual will from such examples is that most of the recipients of specific guidance occupied a special place in the outworking of God's program. They were ordinary people selected by God to play an extraordinary role in His plan.

Most of the examples in the book of Acts occur in the ministries of Peter and Paul— apostles who received special revelation because of their unique office in the church. The nonapostolic recipients of direct guidance— Philip, Ananias, Cornelius, and the church at Antioch — found themselves at strategic historical crossroads in the spread of the gospel beyond the house of Israel. By virtue of their reception of divine revelation and their obedience to it, they became key figures in the worldwide propagation of the gospel.

Old Testament examples are usually prophets, judges, kings, or other leaders rather than the general populace. This is partially explained by the fact that the greatest part of biblical history focuses on “special” believers. Still from the standpoint of logic, to argue from such special cases that God has an individual will for all believers is unwarranted in the absence of further substantiation from the epistles.

The third weakness of the traditional view on this question is that the examples are not sufficiently comprehensive. That is, guidance was only provided for a handful of decisions. God's individual will for the believer's life is supposed to cover every decision that is made. But the examples do not touch upon the ordinary decisions in life. In fact, most of the instances in Acts had some direct bearing on the spread of the gospel. In other words, specific leading was given by God to insure expanding evangelistic outreach during the formative years of the church. Such a purpose is clearly seen in the guidance given to Peter, Cornelius, Philip, Ananias, Barnabas, the church at Antioch, and Paul. In the book of Acts, there is no indication of any specific word from God on the more ordinary decisions of life.

What we have seen so far is that the examples of detailed divine guidance in Scripture are infrequent in appearance, limited in scope, and directed to persons who play a special role in the outworking of God's program on earth. Such selectivity on the part of God seems to weaken rather than strengthen the support for the concept of an individual will for all Christians.

There is one more factor worthy of consideration — namely, the means of communication. The examples indicate too much in this case. For, on the one hand, the traditional view holds that supernatural revelation is not normative experience for all believers. On the other hand, all of the examples which are selected to support individual guidance are clearly instances of supernatural revelation.

In the book of Acts, such guidance came through visions (Acts 9:10-16; 10:3-8; 10:17; 16:9-10; 18:9; 22:17-21), angelic messenger (Acts 8:26; 12:7-8; 27:23), physical miracle (Acts 8:39), an audible voice from God (8:29; 9:3-6; 10:19-20; 23:11) or a prophet who had received direct revelation (Acts 21:10-11). Are there other recorded examples where detailed guidance was given through some means other than supernatural revelation? No. From the examples that are given, one could argue that God may give a believer guidance that is more specific than that found in the Bible. But if He does, it will be through supernatural means.

The absence of any indisputable examples of the traditional view's approach to decision making is striking. At no point in Scripture do we read of a believer asking, "What is God's individual will for me in this matter?" Much of the terminology found in presentations of the traditional view is absent, either in vocabulary or in concept, from the pages of the Bible. One does not read of the "specific will," "center of God's will," "right decision," "putting out a fleece," or even "finding God's will."

But even more startling is the fact that no decision is ever explained on the basis that it was "God's individual will." Today we commonly hear people say, "I did thus and such because I knew it was God's will for me." Or, "I felt in my heart God wanted me to do it." The apostles often gave reasons for their decisions, but never in such terms.⁵ If their decisions were based upon God's individual will, it seems remarkable that they never mentioned it. What is so common and essential to the traditional view is passed over in silence in the New Testament.

What we have shown, then, is that there are no normative examples of ordinary believers making decisions in the manner outlined by the traditional view. Proponents of that view have had to "water down" the patently supernatural examples to support what they contend is normative guidance. Such an approach to biblical interpretation is highly questionable, to say the least.

To take an example, we read in Acts 8 that God gave supernatural guidance to Philip leading him to explain the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch. Is it valid, on that basis, to deduce that God will similarly put impressions in the heart of the believer to point out individuals to whom they should witness? Unless there is some specific teaching of Scripture that promises such guidance (and we contend there is none), such a deduction hardly seems warranted. The difference between "an angel of the Lord" who spoke to Philip (Acts 8:26) and an inward impression in the heart of a contemporary believer is just too great.

Sometimes the life of Christ is cited as an example of individual guidance. All will agree that Christ is unique, being the God-man. But even with this uniqueness, guidance came to Christ through the Scriptures or through direct revelation. And direct revelation was fitting with Christ since He is Prophet, Priest, and King.

To sum up, a survey of some of the biblical examples of detailed guidance has shown that they do not prove the existence of an individual will of God for every believer. What such examples show is that God has broken into history at infrequent times to reveal detailed guidance through supernatural revelation to selected people usually for the purpose of evangelism. The exceptional proves only the exceptional. Such guidance is not normative according to any viewpoint. Nor is it necessary for normal decision making in the Christian life.

Although the examples do not prove an individual will of God, in fairness to the traditional view it must also be said that they do not disprove it either. The direct teaching of the Word of God must act as the final arbitrator.

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Some statements and observations from Team Ministry, A Guide to Spiritual Gifts and Lay Involvement by Larry Gilbert.

What the Will of God is NOT...

The Will of God for Your Life is Not Bad. (Galatians 1:4 *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”* NIV)

God’s Will For Your Life is Not Fixed.

God’s Will For Your Life is Not Lost. (Psalms 40:8 – *“I desire to do your will, O my God; your law (is) within my heart.”* (“is” was added...) NIV)

God’s Will For Your Life is Not Revealed To Others.

God’s Will Is Not Based On Circumstances. (Judges 6:37-40 *“look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.”* 38 *And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew — a bowlful of water.*

39 *Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.”* 40 *That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.* NIV) - fleece/circumstances occurs only here in the entire Bible- Not your everyday occurrence/cowards method to “test” God... weak.

God’s Will For Your Life is Not Contrary to God’s Word.

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What the Will of God IS...

God’s will for your life is that you be SAVED (2Peter 3:9 *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* NIV)

God’s will for your life is that you be SANCTIFIED (1Thessalonians 4:3-4 *“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable...”* NIV)

God’s will for your life is that you be SPIRIT FILLED (Ephesians 5:17-18 *“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”* NIV)

God's will for your life is that you are SUBMISSIVE (1Peter 2:13-15 *"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. NIV)*

God's will for your life is that you SUFFER (1Peter 4:19 *"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."* NIV
1Peter 3:17 *"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."*

God's will for your life is that you are SERVING (Romans 12:1-3 *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 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. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."* NIV)

The following quote is a great one and the application of this has allowed me an immense amount of guilt-free freedom to exercise my God-given wisdom in making decisions that I know are Biblically-based and within the known Will of God. However, it must be remembered, you cannot exercise this freedom of "whatever you desire!" without the pre-conditions being met (saved, sanctified, Spirit-filled, submissive, suffering, and serving). Notice the "IFs" in the statement. –Les Farthing

"IF you are SAVED, IF you are SANCTIFIED, IF you are SPIRIT FILLED, IF you are SUBMISSIVE, IF you are SUFFERING, IF you are SERVING, then (and ONLY then) God's will for your life is WHATEVER YOU DESIRE!"

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How, then, does God communicate with us? (Proverbs 3:6 *"...in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight/smooth."* NIV)

"God doesn't write on the wall with His finger anymore and the U.S. postal service doesn't extend to Heaven, nor can we get direction from super-bass voices from above as in the movies. Without these, all that is left is the Word of God and the Spirit of God. The Spirit indwells us and influences our innermost being. If God wills that you do something contrary to your desire, He will simply change your desire (Philippians 2:13 *"...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."* NIV).

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Food for thought... (time for the open mind!)

Some quotes from the book, **Decision Making and the Will of God** by Gary Freisen

"Perhaps no **myth** more strongly influences us (Christians) than our understanding of how to know the will of God."

"The Bible does not provide a map for life – only a compass"

The guidance God gives to Christians may be more general and less specific than previously thought and “may give increasing freedom and responsibility to believers in their decision making”

“...God guides through the basic principles of life He has given in the Bible (His moral will), thereby teaching His children to wisely use their freedom in the application of those principles to the decisions of life.” (wisdom).

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A Decision-Making Chart from the book, Decision Making and the Will of God by Gary Freisen

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands and principles of God (His moral will) are to be obeyed.2. In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (non-moral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action. Any decision made within the moral will of God is acceptable to God.3. In nonmoral decisions, the objective of the Christian is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual expediency.4. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God’s sovereign will as it touches each decision. |
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Some quotes from the book, Circumstances and the Role of God, by John Boykin

“Many believers become paralyzed when faced with a decision because, try as they might, they simply haven’t a clue what God’s will is.”

“Looking to God for...direction in each situation is only a short step away from looking to Him for written rules and regulations for each situation. Both derive from a legalistic outlook, both seek to evade the responsibility of making mature decisions, and both miss the point of how God relates to his people.”

“The number of spiritual *accomplishments* that result from following some inner leading (still, small voice) are no more in number than the spiritual *failures* that result from following that same inner leading.”

“What is so striking, as one searches the pages of the New Testament, is the glaring **absence** of wording or statements which reflect the idea that the key to making the “right” decision is the discernment of God’s ideal plan or finding the center of His will.”