

# Steps for Guidance in the Journey of Life - Chapter 1

## Does the Lord Really Guide?

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‘Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way’ (*Exodus 33.13*).

Only thirty years ago the question that heads this opening chapter would never have been asked by Bible-believing Christians, because the need to seek God’s guidance in all the major decisions of life was firmly fixed in the minds of those who followed Christ. But the great decline of the quality of Bible teaching in the last few decades has brought with it the rejection of this precious and fundamental principle – that God has a specific plan and purpose for the life of each of his children, and that they should seek his direction in all the great issues of life.

The first chapter of this book will look at the new view, and prove that the old view is the true biblical position. Clearly, if we want to know about God’s guidance, this issue must be settled first. Does God guide his people or not? Should we seek his will in the pivotal decisions of life, or should we make up our own minds? Seeking God’s guidance does not mean that the details of his way for us will always be made known to us, but that we will conscientiously seek his direction, by appealing to him to guide and help us as we subdue selfish desires, weigh pros and cons, apply the principles of the Word, and heed the advice of godly associates.

This first chapter is different from the rest of the book because several leading contenders for the new view are named and quoted, as there seemed to be no other way of making the issues clear. Although this chapter will firmly refute the ideas of those named, nothing is implied against their personal faith and sincerity. However, this writer believes that the new view is a grave error and must be resisted strenuously as it is utterly destructive to biblical obedience and discipleship.

### **The ‘New View’ is Launched**

The full public ‘launching’ of the new view occurred in 1980, when two American evangelicals, Garry Friesen and Robin Maxson, issued their 452-page challenge to the traditional view of guidance under the title, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. [See endnote 1] Overnight, this book became one of the most influential publications in the evangelical world. The authors set out to present ‘a biblical alternative to the traditional view’, and began by sweeping away the time-honoured teaching that God has a particular will for each of his children.

The same tune was soon taken up by other writers, an example being a book by an evangelical academic, Arthur Johnson, entitled – *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism*. [See endnote 2] Much of this book was wholesome material, defining and exposing mysticism, and showing how it had penetrated evangelicalism (particularly through the teachings of Watchman Nee and the charismatic movement). However, the author also fired a massive broadside at the traditional view of guidance, quoting Friesen and Maxson with approval, and both misrepresenting and decrying the traditional approach.

It has been disturbing to see an increasing tide of opinion now running against ‘specific’ personal guidance. To some extent this has come about as a reaction to the brash claims of some believers that they have the direct leading of the Spirit to guide them, but it has been very wrong to deny God’s role in guidance altogether.

In their book, Friesen and Maxson assert repeatedly that ‘the idea of an individual will of God for every detail of a person’s life is not found in Scripture.’ [Italics ours.] But in making such statements, they show how much they have missed the point of the traditional view, for this has never said that God guides in every little detail of life, but in the major issues, as we shall explain. Friesen and Maxson dismiss almost contemptuously the numerous biblical instances of how God has given guidance to his servants, arguing that these represented unique occurrences, and were infrequent and sporadic. In other words, they are not relevant for today. We most strongly disagree, believing with the overwhelming majority of historic Christian teachers that the purpose of these biblical examples is to teach that the Lord does guide his people.

Friesen and Maxson dismiss well-loved texts such as *Proverbs 3.5-6* – ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.’ This passage, they claim, has nothing at all to do with guidance, but their ‘exposition’ is horrendously shallow, failing even to account for Solomon’s choice of words – ways and paths. (The significance of these words will be examined later in this chapter.)

### **‘Christians are Free to Choose’**

The general idea of Friesen and Maxson is that Christians are entirely free to choose for themselves when they make decisions, whether large or small, provided that in making their choice they take account of the moral guidance of the Bible. Should we marry, and whom should we marry? They insist that the New Testament ‘gives no clue that God’s individual will determines these decisions. Rather, when these subjects are touched, the area of freedom allowed by God includes both whether to marry and whom to marry . . . the classic example of the principle of freedom within the moral will of God.’

It is tempting to deal with the many examples of mistaken interpretation and faulty ideas with which the Friesen-Maxson book teems, but our purpose in this chapter will be to establish the true nature and scope of divine guidance. To summarise, the arguments presented by Friesen and Maxson and other authors against the seeking of personal guidance from God amount to the following:

- (1) Christians are regarded by God as mature adults capable of making their own decisions.
- (2) God gives his people the privilege of personal choice in both major and minor matters.
- (3) God wants his people to learn to make sensible decisions in the light of the moral and general rules of the Bible.
- (4) God’s purpose is that his people should grow in wisdom and responsibility, and not ‘hand over’ the decisions to him.

There is no doubt that this new view has already gravely damaged the dedication and commitment of many Christians. It is obvious that as soon as we no longer respect God’s specific will for our lives, we will find ourselves at the mercy of our personal inclinations and desires. These are bound to influence our decisions more highly than they should, and we will find it easy to justify and indulge our whims. Also, as soon as we are freed from the duty of submitting to and standing loyal to God’s will, we will more easily sheer away from hard callings and irksome situations. It is noticeable that wherever the new view prevails, there are fewer people toiling in the work of the Lord, fewer Sunday School teachers, fewer district visitors, and far greater attachment on the part of believers to comfort-seeking and elaborate home-building.

The Friesen-Maxson book provides us with an account of how one of the authors set about seeking a new teaching post in a Bible college, and what we see is an attitude belonging more to worldly

careerism than to the ministry of the Word. It is a sad illustration of the 'do-as-you-like' approach which comes in as soon as we cease to believe that God has a plan for us. It is interesting to note that these authors believe that God calls men to the ministry in a general manner only, and not to specific churches, nor does he have any jurisdiction over the duration of a ministry. Under the new view no Christian worker, ministerial or 'lay', need fear abandoning his duties out of any sense of obligation to God's will.

### **Criticism of Traditional Guidance**

In presenting their case most teachers of the new view misrepresent and ridicule the traditional view. One caricature of traditional guidance reduces it to three stages: (1) consult the Bible; (2) see God's signals in your circumstances; and (3) watch for good inner feelings, eg: being at peace. Such a simple plan for seeking guidance is obviously inadequate, and the traditional biblical approach goes far beyond this, as we shall see.

The most common argument employed against the traditional view of guidance claims that it is invalid because it cannot be applied to all decisions, large and small. Arthur Johnson, for example, derides traditional believers for seeking God's guidance on major decisions and not on minor ones. He writes: 'They struggle to find God's unique decision for their life choices. However, very few try to follow this scheme in the little decisions: which shoe to put on first in the morning, whether to cut an orange for breakfast or have juice instead.' Dr Johnson seems to think that if God does not want to decide the breakfast menu, then he will not want to direct our marriage decision either.

Another critic makes the same point about toothpaste, asking scornfully how we find out which brand or flavour God wants us to buy. He reasons that if the toothpaste decision is to be taken by us in a common-sense manner, why not all the major decisions also? On what biblical basis, these critics demand, do we distinguish between decisions for which God has a specific will, and those for which he does not? The answer to this criticism will be obvious from the Scripture passages which follow in a few pages.

One further criticism of traditional guidance remains to be mentioned. The critics say that if believers are inefficient at seeking God's 'perfect will', or make some vital mistake so that they miss the mark, this introduces a wrong outcome called 'God's second-best', a situation which cannot be reconciled with the concept of a sovereign God. Is this criticism valid? Is it possible to fall into an inferior course of action which thwarts God's will for us? Of course not, because there is a sense in which a believer is never out of the will of God. If we fail to seek the guidance of the Lord properly, and follow instead some whim of our own, then the 'wrong' outcome is the will of God. In these circumstances it is the will of God that we should experience hard consequences, some heartache perhaps, including the loss of spiritual opportunities, or even some harder chastisement.

It is the will of God, planned from before time began, that we should pass through experiences that will teach us true obedience, and sanctify us. Therefore, even when we are wrong we will never thwart his holy and wise will. Romans 8.28 says – 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose', and even mistakes will be turned to our ultimate sanctification.

A more recent book promoting the new antagonism to divine guidance (*Is That You Lord?* by Dr Gary E. Gilley), puts great emphasis on *Deuteronomy 29.29* – 'The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever.' In a bizarre interpretation Dr Gilley claims this means that if the believer is confronted by a decision which is not explicitly resolved in the Bible, he must not seek the mind of God, but make his own

decision. He says that to seek the unrevealed and therefore secret will of God would be sheer mysticism or pietism. (Another recent writer employing the same text says it would be no better than paganism.) In other words, because the name of a Christian's future wife or husband is not revealed in the Bible, that person cannot seek direction from the Lord. Both the writers just referred to are reformed in conviction, showing that this new viewpoint has spread even here, despite its unbiblical, unspiritual, and unpuritan character.

According to such writers, if we seek a job, because no modern employer is specifically named in the Bible, our future is part of the unseen, secret will of God, and so there can be no guidance for us. They repeatedly insist that God has not given any instruction in the New Testament for believers to seek his will about any of the great issues of life, not where to live, whom to marry, not even whether to seek to enter the ministry of the Word, but we believe this is error on a major scale, that will push believers further and further away from a life of obedient devotion to God.

### **The Example of Christ our Lord**

In answer to the claim that there is no New Testament instruction to seek guidance, we must obviously turn first to the all-sufficient and perfect example of our divine forerunner, our Lord and Saviour, who scrupulously carried out the precise will of his Father when he lived a perfect life of obedience as our representative. How can these authors say that seeking to follow the purpose and will of God is not in the New Testament? Astonishingly, they appear to have no theology of Christ in this matter, and this shows how far they have fallen to a 'new evangelical' view of Scripture. 'Not my will, but thine, be done' was the Lord's cry to the Father as he represented his people, and lived a perfect life on our behalf.

'Verily, verily,' he declared, 'the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise . . . I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me' (*John 5.19 and 30*). These sentiments were reiterated by the Lord in *John 6.38*, and *8.28*, and they constitute the unassailable theological basis for submitting ourselves to the specific will of God for our lives, in all major ways, routes, crossroads and turnings.

The fact that the Lord's perfect obedience was an essential part of the plan of salvation shows that this is the standard required of us. The servant is not greater than his Lord (said Christ), and it is inconceivable that he would need to live in such obedience in order to be our Saviour, but that we could then do just as we pleased, as long as we kept to moral behaviour. On the contrary, the life of our Saviour is compelling for us, and we also must pray, 'Not my will, but thine, be done.'

Further proof of our duty of submission to God's will is the notion of discipleship taught through the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. A disciple was one who literally, physically followed his chosen teacher, hanging on his every word and doing his bidding. The words of Christ recorded in *John 10* apply far beyond the moment of salvation: 'To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him.' This undoubtedly reflects the entire Christian life, and we surely see the words of *Psalms 23* enshrined in this tenth chapter of *John*.

The Lord's emphatic promise of answered prayer in *John 15.7* certainly includes the seeking of God's overruling guidance – 'If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' We will frequently be asking, 'Lord, what would thou have me to do in my life, in my career? Whom should I marry? How should I serve thee? Lord, guide me, sharpen my mental processes, give me good insight and judgement, overrule my wrong inclinations, and deliver me from false turnings.'

Here is the Puritan concept of guidance as expressed by Richard Baxter in his great *Christian Directory*:—

‘When God’s ownership of you is grasped and consented to, it will make you aware how much all your powers of body and soul are due to his service, no earthly thing having equal rights to your thoughts, or even a glance of your affections, or a minute of your time. Keep accounts before God. Let God have what is his. Self-resignation to his glorious will is essential.’

That is Puritan thinking, exactly the view being scrapped today, but we must hold on to it, because this and this alone is real Christian living, and its loss will make for unapplied, uncommitted, unused, unassured and eventually very worldly Christian lives.

### **The ‘Roads and Routes’ Principles of Guidance**

We now turn to a number of Scripture passages to establish that believers must seek the help of God to be guided in all decisions relating to life’s overall pathway or direction. First, the prayer of Moses in *Exodus 33.13* is very important to us: ‘Shew me now thy way.’ The Lord answered, ‘My presence shall go with thee.’ The significant point in these words is that all the travels of Moses would be directed by God, and he would have guidance or overruling for his journey. Ahead lay the wanderings in the wilderness; thirty-eight years of bewildering travelling around, but however confusing and protracted these might seem to be, Moses would be most surely steered by the Lord, because he sought this.

Moses did not ask that the Lord would reveal to them their precise daily timetables, or give detailed guidance concerning all the lesser domestic and practical aspects of daily life, but that he would have guidance for their journey, route and destination. Those critics of divine guidance who scoff at Christians when they decide for themselves their daily menus, and yet seek help from God about career and marriage, have failed to observe the most basic feature of these great guidance texts. We are taught to seek the particular guidance of God on all matters relating to the journey of life – its crossroads and forking routes. The key lesson to be gleaned from *Exodus 33.13* is the use of the word way – ‘Shew me now thy way,’ which Moses meant entirely literally. The Hebrew word translated way refers to a trodden road. (The noun comes from the verb to tread.) Moses asked for the Lord’s appointed path for his people.

But are we right to take the experience of Moses as an illustration of how God will guide present-day Christians? Yes we are, because the Bible says so. In *1 Corinthians 10.1-12*, Paul makes it very clear that the journeyings of the children of Israel are specifically recorded as lessons for Gospel-age believers. He says – ‘all these things happened unto them for ensamples [examples or patterns]: and they are written for our admonition.’ In other words, the pathway or route of Moses and the Israelites represents the journey of life of present-day believers.

It is not hard, surely, to distinguish between routine matters, and matters directly relating to the journey of life. Daily food obviously does not relate to the direction of life, nor to one’s spiritual calling and fruitfulness. Nor does the make of car one buys relate to the course of life, though the Lord will help the search and selection in answer to prayer. Like all expensive commodities, the buying of a car is subject to the rules of Scripture. Covetousness and unnecessary luxury and expense are to be avoided, but the decision is not central to the journey of life. On the other hand, one’s marriage-partner affects the entire journey of life. So does one’s career. Where a person chooses to live greatly affects the journey of life, and so does the choice of a church fellowship.

In another great guidance text, *Psalms 25.4*, David takes up the language of travel, although he is quite plainly not on a journey. He uses journeying words figuratively in reference to the direction

of his life, praying, 'Shew me thy ways [lit: trodden roads], O Lord; teach me thy paths' [lit: well-travelled roads, or routes]. He uses these terms just as Moses had used them. The 'new view' promoters say that David only asks to be shown a godly lifestyle, but this is a shrinking of the sense of the text amounting to vandalism, as the psalm is full of 'journey of life' language.

In *Psalms 27.11* David again uses the same terms: 'Teach me thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies.' The roads and routes terminology refers unmistakably to the major aspects of David's life.

In *Psalms 32.8-9* the word way appears once again, this time joined to an illustration of a horse or mule, which must be guided definitely and firmly by a rider or driver. Here, however, it is the Lord who says, 'I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye. Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.' David had sinned grievously, probably his sin involving Bathsheba, and now (as in *Psalms 51*) he is convicted of his sin, and repentant. He is no longer to be headstrong and stubborn, as a horse or mule, but responsive to the guidance of God.

Those who promote the new view of guidance say that this text is about David's behaviour only, and that it has nothing to do with guidance. But the point is that David had not only broken moral standards, he had also left off seeking and following God's will in the major matters of life; matters which determined the future of the kingdom as well as his personal future. He had not directed the battle, and had conducted an intimate relationship with lifelong implications. His immorality is an issue, but so also is his self-determination over where he would station himself, and what role he would undertake.

These verses, therefore, require that we submit to the direction of God in the road or course of life, which represents major matters. Just as the horse needs clear direction from its rider, so we need the guidance of the Lord in order to be of service to him. We are forbidden in this text to decide for ourselves, however wisely, where we will go and what we will do. The text is a command, a warning, and a promise, all combined.

In *Psalms 37.5* David gives us the well-loved words – 'Commit thy way [trodden road] unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.' Because this psalm contrasts the lifestyle of the believer and the unbeliever, some understand the term way] to refer to one's lifestyle, but as the 'journey of life' theme runs prominently through the psalm (the distant future reward of the righteous being referred to repeatedly) the primary sense is plainly the direction and route of life, or its major policy decisions. This is how Christian expositors have understood the text for centuries, but the 'new view' writers shamelessly tear it away.

*Psalms 48.14* introduces us to another important term: 'For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.' What kind of guide is in mind here? The Hebrew word means a driver, such as a person who drives animals or a chariot. In other words, this guide is a pilot or steerer; one who determines a direction. The context of the verse is the lovingkindness and faithfulness of God, who will determine the fortunes and affairs of his people all the way to the grave. To reduce this glorious language so as to make it apply solely to the guidance which God gives on moral standards (as Friesen and Maxson do) is once again to minimise the plain sense of the inspired Word of God. In this psalm the Lord has chosen a picture to describe his own role in the most important affairs of his people, and the picture is that of a guide who knows better than the animals which direction to take, and who has decided the course for the journey.

The familiar words of *Proverbs 3.5-6* bring us back to the language of the journey of life expressed

in ways and paths. Solomon says, ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.’ The opponents of the traditional view of guidance hotly contest the meaning of the word – direct. They do not want to see God directing life’s great decisions, and are quick to point out that the original Hebrew word means – make straight or smooth. Armed with this translation, they claim that the text merely promises a blessed life to all who keep God’s commandments.

But once again their interpretation amounts to a trivialisation of Scripture, the plain sense of which shows an ‘executive’, superintending God, who will make the highway of life straight. In other words, if we neglect to acknowledge the Lord as supreme Governor of our lives, our paths will twist and turn in a purposeless and frustrating manner, and we will have an inefficient and unproductive journey. If, however, we renounce our own will and self-determination, and we seek his rule, then he will order the highway of life so that our journey is direct and purposeful. The language is designed to show that God himself will do something about the route and nature of the journey. It is his prerogative to guide in the major decisions.

*Isaiah 58.11* is another great guidance promise which is taken away by the new-view writers. The prophet says: ‘And the Lord shall guide thee continually.’ The context (verses 6-12) is conditional. If the believer is full of compassion and mercy to the afflicted (which for us includes witnessing to the spiritually needy), then God will bless that believer with prominent influence, light, and guidance. Anti-guidance writers reduce this promise to the idea that if we are compassionate and good, then God will look after us, generalising away the guidance element. However, the Hebrew word translated guide means literally that. It would be used about a conquering king transporting prisoners into exile, in which case the conqueror determines the route – not the prisoners. The word is also used to mean govern, direct, constrain or restrict. It is a strong ‘executive’ word which undoubtedly means what it says – that the Lord will overrule and superintend the compassionate believer’s life according to his glorious, wise, kind and perfect will.

These familiar Old Testament passages unquestionably show that the direct guidance of God is to be sought or submitted to for major decisions rather than for minor ones. The taunt that it is impossible to distinguish between decisions which God should take for us, and decisions which we should take, is made in ignorance of the ‘roads and routes’ language of the Bible.

## **New Testament Guidance Texts**

What about the New Testament, and the bold claim of the new-view writers that there are no promises here that God will guide his people? We have already considered the supreme example of the Saviour, who submitted himself to the will of the Father as our representative. The distinction we have drawn between major matters of life’s direction, and lesser domestic matters is seen in the words of the Saviour, recorded in *Matthew 6.25*. Our Lord said: ‘Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?’ The purpose of the passage is to teach true priorities, that we must always put God first, and distinguish between affairs of the kingdom and affairs of earth. We should not be as concerned about food and clothing, or the next day’s domestic routine, as about obeying the Lord.

As believers, the Lord tells us to work out the practical and everyday matters of life without fuss, as responsible Christians. We are warned not to worry overmuch about these everyday material things, but simply to be conscientious and godly in our decisions. We know the standards of the Lord, for the rules of the Word are made clear elsewhere – don’t be greedy, don’t be proud, don’t be wasteful, don’t be worldly, and so on. However, the state of the soul, the service of God, and the

overall journey of a life given to him, require an altogether different level of thought, because these are not domestic matters, but great and long-term issues. Concerning these we must seek God's guidance and overruling.

*Acts 13.2-3* provides a view of God exercising his sovereign direction in the sending of the first Christian missionaries out from Antioch. As the leaders of the church 'ministered to the Lord, and fasted', the Holy Spirit said to them, 'Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.' To past generations of Bible believers this event taught that those who are to engage in missionary service must be called by God. They expected this call to be felt by the missionary, who would have a strong inner desire for this service, and also to be ratified by the leaders of his church, who would have proved his suitability, gifts and preparation.

However, to the promoters of the new view the call of Barnabas and Saul is yet another 'one-off' event. The assumption is made that they had a special call from God solely because they were the very first missionaries. It is also asserted that their call should be seen as a unique event because God's will was revealed by direct supernatural communication, which does not occur today. The conclusion is that we are no longer to look for a personal call of God, but simply to choose, by our own wisdom, the best-suited people as missionaries.

This new 'rationalistic' approach to choosing God's servants is further justified by the strange claim that Paul did not look for specific guidance from God in connection with other missionary events, such as when he proposed to take a second missionary journey (*Acts 15.36*), or when he took the decision to separate from Barnabas, or when he chose Silas as a fellow labourer (*Acts 15.39-40*). It is said that Paul came to all these decisions himself, as a mature and wise Christian.

Timothy (these writers say) was chosen by Paul to join his mission partly because he impressed Paul, and partly because he was well spoken of by others. Friesen and Maxson say: 'Again, it was demonstrated spiritual qualifications, rather than a call, that proved to be decisive.' However, these authors do not appear to know about *1 Timothy 4.14*, where we read that Timothy's gift, and its use, was as the result of God choosing him, and revealing his choice to the leaders of the church. By this one text their many pages of wrong interpretation are refuted and destroyed.

It would be time-consuming to correct all the spurious arguments presented by those who so vigorously oppose traditional guidance, but the few examples we have mentioned are typical. Where the biblical narrative omits any specific mention of Paul seeking guidance, these writers feel free to assume that he did not do so, and state this as a fact. In their view, Paul did not believe it was necessary to seek God's specific will over his movements, or 'staff' appointments, but only to take sensible and wise decisions. Whenever a scripture makes it clear that God made these decisions for his servants, the new-view writers dismiss the event as a 'one-off'. But this is no way to interpret Scripture! We must protest at the humanising, rationalising and minimising of the narratives of God's Word on the part of these writers who want to be free to make their own decisions and please themselves in their Christian lives.

To return to *Acts 13.2*, we have a precedent for church life in every age, not in the manner by which God made known his will, but in the principle that his will is paramount in the ministerial appointments of the ongoing church. It was God's will that missionaries should go, and he selected the very individuals. Because the missionaries knew God had called them, they could be sure of the rightness of their work no matter how great the difficulties along the way. With this assurance they would not easily abandon the work. They saw themselves as men under the direct orders and the protection of the Most High God, and as bearers of his personal commission.



## Paul's Word's on Guidance

We should listen to Paul who was able to say of himself as a preacher, 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me . . . putting me into the ministry.' He did not put himself into the ministry, rather the Lord did so. Similarly, he says: 'I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.' Every true minister is appointed by God, and Paul is therefore able to utter his grand words to Timothy: 'That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost . . . ' Timothy had his commission, not merely from his fellow believers, but from the Lord of the harvest.

The entire narrative of Paul's journeys is the record of a ministry under the constant superintendency and direction of the Holy Spirit. *Acts 16*, for example, tells of Paul and Silas on the occasion when they were 'forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia'. When they tried to go into Bithynia – 'the Spirit suffered them not.' Then came the Macedonian vision, and they knew that the Lord was calling them to preach the Gospel there. At every stage when major decisions were needed, the guidance of God was expressed, and is this not a lesson for us? No, say the teachers of the new view. Yes, says the Bible. The way God's guidance is communicated is different, because we are not apostles in receipt of direct voices and visions, but the principle remains. We earnestly pray and submit to God's direction, which comes as our minds are sharpened to see and weigh the issues, and also as circumstances are ordered to direct us in the right way. (We shall explore this more fully in later pages.)

We know that Paul's conduct is an authoritative example to us because several key texts command us to follow his actions, not only in the way he organised the churches of the New Testament, but in his spiritual approach to matters. [See endnote 3] The message of *Acts* is loud and clear, saying in effect, 'Subordinate yourselves to the direction of the Lord in the major decisions of life and of spiritual service.' *Acts 16* unquestionably shows us Paul's concern to discern and obey God's guidance as a vital part of his decision-making.

The example set by Paul was that he must always be in the place where God intended him to be, and he constantly teaches that God's will must be sought and honoured. In *Acts 18.21* we find him bidding farewell to his hearers at Ephesus saying, 'I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will.' The teachers of the new view say this means that Paul made his own decisions in the light of good sense, but was ready to submit to the ultimate will of God. They read this verse as though Paul merely says: 'I will return, but if I do not succeed then you will know my intention has been overruled by the Lord.' This, however, is to empty Paul's words of their plain sense, which is that if God directs him to return, he will do so. God's special and particular will is paramount in the major matters of Christian service.

Take the matter of appointing office bearers, where once again, we see the need to seek the guidance of God. In *Acts 20.28* Paul addresses the elders of the church at Ephesus, saying – 'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers . . . ' The Holy Spirit had appointed those elders, not the church. It was his guidance, not human discretion. When we appoint office bearers today, we must pray much for help and guidance as we apply the qualifications of Scripture, and weigh the suitability of a 'candidate'. We cannot proceed with the easy confidence of people who possess an executive power of decision, but only with humility and real dependence on the help of God.

Another quite different proof for the need of special guidance in the major decisions of life is to be seen in *2 Corinthians 6.14-18*, where believers are commanded to separate from idolatry and all forms of religious syncretism. The passage concludes with the wonderful promise of verse 18 –

‘And [I] will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.’ The role of the father in Bible-times Eastern culture throws much light on the subject of divine guidance, because the father of the family had far more extensive responsibilities than the modern, Western father. When God promises to function as the perfect Father, his fatherhood is analogous to that of the ancient Eastern father.

This concept helps to answer the question of whether God has a specific and particular will for the direction of life’s journey. The natural father of Bible times ruled the family with great authority, deciding all major matters for family members, and it was this style of fatherhood that the Lord promised to exercise in the directing of his earthly children. He would decide and direct in the great issues of life. When the young men of the Eastern family were out shepherding the flocks, they would use their initiative, not resorting to their father for directions over routine, day-to-day matters. They became farmers, husbandmen, traders, dyers, craftspeople and so on, experts in their own right, and in all these matters they functioned independently. But in the larger issues of life, such as where they were to live, which occupation they would learn, and whom they would marry, the supreme decider, who would always be consulted, was the father and head of the family. So it is with us in reference to our heavenly Father.

### **Free Choice Rebuked, Obedience Approved**

The new spirit of self-determination in decision-making is strongly rebuked in *James 4.13-15*, where we read the words: ‘Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.’

Here were Christian businessmen committing a year of their lives to trading away from home, without any deep consideration of the will and purpose of God in the matter. Not only did they plan entirely in terms of the profitability of the venture, but they made up their minds very speedily, deciding to go ‘today or tomorrow’. A year is a long time, certainly long enough to greatly affect one’s church life and service, not to mention family life. This absence for business was clearly a major undertaking, deserving careful and prayerful consideration, coupled with a serious desire to be guided by God.

It is not enough to say that these businessmen were rebuked only for lacking a general respect for the sovereign will of God, as if they ought to have added the formal acknowledgement, ‘God willing’ at the end of their proposals. (Friesen and Maxson reduce the passage to this.) The words of James have no practical purpose unless they remind believers that they have an obligation to seek God’s guidance and oversight in all the major issues of life.

James condemns believers for confident self-determination, describing it as a sin, saying, ‘But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin’ (*James 4.16-17*). God has his own direction for us in the journey of life, and we are to apply the rules of guidance in order to honour his will and his rule. We will not always have an advance view of where he is taking us, but if we seek guidance and submit our way to him, we may be sure that his superintending hand will shape our circumstances and affairs.

A final text for our thinking is *1 Peter 5.6-7*, where we read: ‘Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.’ Sometimes the word care is translated anxiety. The original Greek word comes from a verb signifying – to draw in different directions (to part, differ or divide). It suggests a kind of care or anxiety in which conflicting thoughts clamour for attention or supremacy; in which a

person is drawn in several directions at once. One translator attempts to capture this element of meaning in the rendering – ‘Casting all your distracted thoughts upon him’. Behind this word lies a confusion of desires and concerns.

The same Greek word is used in the parable of the sower, where the seed which fell among thorns represents the hearer who is handicapped by the ‘cares of this world’. A battle rages in this person’s mind as the lure of riches and prosperity in this world draws the heart. The ‘cares of this world’ are not the ‘worries’ of the world, but the distractions of the world. Paul uses the same Greek word in *2 Corinthians 11.28*. As he lists his trials and weaknesses he mentions this particular daily pressure – ‘the care of all the churches’. He does not mean that his ministry of caring for the churches was irksome and painful to him, but that his mind was continuously drawn in different directions by the trials and problems of the churches.

The care word of *1 Peter 5* carries this sense of being torn in different directions. It refers to the divided, confused and uncertain mind, and this is especially relevant to the perplexing major decisions of life’s journey. In such decisions we may cast all our distracted reasonings upon the Lord, knowing that he ‘careth’ for us (a different Greek word which means that he is interested in us). This does not, of course, mean that we can omit the duty of thinking through the problem carefully and prayerfully, according to the rules of the Word, but that the decision is not ultimately ours, but the Lord’s.

What a reassuring teaching it is, that God has a specific will for us! It tells us just how much he loves us and watches over us, and it underlines the intimate nature of our union with him. It assures us that there is a purpose in every major stage of life’s journey, every great turning point, and that there will be no wasted years or vain regrets if we seek his will. Such a thought humbles us and moves us to strive for full obedience to the will of our God.

The new approach to guidance greatly weakens the believer’s realisation of the lordship of Christ. Licence and self-determination quickly become the rule as Christ is robbed of his authority and headship. We do not suggest that the new school of teachers who oppose traditional guidance intend to attack Christ’s lordship, but this is what they achieve, playing into the hands of unconsecrated Christians who do not want to yield themselves wholly to the Lord.

In these days of affluence, the temptation to feather our nests and line our pockets is ever present, and the new outlook tears down the defences of believers, saying – ‘Do whatever seems sensible and right to you.’ Sadly, when tempted, many things (so long as they are not blatantly immoral and unethical) can seem reasonable. Under temptation, we can justify any amount of ease, plenty, leisure, recreation, self-service, and so on. The new way hands us over to the tyranny of self, and to the ‘token’ rule of an absent Lord, reducing evangelical obedience to the level of the nominal Christian. The fact that God has a particular will and purpose for the lives of his people is one of the greatest blessings of salvation, and a vital spur to true and living godliness. We must always be glad and willing subjects of the King of kings, for this is our high privilege and glory.

### **Endnotes:**

1 Multnomah Press, Portland, Oregon

2 Moody Press, Chicago

3 *1 Corinthians 4.16; 11.1-2; Philippians 3.17; 1 Thessalonians 1.6; 2 Thessalonians 3.9.*

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