

## **The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God**

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The Holy Spirit is given to all Christians to transform them by his teaching, making them into God-focused thinkers and equipping them to discern his will and make decisions accordingly. They do this by rational reflection on their life-situation, helped by wise and godly advice, within the parameters that the Word of God establishes. The idea that the superior path in matters of guidance is to wait passively before God for direct promptings to action to come into one's mind is a mistake. So is the superstitious notion that failure to discern the specifics of God's vocational guidance sentences one irrevocably to a second-best life, with no restoration possible.

In the English-speaking Western evangelical world the words "guidance" and "will of God" have become labels for a pastoral problem that has come to loom large in public discussion, because for many believers it has been a source of intense personal anxiety. This problem has the shape of an ellipse with two foci. Focus one is the question of the God-pleasing way to make decisions, particularly about such major matters as whom to marry, where to live, what career to follow, how many children to plan for, what church to join, and so on. There is agreement that God's guidance should be sought in making decisions, but uncertainty as to how one does this. Focus two is the question of how we should deal with inward impressions, suggestions, promptings and urges that come to us unbidden, sometimes as we try to work our way through problems of decision, sometimes, it seems, as we try to evade them, and sometimes, as we say, out of the blue. Evangelicals are aware that these impressions might be the voice of God, and also that they might not; so how may we tell whether promptings we feel are products of our own disordered imagination (wishful thinking or obsessive fear), or Satanic proposal, like the ideas put into Jesus' mind in the wilderness temptation, or monitions from God on which we should act? On this two-pronged problem of discerning the will of God at least three dozen books<sup>1</sup> have been

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<sup>1</sup> "There are about thirty-five evangelical books in print on this subject (this one makes thirty-six)" (James C. Petty, *Step by Step* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999], 9). Among the more useful of these are Petty's own book; Oliver R. Barclay, *Guidance* (London: IVP, 1956); Elisabeth Eliot, *A Slow and Certain Light* (Waco: Word, 1973); Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland OR: Multnomah, 1980); M. Blaine Smith, *Knowing God's Will* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981); Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God* (Gresham OR: Vision House, 1995); Phillip D. Jensen

written at a popular level during the past half-century, and the fact that they have all found buyers shows how widespread concern about this matter has become.

The present essay aims to explore the ministry of God's Holy Spirit in relation to this problem. In light of all that has been written on it already I do not think I shall be found saying anything notably new. But I shall attempt to demonstrate that the problem is regularly discussed in too narrow terms, isolating it from God's total ministry to his Church on earth in a way that is biblically improper, and that makes it both more difficult in itself, and more threatening to sensitive souls, than ever it ought to be. If I can show this, the labor of composition will be well worthwhile.

I open my argument with some general observations on the transforming and enlarging of personal consciousness and individual experience that the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the human heart brings about. This is basic to every mode of spiritual discernment, and every quest for it.

The terrorist demolition of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001, has led many to speak of it, with good reason, as a day that changed the world. But there was another day that changed the world, in a much deeper and more far-reaching way: that was Pentecost morning in the year 30 or thereabouts, when shortly before nine o'clock Jesus of Nazareth, God's glorified and enthroned Christ and the world's cosmic Lord, poured out the Holy Spirit on his disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1–41). For it was then that the new covenant ministry of the divine Spirit was initiated, and that ministry—maybe I should say, the Church in the power of that ministry—has done more to change the world than any other force since history began.

Jesus, as recorded in John's Gospel, had already declared what this new ministry would involve. It would not be the world's first acquaintance with the Spirit of God, who had already (so the Old Testament tells us) been active in creation, providence, revelation, gifting for leadership, and renewing of hearts. But this would be the opening of a new era, all the same, with the Spirit adding a new role to the work he was doing already. Jesus would send the Spirit as "another Paraclete" (Helper, Supporter, Counselor, Comforter, Encourager, Advocate—*paravklhto* [*parakletos*] has a wider range of meaning than any one English word can cover), to be not just "with" but "in" his disciples for ever (14:16–17). Through his coming Jesus himself, now absent in body, and his Father with him, would come and reveal themselves to disciples in a personal and permanent way, in a communion of love (14:18–23). As teacher, the Spirit would enable the apostles to recall and grasp what they had heard from Jesus,

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and Tony Payne, *The Last Word on Guidance* (Homebush West NSW: Anzea [St. Matthias Press], 1991); Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999 [originally, *In Search of Guidance* (Ventura CA: Regal, 1984)]).

and would add more to it (14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Thus the apostles would come to see the full truth about Jesus' glory (16:14) and so be qualified to bear faithful witness to him (15:27). Then through that witness the Spirit would convince people everywhere of the Christian facts (16:8–11; 17:20) and bring them through new birth to the living faith in Christ that marks entry here and now into God's kingdom (3:1–15). Hereby the Spirit would engender in life after life the joy and influence that Jesus pictured as "living water" in flow out of the believer as a temple of God (7:37-39, cf. 4:10–14; Ezek 47:1–5).

In this is foreshadowed all of Paul's presentation of the Spirit's ministry to individuals (illumination, incorporation into Christ, certification, jubilation, moral transformation, final glorification: see 2 Cor 3:14–4:6, cf. 1 Cor 2:9–15; 1 Cor 12:13, cf. Rom 8:9–13; Rom 8:14–17, cf. Gal 4:4–6; Eph 1:13–14; Rom 14:17, cf. 15:13; Gal 5:22–25; 2 Cor 3:18). And what is said here also anticipates both Paul's further teaching about the Spirit's ministry to the Church (incorporating and indwelling, gifting and upbuilding: see 1 Cor 3:16; 12:6–31; Eph 2:19–22; 4:4–16), and Luke's fascinating and fascinated narrative in Acts of the Spirit's initiating and empowering activities in the Church's first generation. The New Testament view, first to last, is that since Pentecost the Holy Spirit, as the executive of the Trinity and Jesus' personal agent, has been constantly at work forming the new human family, which is the Church, by re-making sinners in and through Christ in the manner described. Ministry of the gospel is new covenant ministry, and new covenant ministry communicates the life-giving Spirit to this effect (2 Cor 3:6).

Now all that has been said above has experiential implications that revolutionize the workings of our minds. Paul signals this when he writes:

[Christ] died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised. So then from now on we acknowledge no one from an outward human point of view. Even though we have known Christ from such a human point of view, now we do not know him in that way any longer. So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come! (2 Cor 5:15–17)

We hear much today of altered states of consciousness induced by new age techniques of meditation; it would be well if more attention were paid to the altered state of mind into which new creation by the Spirit brings believers. This new consciousness begins as a permanent pervasive awareness of the inescapable reality, heart-searching presence, and saving love of our holy sovereign God, with a sense that we ought to pray to him, live to him, and seek to please him in all that we do, and at every turn of the road. Then, within this basic framework, Paul speaks directly of "the renewal of your mind." He does this in a truly foundational statement about discerning the will of God. That statement runs as follows.

Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

“The mercies of God,” in this passage, are the blessings to previously lost sinners that Rom 1–11 has been spelling out. “Bodies” are the readers’ whole selves. “Holy” means dedicated by man and accepted by God. “Spiritual worship” (so rsv, esv; net, kjv, etc. have “reasonable service” here) is the life of God-glorifying homage that we owe to our divine Rescuer, history’s mighty Lord, the God of the doxology of Rom 11:33–36. “Conformed to” means shaped by, and “this present world” means the existing order of things (culture, heritage, conventions, assumptions, expectations). “Transformed,” the verb from which comes our word “metamorphosis,” means changed in both outward style and inward character; it is the verb Paul used in 2 Cor 3:18, where the KJV’s “changed form glory to glory” renders exactly what he wrote. “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within,” was J. B. Phillips’ luminous rendering of what verse 2 is saying. “Mind” (*nou*”, *nous*) here signifies all that the Bible means by “heart”: namely, the dynamic core of our personhood out of which flow the desires, instincts, tastes, loves, and fears that determine our goals, purposes, mindsets, plans, attitudes, aversions, schemes, excitements, boredoms, and so forth. This is mind, not just as a power of reasoning, but as an index of character. “Test and approve” precisely translates a Greek verb for which English has no one-word equivalent. The “will of God” is what will please him for each person to do in each situation (that is the thought that the words “good” and “well pleasing” and “perfect” are underlining). We are to discern God’s will for our actions by testing (that is, thinking through and comparing) the options and alternatives that are open to us. What Paul sees, and tells us, is that only those whose minds have been re-made by the Holy Spirit through one-time regeneration leading to ongoing sanctification will be able to make this discernment adequately. The verbs in verse 2 are in the present tense, signifying continuous or repeated action: the renewal of our mind is to be a continuous process, and the discerning of God’s will is a task to be repeated whenever fresh choices need to be made.

But without this renewal, no matter how much thinking we do, and however correct our theological formulations, personal discernment of the will of God will not take place. For the will of God covers not only what we do outwardly as performers, but also how and why we do it from the standpoint of our motives and purposes. If these inner aspects of action are not as they should be we fall short of the perfect (that is, in the Greek, the fully-fashioned and complete) will of God, as did the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Those who are not yet new-created in Christ and indwelt by his Spirit can neither conceive nor achieve the attitudinal

rightness (love to God and neighbor: Matt 22:34–40) and the motivational rightness (the “glory,” that is, the display and praise of God: 1 Cor 10:31) that make behavior acceptable in God’s sight. This is because, to cite Phillips’ paraphrase again,

the unspiritual man simply cannot accept the matters which the Spirit deals with—they don’t make sense to him, for, after all, you must be spiritual to see spiritual things. The spiritual man, on the other hand, has an insight into the meaning of everything, though his insight may baffle the man of the world...we who are spiritual have the very thoughts of Christ! (1 Cor 2:14–16).

“Thoughts” there is mind in the Greek, the same word as in Rom 12:2, meaning thoughts shaped and driven by desires of the heart. When in regeneration the Holy Spirit unites us to the risen Christ, our hearts are remade in the image of his, so that we too, like him in the divine-human unity of his personhood, constantly desire to love and obey and please and honor and exalt and glorify the Father. Accordingly, in our Christian lives we will be dominated and driven (and if we misbehave, accused) by this overmastering, ineradicable desire, that the Spirit has planted within us. And our thoughts, like Jesus’ own, will embody and express this purpose, and enlist all our creativity and power of imagination and relational capacities in its service. So to live is now our nature. Our blind eyes have been opened, our deaf ears unstopped, and we have tasted the good word of God; our hard hearts have been softened, and our hostility to God’s law (that is, his across-the-board instruction on how to please him) has been turned into a love of it. We are conscious of being people who now know God and are known by him in a life-giving relationship. We are new and different creatures, responding to God and reacting to people and things in a new way that was not part of our lives before. In a word, our experience has been changed. And it is out of this decisive experiential transformation, through the present help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, that discernment of the will of God in each specific case is born.

### **The Holy Spirit and the Path of Discernment**

The gnawing evangelical anxieties about guidance that the three-dozen books mentioned above are addressing did not enter into the practice of discernment for decision-making among evangelicals of the older school. Informed by biblical theology and narrative, soaked in the biblical text itself, aiming always at the best for God’s cause and others’ good, and confident in God’s promise of guidance to the humble and prayerful (see Pss 5:8; 23:2–3; 25:8–9; 32:8–9; Jas 1:6), they sought to be made wise, prudent, and judicious, men and women of good judgment. They asked that God would thus enable them to see each time the course of action for which there was most to be said as they reviewed facts, took advice, measured their personal resources, surveyed circumstances, and

calculated the consequences of possible choices. Bruce Waltke models this older practice when he writes:

When I wonder about which job offer to take, I don't go through a divination process to discover the hidden message of God. Instead I examine how God has called me to live my life; what my motives are; what He has given me a heart for; where I am in my walk with Christ; and what God is saying to me through His word and His people.<sup>2</sup>

There are in this, to be sure, pitfalls, all the direct result of being the sin-spoiled creatures that we are, immature, prejudiced, out-of-shape, and as yet imperfectly sanctified. We need to be aware of how choices may go wrong.

Our understanding of scripture can be incomplete and twisted, particularly when we live in anti-theological and pagan cultures and belong to churches that, for whatever reason, do not preach and teach the entire Bible.

What we think of as our godly desires, which may indeed have their roots in the prompting of the Holy Spirit, can nonetheless be self-centered, self-serving, and self-indulgent to a far greater extent than in our naïve self-ignorance we suspect. Zeal for God, however intense, is no substitute for self-knowledge, and lack of self-knowledge can lead into fanatical craziness.

Our ability to measure our own gifts and potential constantly proves deficient, the more so the younger and more inexperienced we are. Either we undervalue what we can do, feeling that something is beyond us when in fact we could handle it well, or we overvalue our powers, assuming (for example) that because we can talk steadily for long periods we must have a teaching or preaching gift. (Let it clearly be said: no one has a teaching gift unless people actually learn something from him, nor has anyone a preaching gift unless people actually meet God under his ministry.) And it is regularly beyond the power of consciously gifted people to tell whether they have the character qualities needed to sustain their gifts in useful exercise.

Awareness of the reality of these pitfalls burns into the mind the need to distrust emotionally-charged impressions and to take advice from those we recognize as wise, tough-minded, and godly, and most importantly from persons who know us well. The Holy Spirit regularly guides us in discernment for decision-making via the judgments of others.

A case study of decision-making in the life of a great evangelical of the old school, the Englishman John Charles Ryle (1816–1900), expository preacher

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<sup>2</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 35.

and writer, evangelical leader, and first bishop of the diocese of Liverpool, will bring some of this into focus.<sup>3</sup>

Ryle's father's bank suddenly went bankrupt in 1841, when Ryle was 25, headed for public life, and a converted Christian of four years' standing. Reared in the lap of luxury, he now found himself virtually penniless. He sought ordination, not because he wanted to be a clergyman (he didn't) or felt an inner constraint to become one (he felt none), but because it was the only profession open to him that would give him an immediate salary. The evangelical bishop who was willing to ordain him saw his Oxford degree and lively Christian experience as adequately qualifying him for the clergyman's role. (This, then, was a decision based on Ryle's circumstances and a bishop's judgment of his fitness.) Having won his spurs as a minister in two brief underpaid posts, Ryle accepted an invitation to a rural pastorate with a stipend sufficient for a married man, and there wooed the first, followed after her death by the second, of his three wives. His guiding light here was to choose as a spouse someone he could thoroughly respect: "the great thing I always desired to find was a woman who was a real Christian, who was a real lady, and who was not a fool."<sup>4</sup> His actual discernment, as he applied this principle of wisdom, did not fail him, but the bad health of both his first and second wives drained his resources, and fifteen years after his first marriage he found himself a widower with five children, and a poor man once more. (Good decisions do not always bring the good consequences that we hope for.) A move to a larger, better paying parish and a third marriage led to nineteen years of happy and fruitful ministry there. This however was eventually interrupted, early in 1880, by the invitation to become dean of the cathedral at Salisbury, presumably as a light and honorific job for his old age (he was almost 64), and so a new decision had to be made.

### **He did not want to go.**

Flesh and blood were utterly against it [he wrote to a friend]. But almost every one of 16 men I consulted said, "You ought certainly to go for the sake of Christ's cause in the Ch(urch) of E(ngland)."—So who was I that I could withstand? I had prayed for light and signs of God's will, and this was all I got. If three men had said "Refuse," I would have refused...But...I am a soldier. The Captain of my salvation seems to say, "these are your marching orders." I have nothing to do but to obey. Pray for me. My heart is very heavy.<sup>5</sup>

So, discerning from advice received what he ought to do, though against his own desire, he told his people he was leaving them, and got ready to move. But then,

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller treatment, see J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: the Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002) 21-26 and 51-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

within weeks, out of the blue, and requiring immediate decision for political reasons, came the call to Liverpool. To that call Ryle, having already adjusted to leaving the place he liked most, was able to say a responsible “yes” on the spot—actually, on the platform where he had just dismounted from the train and been confronted for the first time with the offer. (This appears as two-stage circumstantial guidance: had God not first led Ryle to commit himself to leave his comfortable pastorate, he would have been in no position to utter that instant “yes.” But as it was, he needed only a split-second comparing the depressing prospect of Salisbury with this new challenge, and his mind was made up.) Ryle thus, it would seem, concluded himself called by God to be Liverpool’s first bishop. And over a period of twenty years, despite his age, he proved himself to be the man for the job, giving the diocese an infrastructure and personnel that made it the most evangelical in doctrine, and evangelistic in practice, anywhere in the Church of England.

Was Ryle led by the Holy Spirit in his discernments of the will of God? Surely he was. Were these discernments the product of inner voices or impressions, freak coincidences, private revelations, or any such thing? No; they were the rational fruit of having a biblical value-system and a heart for God, for his gospel and for his glory; and of seeking wisdom, noting circumstances, taking advice, and not letting the merely good elbow out the best. By these means the Holy Spirit gave Ryle discernment for his decisions, and we should expect that he will use the same means with the rest of us.

This is the moment for pointing out that God in the Old Testament, and Christ specifically in the New, are set forth as shepherding the holy flock and each individual within it (see Pss 23; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; John 10:11–16, 25–30; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:4). Shepherding means caring for, watching over, protecting and preserving, guarding and guiding the sheep as they feed and travel to their many places of pasture. Giving us discernment of his will is only part of the Shepherd’s work ordering our lives as he leads us home to glory. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit shape our circumstances, overrule our advisers, and sustain our overall sense of spiritual realities and theological truths, as well as prompting the brainwork that processes the factors that yield the discernments needed for decisions. The idea that at some point in the decision-making we are left to fend for ourselves is a mistake, and a troublesome one, as we shall shortly see.

### **The Holy Spirit and Defects in Discernment**

How is it then that in this matter of discerning the will of God errors get made? Well, how in God’s world do human mistakes ever get made? Here we face, as so often, the mystery of created freedom in a world governed by its sovereign Maker and Master. This is a both...and, a state of things in which two seeming incompatibles coexist and it is beyond us to know how what is the case can be. It is a situation best labeled, in echo of Kant, an antinomy. The fact that we can and

do err and sin does not overthrow God's controlling lordship, any more than that controlling lordship turns us into robots, destroying our self-determining individuality so that we are no longer moral agents answerable to God. This is how things are. So in every part of life intellectual and behavioral lapses actually occur; and we must not be surprised to meet them. We now examine two common mistakes relating to our Spirit-given discernment of the will of God: the first, about man's passivity, and the second, about God's plan.

(1) The error about man's passivity.

In the movement led by the magnetic Frank Buchman through the middle decades of the last century, which at various times was called Buchmanism, First Century Christian Fellowship, the Oxford Group, and Moral Re-Armament, it was the rule to have a daily "quiet time" in which one practiced what is nowadays called listening prayer. That is, one reviewed one's ongoing life before one's divine Watcher and noted what practical ideas about things to do and not to do, people to deal with, tasks to tackle and so forth, broke surface in one's mind. These thoughts, writes Garth Lean, "became known, in the verbal shorthand of Buchman and his friends, as 'guidance,' though neither he nor they considered that all such thoughts came from God."<sup>6</sup> To avoid potentially vicious self-deception, these thoughts were always to be tested by whether they embodied absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love, whether they squared with the Church's teaching and experience and the mind of others seeking guidance this same way, and whether they were actually practicable. So far, so good; none of this is off center. But in the world of simplistic and somewhat loosey-goosey pietism where this practice was developed the thought-processes comparing alternatives that discernment ordinarily requires were not stressed. Expectations of immediacy in guidance became unhealthily high, while the mental passivity that was cultivated—the fallowness of the mind, as we might call it—led inevitably to an increasingly narrow and undocctrinal mindset, the outcome of which was Moral Re-Armament's drift into multifaith moralism to further its political agenda. This was not a fruitful way to go. Small wonder that Buchmanism is now a thing of the past.

But the legacy of this once influential movement seems to be fourfold:

First, it has given the word "guidance" universal label status among evangelicals for all that is involved in discerning the will of God. This continues.

Second, it has reinforced already widespread expectations of being admonished for action by a direct "word from the Lord," either through what Pentecostals describe as prophecy, or through a contrived sign ("putting out a fleece"), or through some striking factual coincidence or new notion springing from words of

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<sup>6</sup> Garth Lean, *On the Tail of a Comet: The Life of Frank Buchman* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988) 75-76.

scripture, or through some private inner revelation by dream, voice, or intrusive thought. This also continues.

Third, it has encouraged a murky pride, elitism, and sense of superiority among those who have thought they were receiving, or had received, divine guidance in the supra-rational way that has just been outlined. This still appears.

Fourth, it has generated, and continues to generate, anxiety, depression, and paralysis of action in some who have sought guidance this way without receiving it, and now are either marking time as still they wait for it, or are blaming themselves for not seeking it seriously enough and viewing themselves as relegated to the ranks of second-class Christians—a form of anxiety and inner bleakness that links up with a further condition at which we shall look in a moment.

In saying this, and calling for appropriate brainwork to discern God's will, I do not mean to imply that only persons of high intelligence, trained minds, and academic excellence can hope to discern the will of God. Paul prays that God would fill the Colossians

with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects: bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God (Col 1:9-10).

“Spiritual,” the qualifier of wisdom and understanding, means precisely “given by the Holy Spirit,” and the Spirit is no respecter of persons when it comes to education or brain power. In similar vein, Paul prays that the Philippians' love

may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God (Phil 1:9-11).

“Decide” here is the same word as “test and approve” in Rom 12:2. All Christians have minds, and they are not to be left lying fallow; all are to put the minds they have to work in the discernment process.

The nature of the brainwork involved is clear from James Petty's analysis of the Spirit's role in divine guidance.

1. The Spirit illuminates the connection between God's word and our lives.
2. He does this by personalizing and particularizing (applying) the will of God for us...

3. The result of the Spirit's work is not so much a "message from God" as it is a provision of "discernment and wisdom" granted for specific situations and progressively built into Christians as a character trait.

4. Though it is wisdom from God, it also becomes our wisdom...From God's perspective it is a direct gift, supernaturally given by the Spirit. From our perspective, it is our renewed mind enabled by God to see as Christ sees. It is our wisdom, yet it is God's. It is Christ's mind, yet it is given to us as ours. Scripture sees it both ways and so should we.<sup>7</sup>

Christians may not make rules for God. It is clear that on occasion God has bypassed reason, giving discernment of his will in a direct and immediate way, just as has been claimed, and it is not for us to deny that he may do so again. But God makes rules for Christians, and it is equally clear that we have no business expecting to discern his will save by Spirit-led reasoning in the manner described. The exception should not be mistaken for the rule. "Let your mind alone" (the title of one of James Thurber's extravaganzas) is not the way of wisdom for discerning God's will. Passivity of mind, valued and cherished, will keep us from spiritual discernment rather than lead us to it.

(2) The error about God's plan.<sup>8</sup>

That God has a comprehensive, foreordained purpose and plan for all of world history, from the greatest events to the smallest, and that this includes a specific, detailed intention for the life of every human being, is to my mind beyond doubt: the Bible is clear on it. That his intention, once you become a Christian, is comparable to an itinerary drawn up for you by a travel agent, where everything depends on you being in the right place at the right time to board the plane or train or bus or boat or whatever and where the itinerary is ruined once you miss one of the preplanned connections, is, by contrast, a sad misconception. It is, however, a common view, and has bitter implications. If, on this view, your discernment fails and you get your guidance wrong on some key matter, a substandard, second-best spiritual life is all that is open to you. Though not perhaps on the scrap heap, you are certainly on the shelf, having lost forever much of your usefulness to God. Your mistake sentences you to live and serve your Lord as a second-rate Christian.

What is wrong with this idea? Three things, at least.

First, it is a speculation—in plain English, a guess, a fancy, indeed a fantasy, and a morbid one at that. There is nothing in scripture to support it.

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<sup>7</sup> Petty, *Step by Step*, 165.

<sup>8</sup> I echo here some things in my chapter, "Guidance," in *God's Plans for You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) 91.

Second, it assumes that God lacks the wisdom or the will or the goodness or the power to put us back on track when we have slipped. But this is false, and to think otherwise is unbelief. The grain of truth in this view is that bad choices have bad consequences, from which we cannot expect to be totally shielded and with which, therefore, we may now have to live, as Jacob had to live with the limp he got fighting God at Jabbok and David had to live with the family troubles he brought on himself by his marital roving. But the idea that God cannot or will not forgive and restore when transgressors and wanderers confess their follies and repent of them, flies in the face of scripture. Ponder the implications of Solomon's prayer in 1 Kgs 8:27–53, and 2 Chr 6:18–40, and the testimonies in Pss 32 and 85:1–3, the promise in 1 John 1:9, if you doubt that.

Third, this idea ignores clear lessons from Bible biography. Scripture shows us servants of God making great and grievous mistakes in seeking to discern God's will for their actions—Jacob begging his brother and fooling his father; Moses killing the Egyptian; David numbering the people; Peter boycotting Gentile Christians at the meal table, for instance—yet none was thereafter demoted to second-class status. And if God restored David after his adultery with Bathsheba and taking out of Uriah, and Peter after his threefold denial of Christ, we should not doubt his readiness to restore Christians who acknowledge that they failed badly in their endeavor, or perhaps by their reluctance, to discern the will of God.

The source of this mistake about God's plan appears to be a streak of legalism, linked it seems with classic dispensational theology, that found its way into evangelical teaching on the Christian life at the turn of the nineteenth century when dispensationalism was riding high and the older evangelical theology was at a discount. This was the era in which life-occupations were graded on a strict scale of value and desirability (first and best, overseas missionary; second, ordained pastor; third, physician and nurse; fourth, schoolteacher; fifth, money-maker to support evangelical enterprises, and so on), and holiness teachers proclaimed a double standard, urging that it was better, though not necessary, to choose to be a spiritual Christian rather than remain a carnal one. And much was made of Paul's warning that the "wood, hay, stubble" of the careless Christian's life would be incinerated in a "judgment of works"—"If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15). Most of this legalism is now defunct, and it is to be hoped that the frightening and really blasphemous mistake about the plan of God that we have been looking at will perish with it.

## **Last Word**

Finally, it needs to be said that the ultimate purpose of God for every Christian is character-transformation and growth into the full image of Jesus Christ; and therefore that the Holy Spirit's work of imparting wisdom for the discerning of God's will, case by case, is part of that larger enterprise for which our

sanctification is the usual name. What God wants for us is not simply a flow of correct discernments in the choices we make, but that we become discerning persons in ourselves, as Christ was a discerning person before us. "Wisdom in the Old Testament" writes Bruce Waltke, and in the New Testament this is equally the case, "is a character trait, not simply thinking soberly. People with wisdom have the character whereby they can make good decisions."<sup>9</sup> But the people with wisdom are those in whom the word of Christ dwells richly (see Col 3:16), and these are the people who heed the summons: "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him" (Col 2:6-7). He is the wisdom of God, the Lord of glory, the good shepherd, and his people's life and hope. So studying the Spirit's works in our discerning of God's will should bring us to the place where with Charles Wesley we sing:

Captain of Israel's host, and Guide

Of all who seek the land above,

Beneath thy shadow we abide,

The cloud of thy protecting love;

Our strength, thy grace; our rule, thy word;

Our end, the glory of the Lord.

By thine unerring Spirit led,

We shall not in the desert stray,

We shall not full direction need,

Nor miss our providential way;

As far from danger as from fear,

While love, almighty love, is near.

Let Wesley's lyric be the bottom line, and the last word, and the constant song of all our hearts.

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<sup>9</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 360.

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