
Knowing God's Will

ROGER FELLOWS

'Show me the way I should go' Psalm 143:8

Christians probably pray for guidance more than anything else: and with good reason. It is important to know God's will. Not many would dispute that: we want to know the way we should go. Yet there are few areas where God's people show more inconsistency and confusion. Perhaps we can demonstrate that by asking a series of questions.

Would you seek God's will in the choice of a husband or wife?

Would you seek God's guidance in the purchase of a house?

Would you seek His guidance when buying a car?

How about when buying a refrigerator?

When buying a newspaper?

I would presume that you would answer 'Yes' to the first question, but by the time you reached the last one you were probably saying 'No'. Doesn't that teach us something? That we divide life into 'big' and 'little' things. There are things that are important enough to seek God's guidance, but other things that are not worth praying about. But how do we decide what is important? For example, in the case of buying things, do we set a monetary value above which we seek guidance, but below which we don't bother? Such an approach is obviously faulty and reveals a fundamental error in our thinking.

Let's ask another question: Is God interested in every area of our lives? Surely He is. Certainly if we are Christians we believe that He who is our heavenly Father is not less interested in the welfare of His children than we are in ours. Again, is God sovereign in every area of life? If He is, then does that leave us with any choices, or do we have to discover His will for everything?

Let us be sure of this, God is sovereign: He is in control of every area of life throughout His entire creation. Whether 'big' things or 'little' things, nothing happens unless He has ordained it. God . . .

. . . works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. (Ephesians 1:11)

From the death of Christ (Acts 2:23), to the death of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29), all things are according to the plan and decrees of God. That doesn't make God the author of sin. Nor does it mean that God doesn't use second causes, such as people, but nothing happens unless God causes it to happen. When it comes to things like sin, some prefer to speak of God permitting it to happen. It may sound better, but it really doesn't change the fact that God ordains all things. Nothing happens without God's decree, and nothing can hinder or frustrate God's decree.

He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?' (Daniel 4:35)

We usually refer to this as God's sovereign will. Some would call it His secret will. It is secret because we cannot know that will—at least not until after an event has happened. The only exception would be in the case of prophecy. We know, for example, that Christ will return and that there will be a new heavens and earth. Even then our knowledge is very limited because we cannot know the time of Christ's return.

Certainly in the case of every day events in our own lives, we cannot know God's sovereign will beforehand .

There is probably a general acceptance of what we have said so far, but many would introduce what seems to be an offshoot of this, namely that God has a plan for each of our lives that we can and should know. We might call it God's individual will. A personal illustration will clarify what I mean. In 1960 I was engaged in pharmaceutical research in Britain. My company was to begin the manufacture of veterinary vaccines in New Zealand. There were four positions open, and I applied to go. Somewhat surprisingly I was one of those selected (my field was pharmacy not microbiology). Just before the job opening there had been an unpleasant situation in our church, and I thought it was a good time for a change. However, after being offered the job, the church situation improved and I wasn't sure what to do. Prayer didn't seem to bring any light so I asked my pastor for advice. He said I should stay (who likes to lose able-bodied men?) so I turned down the job in New Zealand. For about two years I had nagging doubts. What if I should have gone? If it were God's will for me to be in New Zealand, then I was out of His will and would remain so unless I could find some other way of getting 'down under'. I feared I had ruined my life. Many Christians could give similar illustrations.

The idea is that we must discover God's will for our lives at every point, and follow it. It is rather like a road map that we must follow. If you belong to an automobile club, they will give you a route map to your destination if you request one. If you follow their route you will arrive at your destination; if you take a wrong turning, you may get lost and remain lost until you get back to where you went wrong. People approach the Christian life in the same way. If we take a wrong turn then we are out of God's will and will remain so until we put things right. If a mistake is made in something like marriage, then we might put ourselves out of the will of God permanently, and have to settle for what some call God's 'second best'.

Let us assume for a moment that there is such a thing as God's individual will for our lives. How far would it extend? Would it cover things like marriage or buying a house? Without doubt. But what about the questions we asked at the beginning? What about buying a newspaper? Surely to be consistent we would have to say that God's individual will would cover everything. It would also mean that we have no personal choices. We would have to discover God's will in each detail. In marriage we would have no choice, we would have to discover the one God has chosen for us. Indeed we would have to discover first if we should marry at all, and when. But taking it a step farther, it would also mean that we have no choice as to the socks we put on in the morning. We would have to discover which ones God had chosen for us. How many are that consistent? Some are. J.I.Packer gives such an example. Quoting from Hannah Whitall Smith, he tells of a woman who would seek the Lord's direction in literally every detail: when to get out of bed: which article of clothing to put on:

Very often the Lord would tell her to put on the right shoe and leave off the other: sometimes she was to put on both stockings and no shoes; and sometimes both shoes and no stockings.

(Knowing God, p.213,214)

We may find this amusing and consider her actions absurd, but she was being consistent. The vast majority of people who hold the road map view do not behave in this way. They only seek God's will in 'important' decisions. We would ask, where is the justification for the distinction between the important and the unimportant? A minor change in one's route to work could be followed by an accident that could change a life. Should we therefore pray to know every turn we make when driving? It would become a little dangerous for those following us while they wait for us to get our answers! As we said earlier, if in fact God has a plan for our lives that we must discover, then we have no choices—not even in the radio stations we listen to. We could be out of God's will if we listened to the wrong news broadcast !

Do we have choices? Of course we do. Choices were a part of life from the beginning of creation. Adam and Eve had choices in the food they ate. They could eat bananas or pineapples—whatever they fancied. There were certain limits or boundaries. There was one tree that was forbidden to them—the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). It seems probable too, that at that stage they could not eat meat. But within specified limits they had complete freedom.

When the Israelites offered sacrifices, there were limits. The kind of animals were limited (see Leviticus 11). The age and quality of the animal were usually specified. In some kinds of sacrifices, the requirements were specific. But in other cases, they had a choice. For example in a free-will burnt offering, people could offer a bull, a sheep, a goat or even pigeons. The choice was theirs.

In the realm of marriage, there are also choices. Even in the question of whether or not to marry, we have a choice. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul discussed a number of issues regarding marriage. He dealt with the case of whether or not a certain individual should marry. There is some debate as to whether the apostle was talking about a father who contemplated giving his daughter in marriage, or a man who contemplated marrying a certain woman, but the outcome was the same. Whatever the choice, 'He is not sinning' (verse 36). We must realize that we do not sin unless we transgress a specific revealed command of God. Paul concluded this part of his argument by saying:

*So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.
(verse 38)*

Incidentally, the 'doing better' is not in respect of God's 'best' and 'second best' for the life. It was the apostle's opinion that because of the climate of persecution, it was not a good time to marry at all—see verses 26-28.

Paul also addressed the question of remarriage after the death of a husband. His personal judgment was that it would be better to stay single (verse 40), for reasons already given; but he made it clear that she was free to marry 'anyone she wishes' (verse 39). There was one restriction—'he must belong to the Lord'. He said nothing about seeking God's will as to whether they should marry. Neither did he tell them to seek God's will for the 'right one' to marry. In both cases there was freedom of choice within prescribed limits. The limits were that a believer could only marry a believer, and of course both had to be free to marry, that is, they had to be single.

Wisdom would dictate that prospective partners carefully consider other factors such as compatibility in areas like intellect, culture and general interests. The individuals should be much in prayer over the matter. We are not suggesting it is wrong to pray for God's guidance, but the guidance we are to seek is not regarding some pre-arranged plan, but in wisdom of choice. We will say more about this later. The fact remains that even if people make an unwise choice, there is no sin unless God's revealed will has been contravened.

In giving to the Lord's work, we have a choice as to the amount we give. Writing to the Corinthian church on this subject, Paul said:

*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)*

The amount given was a matter of choice. Again there were guidelines. The money or goods were not to be reluctantly given. The giving should not be stingy. Within those limits there was freedom. Under the Jewish law there was no freedom. The people had to give a tenth. Under grace, while the general principle of tithing might be a good starting point for giving, there is no compulsion, and people do not sin by not tithing. They sin by giving reluctantly. They sin by giving stingily: but that matter must be decided by the individual before God, not by rule of the church.

In all of these instances we see that people are given freedom of choice within specified limits. To go outside those limits, is of course to sin. As long as we stay within those limits we do not sin in that matter. We cannot sin by taking the 'wrong' job, marrying the 'wrong' woman or by wearing the 'wrong' socks, as long as there is no transgression of a command.

EXAMPLES OF SPECIFIC GUIDANCE

Some will probably be thinking of some biblical examples where very specific guidance was given, and where it seemed that there was a divine plan to follow.

1. The pillar of cloud and fire. (Exodus 40:36-38)

Israel was led through the desert by the pillar. Every journey and change of location was unmistakably revealed to them by this means. But where is the parallel today? These were God's covenant people. Their final home was not to be left to human choice. These were days of miraculous signs. Their food came down from heaven. In forty years their shoes did not wear out. They were miraculously led by the pillar of cloud. We are not in the same position and cannot expect such signs.

2. The choice of David as Israel's king. (1 Samuel 16:12)

Samuel was a prophet and received direct revelation. Moreover the change in line from Saul's family to Jesse's was vital to fulfil Scripture and bring the Messianic line to the throne. Again, we have no parallel today as we do not have direct revelation.

It is interesting to compare that incident with other occasions when people were chosen for important office. For example when Jesus chose the apostles (Luke 6:12-16) there was no indication of direct revelation in the choice, and the fact that Jesus spent the previous night in prayer suggests that He looked to the Father for wisdom in the choice, rather than for specific direction.

Another example is in the choosing of the seven men to serve tables in Acts 6. Certain qualifications were given by the apostles: the men were to be from their own number; full of the Spirit and wisdom (verse 3). Within those limits, the choice was left to the believers. The people chose the men and the apostles laid hands on them (verses 5,6).

3. Paul's leading by the Spirit to Macedonia. (Acts 16:6-10)

There are three distinct instances of guidance in this section. Paul was prevented by the Spirit from preaching in Asia. He was hindered from entering Bithynia by the Spirit. Then he had the vision of the man from Macedonia. Once more we are compelled to ask, is there a parallel for us? These were supernatural events. They were in a period of miraculous signs. We are not.

Several other cases of specific guidance could be given: Philip was sent to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26,29); Ananias was sent to Saul (Acts 9:10-16). In each case there was supernatural revelation, something we do not have.

The Lord's servants were sometimes directed in this way, but not always. When Paul discussed with the Christians in Rome his plans for the future, he expressed them in terms of aspirations:

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now however I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.
(Romans 15:23-25)

He was on his way to Jerusalem with a gift for the poor. Then it was his intention to visit both Rome and Spain. The apostle did not speak of the Lord sending him to Jerusalem, Rome or Spain. He spoke in terms of hopes and plans. He saw needs, recognized his own gifts, and set his goals and priorities accordingly. This method would represent an ongoing pattern for Christian guidance, rather than the supernatural methods referred to above.

VERSES THAT DEAL WITH GUIDANCE

Let us examine some verses that are often used to support the road map view of guidance.

Proverbs 3:5,6

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

The change in translation from the King James Version deprives the verse of much of the seeming support for individual guidance. The old version has: 'He will direct your paths.' The true meaning of the latter phrase is, 'He will make your paths smooth' or 'successful'. In other words, if we acknowledge God by obeying His commands we shall be successful (compare Joshua 1:8). The passage understood in this way does not lend any strength to the road map view.

Psalms 32:8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

The KJV has, 'I will guide thee with mine eye.' Some understand this to mean that God is looking in a certain direction, and we have to see which direction it is, and walk that way. Literally it is, 'With my eye upon you.' The thought is more of protection, though clearly the first part of the verse speaks of guidance: but by what means? By instruction and teaching. It is the moral or revealed will of God that we are to seek, know and follow. By this means the Lord shows us the way we should go.

Isaiah 30:20,21

Although the LORD gives you the bread of adversity . . . your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'

A common view of this passage is that it refers to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, reproofing and correcting us when we turn out of the path appointed for us. But that is reading more into the text than is there. There seems to be no warrant to depart from a literal interpretation. The teachers of verse 20 would be the prophets. They would be seen with their own eyes. In verse 21 they would be heard with their ears, not within them but behind them. There is no good reason to separate the voice of verse 21 from the teachers of verse 20. This is the view taken by E.J.Young in his commentary on Isaiah.

Colossians 1:9,10

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way ..

This is typical of New Testament verses that speak about the will of God (compare Romans 12:2, Ephesians 5:17, Colossians 4:12). The big question is, what kind of 'will' of God is referred to? The context points to the moral will of God. Paul went on to speak about living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing to Him. Even in verse 9 the knowledge of His will was not by discerning a plan for our lives, but by spiritual wisdom and understanding. So it seems that support for the road map view of guidance evaporates when the passages are subjected to any more than a superficial examination.

Garry Friesen in his book **Decision Making and the Will of God** gives a more thorough treatment of the verses commonly used to support the road map view of guidance. His book is an excellent refutation of this view.

THE BIBLE PLUS . . .

Most Christians will admit that the Bible gives general principles of guidance. They believe that the Lord will never lead contrary to Scripture. However, many feel that the Bible is not very specific in some areas, so other help is needed. That help is found in two things—circumstances and inward impressions. A common view is that when Scripture, circumstances and a sense of peace combine, then we can be sure of the Lord's leading. Some will say that if at least two of those features are present, then we are fairly safe. But supposing those two are circumstances and a sense of peace? Is that adequate? Let's look at the two things separately.

Circumstances

No one will question that God sometimes directs our path by circumstances. Suppose I set out in my car for a given destination, but am involved in an accident and end up in hospital instead. God's will has been carried out in a way I did not anticipate. However, that does not enter into the matter of guidance from a practical standpoint. Is it appropriate to pray, 'Lord if You don't want me to get to my destination, then shut up my path'? I don't believe so. The destination may be my place of work, or the Sunday morning service at the church. I don't need to pray if I should go to work if that is my duty. My responsibility is to go to work, or church, as the case may be. God may overrule by sickness, weather or accident, but that is really not my concern. He may reveal His sovereign will by circumstances, but that is seen in hindsight rather than looking ahead.

Relying on circumstances to determine God's will can be very dangerous. People often speak of 'open doors' or 'closed doors'. An open door is an opportunity that presents itself. It may be a job offer or an opportunity to do a certain thing. I knew a woman who was seeking part time employment to supplement the family income. The only opening was a weekend job that prevented her from attending the services at her church. She reasoned that it was all right because God had opened the door. Job offers must be evaluated on the basis of scriptural principles, rather than opportunity, even if it is the only opportunity. Questions need to be asked regarding the way the job will affect the family, our involvement in the church, and of course we must ascertain that the job does not involve any practices that are less than honest.

The apostle Paul demonstrated an interesting response to an open door.

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12,13)

He had gone to Troas expecting to meet Titus and get a report on the Corinthian situation. The Lord had opened a door for him, giving him the opportunity to preach the gospel—that was the other reason for him going there. Because Titus did not show up, and Paul was so anxious for news about Corinth, he passed up the opportunity to preach and went to Macedonia in search of Titus. He did not interpret the 'open door' as an obligation to preach in Troas.

What about closed doors? A closed door could be the failure to get a particular job; the refusal of an application for a visa, or a rejection of a proposal of marriage. These negative responses would certainly indicate that the intended step is temporarily prevented, but that does not preclude further attempts. To become a chartered accountant requires a lot of hard study. Many do not pass their exams the first time. A Christian following the road map view might see his failure as a closed door and seek a new career. Others would study some more and try again—a perfectly logical course. Paul made numerous attempts to visit Rome:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) . . . (Romans 1:13)

The apostle did not see this as a closed door and seek openings elsewhere. He knew there was a need in Rome, so he kept trying.

If we applied the same principle to unanswered prayer, we would give up every time our prayers were not answered, but we have a couple of parables, in Luke 11 and again in chapter 18 that teach us that we must not give up when our prayers are not answered. Persistence often pays off.

Some Christians not only rely heavily on circumstances for guidance, they even try to force God's hand by creating circumstances in which they feel He must work. The term 'fleece' is often used in this regard. The expression is based upon an incident in the life of Gideon. It might be as well to quote the whole passage.

Gideon said to God, 'If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—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.' And that is what happened. Gideon rose early next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. 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.' That night God did so, Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

(Judges 6:36-40)

Gideon asked for two signs. First a wet fleece on a dry ground, and then a dry fleece on wet ground. An equivalent today might be a person who is seeking to buy a house praying, 'Lord, if this is the house for us to buy, make the real estate man call before noon.' Such an approach could result in some disastrous decisions.

Someone is probably thinking, 'Whatever you say, God did honour Gideon's fleeces.' True: but is that normative? Consider some things about the original incident. First, the fleeces, wet and dry, were supernatural signs. Can we expect that? Second, Gideon had already been given his directions and the assurance that he would save Israel from the Midianite captivity (chapter 6:14). The fleeces were an extra sign and a gracious confirmation of what the Lord had already said. Gideon's request was really an indication of unbelief. Third, using fleeces was not a method regularly employed by God's people.

Another incident that is similar, and may be seen as 'putting out a fleece' is found in Genesis 24. Abraham's servant had been charged with finding a wife for Isaac. His mission was clear and he was told to go to Haran to Abraham's relatives to find a woman. The field was immediately quite narrow. As the servant came to the town of Nahor, Abraham's brother, the servant prayed that the Lord would show him the right woman, and then stipulated some circumstances:

See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink', and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. (Genesis 24:13, 14)

Those circumstances were exactly fulfilled by Rebekah (verses 17-20). Does this give us warrant to stipulate specific circumstances? Would anyone today follow such a procedure in search of a wife? Garry Friesen has an amusing comment on this:

Making allowances for differences in time and culture, a man could hire a representative from a Christian dating agency. He could send that agent on a search to find a wife for his son. The agent could drive into a service station, offer a prayer, and sign up the first woman who meets his request

for a drink by filling his water jug and checking his radiator!

(Friesen p.299)

He adds:

The whole thing sounds preposterous, but if Genesis 24 is normative it would be a legitimate approach to the same goal.

There are some rather unusual things about Genesis 24. Isaac had to have a wife to fulfil the promise made to Abraham regarding his descendants. We are dealing with the Messianic line here. Note also that the servant was assured of angelic help in his search (verses 7,40). The incident does not represent a pattern for us to follow.

The only New Testament situation that could be considered in the same light is the casting of lots to choose an apostle to replace Judas (Acts 1:23-26). Perhaps it should be noted that the event occurred before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Also that there had not been any divine directive to choose another apostle at this point. The Lord may have overruled in the incident, but it would be unwise to see this as a precedent. If it were, then we could decide every issue by simply spinning a coin! There is certainly no New Testament instruction to seek God's will by such a means .

Impressions

There are Christians who rely heavily on impressions, or a sense of inward peace. They will never act without that peace. Some would equate this with the leading of the Spirit. It is common to hear people say, 'I felt led of the Lord . . . ', or, 'God told me . . . ' What is the leading of the Spirit? The key passage is found in Roman 8:

For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
(Romans 8:13, 14)

For many, being led by the Spirit means being led by inward impulses and impressions which come from God. It is something quite subjective. However, it is important to notice the 'because' that begins verse 14. The statement about being led by the Spirit is linked with verse 13 where Paul dealt with putting to death the misdeeds of the body. Mortification of sin is an indispensable part of being led by the Spirit. That removes the 'leading' from the realm of the subjective into the area of sanctification. The Spirit leads us in holiness and warfare against sin as we obey God's Word.

In Galatians 5 Paul used interchangeably expressions like 'live by the Spirit' (verses 16,25); 'led by the Spirit' (verse 18) and 'keep in step with the Spirit' (verse 25). The whole context of verses 16-25 has to do with moral behaviour rather than a subjective sense of guidance. Being led by the Spirit means manifesting the fruit of the Spirit (verses 22,23) and avoiding the works of the sinful nature (verses 19-21).

To rely heavily on feelings for guidance is extremely dangerous. I referred earlier to the woman who sought God's guidance even in dressing. The end result was that she might end up wearing only one shoe. We can laugh at that, and the only effect would be some discomfort and inconvenience for the woman; but the results of following that route could be disastrous. J. I. Packer cites another example from Hannah Smith's book where a woman had what she considered an 'impression from the Lord' that she should take some money her hostess had left lying around. It was supposed to illustrate the truth that 'all things are yours' (1 Cor.3:21). I have heard of other cases where people felt 'led of the Lord' to discontinue vital medication, with tragic results.

On the other hand there are times when we do not have any feelings confirming that a certain course of action is right, and we may not have any sense of peace. As a pastor I was sometimes faced with a situation that required confronting or challenging someone. On my way to such a meeting I may find my mind in a turmoil, my mouth dry and my stomach in knots. If I followed inward impressions I would turn

back, but it would not be right to conclude that I was out of the will of God because of these symptoms which are simply a medical response to an unpleasant situation.

Of course, many can cite instances where they acted in response to strong subjective impressions with blessed results. I could give examples myself. Many years ago when I was a pastor in Toronto, I felt a strong urge to visit a family that had attended our church but had moved to Hamilton, a city about 40 miles away, some months before. I had an address but no directions. The weather was terrible and the highways had been closed because of heavy snow, but I went, and with some difficulty located them. It turned out that the very next day they were moving to New Brunswick, and I have reason to believe the visit was beneficial to them. How do we explain experiences like that? We don't put it down to coincidence. We believe that our heavenly Father is in control of every detail of our lives. Sinclair Ferguson has some helpful comments on the subject:

There is much that is mysterious about the way God guides us. What is plain to Him is frequently obscure to us. But we are not called by God to make the mysterious, the unusual, the inexplicable, the rule of our lives, but His Word. Further it should be noted that very often these experiences, in which we begin to sense or understand what God's will is for us, fit in perfectly with the conviction that the Word of God is a living, active guide to us. (Discovering God's Will, p.32)

While we are to seek the will of God through the precepts and principles of Scripture, there are occasions when circumstances do indicate the will of God, and sometimes we may have a strong conviction that a certain course is to be followed. Just as circumstances must be evaluated in the light of Scripture and wisdom, it is even more important that feelings be evaluated in the same way. It must be recognized too that to rely on impressions alone is unwise and dangerous. We are too much infected with indwelling sin to be led consistently and accurately in this way.

In the personal example I gave, there could be nothing wrong in the course I felt constrained to follow, though some might feel it was unwise because of the weather. The family involved was very unstable and in need of frequent attention, so it was likely my visit would be timely. We should never seek mysterious or supernatural guidance, though we should recognize that it does sometimes occur. If it happens it is the exception not the rule.

The experiences of some outstanding Christians are often taken as examples of the kind of thing we are talking about. Hudson Taylor at 17 felt clearly that the Lord was saying to him, 'Then go for me to China.' It was 'as if a voice had spoken it.' However, we must not imagine that this was the first sense he had of a call to China. His father had a keen interest in that country and at quarterly meetings for lay preachers would ask, 'Why is so little being done for China?' It was a topic often discussed in the home, and even as a child Hudson had said, 'When I am a man I mean to be a missionary and go to China.' It was a field often before him and therefore it was not surprising that Hudson Taylor felt constrained to go there. We cannot doubt that these circumstances together with his inward conviction, combined to carry out the Lord's will with regard to his life's work.

How then does God reveal His will to us? Let's look once again at Colossians 1:9:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way .

Paul was praying for the very thing we have been discussing—knowing God's will. What he asked for the Christians at Colosse was not that God's will should be revealed in some mysterious and subjective way, but through divinely given wisdom. The purpose of his prayer was to help them live a life worthy of the Lord. A right understanding of this verse would keep Christians from frustration and many a pitfall. Even the way that guidance is often approached is wrong. We are all too often asking the wrong question. We are asking, 'What is God's will for my life?', whereas we should be asking, 'What kind of life does God

want me to live?’ ‘What sort of life or lifestyle is pleasing to Him?’ The answer then is found, not in an individualized road map, but in the Word of God which tells us how to live: how to behave in the home, in the workplace, in society, in the church. What we need is a knowledge of Scripture: an understanding of principles for living; and wisdom and grace to put it into practice.

Some will feel that this approach takes some of the romance and mystery out of Christian guidance. Perhaps it does, but it also removes much of its difficulty.

Some may feel that the approach is rationalistic and that it seems to leave God out of things. Not at all. We are saying that we seek God's will through the directives and principles of Scripture. We can't do that on our own. We need the Holy Spirit to give us an understanding of the Word, and we need divine help to put it into practice. We certainly should not be less in prayer than those who seek to know God's road map for their lives.

There are other passages that point in the same direction—the direction of wisdom and discernment.

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. (Romans 12:2)

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (Ephesians 5:17)

To know the Lord's will in the road map sense would not require wisdom so much as sensitivity to the Spirit's leading. Wisdom and understanding are key words in the matter of guidance. Maturity is another important concept.

Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

Following God's will involves many decisions. Not intuitive decisions—one route as opposed to another, but moral decisions—choosing right from wrong. For these decisions we need to understand God's Word. The more we know of it, the more we are equipped to make decisions.

With young Christians, the Lord is gracious, and often by various providences keeps them from rash decisions. He frequently uses older Christians to do this.

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22)

At any stage counsel should be sought in difficult decisions, but it is particularly needful for those young in the faith. As they mature they are more competent to make these decisions themselves.

There is a parallel in raising our families. When children are young they need to be instructed and directed in everything. As they mature they will take more and more decisions themselves.

To return to the woman who sought God's will as to whether she should put on one shoe or both, I would ask, is that a sign of spirituality or of immaturity? Surely it is the latter.

Earlier I quoted Psalm 32:8:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

The following verse is interesting:

Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.

To turn a horse it is necessary to use a bit and bridle. A bit is a piece of metal that fits across the horse's mouth. If the rider pulls on one side of the bridle, the bit presses into the side of the mouth, and to avoid the pain, the horse will turn its head thus changing direction. That is the kind of guidance many are

looking for: an unmistakable tug to one side or the other. Some circumstance, ‘fleece’ or impression that will lead them in the desired path. But the Lord says, ‘Don't be like that!’ It is a sign of immaturity to seek that kind of guidance. It is His instruction and teaching that we are to employ, applying our minds to the Bible to know what pleases the Lord.

At the beginning we asked a series of questions about situations in which we would seek God's will. We said that there is no justification in making a division between ‘big’ things and ‘little’ things: between ‘important’ decisions and ‘unimportant’. No one questions that we should seek God's will in the choice of a marriage partner. But what about the newspaper or the brand of soup? Very few would stand before the supermarket shelves and pray for the Spirit to direct them to the right brand of soup. Does that mean that God is not interested in our shopping, or that it is an area of our lives that is never related to God? Certainly not. As we saw, we have choices. We can choose whatever brand we like of soup or cereal. But there are also biblical principles for the use of our money. We should be wise stewards of it, therefore we should be concerned to honour God in the spending of our money. We should live within our means, and it is always appropriate to pray for wisdom in our purchases. Looking out for bargains; watching for specials and using coupons are all means of good stewardship. Some can make their money stretch further by shopping at several stores and getting the specials in each. Others with a heavier schedule may feel that the extra time required is not worth the savings that can be made. The point is, we should seek to honour the Lord in everything.

Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

At the beginning we quoted the prayer of David, ‘Show me the way I should go’ (Psalm 143:8). Does the Lord show us that way? Most certainly. He shows us His will; and with no less clarity that He showed it to Abraham or Noah. God always guides His people. It is just that the means are not always the same. As far as we are concerned, guidance comes mainly through Scripture. The Lord may use circumstances: He may give strong subjective convictions: He may on occasions use strange and mysterious ways: but He will never lead contrary to Scripture, and it is always from Scripture that we are to **seek** guidance.

At the beginning of each day and throughout the day, we ought to pray that the Lord would teach us to do His will. At the end of each day we ought to be able to know that we have carried out His will. Doubtless there will be failures on our part, and those failures, whether in ‘big’ things or ‘little’, need forgiveness. However we know that God, as our loving heavenly Father does not abandon us because of our failures to discern and do His will, nor does He consign us to a ‘second best’ existence. If every mistake put us ‘out of the will of God’ we would be in big trouble. We sin numerous times every day. Yes, every sin is contrary to God's revealed will, but we can be forgiven. We need to confess whenever we sin, but there are many times when we are not even aware that we have sinned, but God is gracious and we are forgiven anyway. When our children fall down we pick them up, dust them off, hug them and put them on their feet again. Our heavenly Father does not treat us with any less love. He has compassion on us and remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13,14). May the remembrance of His love and fatherly compassion motivate us to do His will, not because we fear His punishment, but because we are moved by God's redeeming grace in Christ .