

SESSION 8

The Fundamental Guide for Biblical Decision Making

When we talk about Biblical decision making, what we are expressing is our desire to make choices that are pleasing to the Lord and according to His will. However, there are many methods of decision making that sound spiritual, or even scriptural, that are not wise or pleasing to Christ. We are going to examine the principles and process for biblical decision making and briefly discuss many of the pitfalls that we can easily fall into along the way.

I. THE FOUNDATION FOR BIBLICAL DECISION MAKING

A. Defining the Will of God

“God's will is his perfect determination and sovereign ordination of all things, pertaining both to himself (including his decrees and actions) and to his creation (including the events of history and the thoughts and actions of people), all unto the magnification of his utmost glory.”¹

B. Distinguishing the Will of God (One Will; Two Aspects)

a. God's Decretive Will – His Secret, Decreed, Sovereign Will

God's decretive will “is God's good pleasure, his eternal, unchangeable counsel or decree in which he has ordained all things. God's decretive will characterizes all of God's essence, so it is eternal, immutable, independent, and omnipotent. This does not mean that he is the immediate or efficient cause of all things but that all things exist or occur by his eternal sovereign decree. God's decretive will makes everything certain, but he does not coerce his creatures to do anything. He ordains the free choices of men.”²

Ephesians 1:9-12

He made known to us **the mystery of His will**, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him **with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times**, that is, **the summing up of all things in Christ**, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been **predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will**, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

Isaiah 46:9-10

“Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, **‘My purpose will be established,**
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure’”

- i. God's Sovereignty – His complete and absolute control over everything
- ii. Providence – His care and guidance in all things towards His sovereign purpose

¹ John MacArthur, Biblical Doctrine, p. 185

² John MacArthur, Biblical Doctrine, p. 187

b. **God's Preceptive Will** – His Revealed Will in Scripture; Moral Will

God's preceptive will "consists of God's precepts in the law and in the gospel for man's conduct. It is often called God's revealed or signified will. God reveals his preceptive will by means of scriptures commands, prohibitions, warnings, christenings, and judgments. God's preceptive will is God's will only in a prescriptive sense. The preceptive will reveals not what God will do but what he demands of people."³

Ephesians 5:17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is

Colossians 1:9 ...we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding

- i. Commands – Direct commands of God in Scripture
- ii. Principles – Indirect, but biblically derived precepts of God

"God's decretive will and preceptive will must be held in tension period to deny his preceptive will is to commit injustice against God's holiness and to ignore the gravity of sin, but to deny god's decretive will is to deny his omniscience, wisdom, omnipotence, and sovereignty."⁴

"The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."⁵

"The Bible must be our standard. Whenever we are confronted with a question about Christian practice, we must apply the teaching of the Bible. Sometimes the Bible will deal with it directly, and we must go by its direct teaching. Often the Bible will not deal with it directly, and then we must look for general principles to guide us. It does not matter what other people think. Their behavior is not a standard for us. But the Bible is a standard for us, and it is by the Bible that we must live."⁶

Additional Notes

³ John MacArthur, Biblical Doctrine, p. 187

⁴ John MacArthur, Biblical Doctrine, p. 188

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith - 1.6

⁶ J.C. Ryle, Walking with God

II. PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR BIBLICAL DECISION MAKING

“You must begin the biblical decision making process with some crucial presuppositions. A presupposition is what you assume to be true and therefore act upon. The following are biblical truths that you must be convinced of before you will make decisions biblically.”⁷

A. We do **not** need to know God’s decretive will to make a decision

B. We do **not** need to interpret God’s providence to make a decision

Isaiah 55:8-9 For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways

Deuteronomy 29:29 The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law

C. The Holy Spirit will **not** speak to you apart from God’s word. The Holy Spirit convicts, teaches, encourages, and conforms us through God’s revealed word.

John 14:26 The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

John 16:13-15 When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for **He will not speak on His own initiative**, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you

D. God's only guides or leads his people today by **providence** (we know after the fact) and by **promises** (*Scripture*) (we know before we act).

E. God has provided all we need in His word through His Spirit to do his will

Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path

2 Peter 1:3-4 seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust

F. We are fully responsible to search Scripture and obey God’s preceptive will

G. If we make a decision based on biblical commands and principles alone we can fully trust that we are pleasing God in our decisions and fully trust he will providentially change our choice if it is not within his decreed will

H. We must rightly interpret and apply the word of God. We must accurately handle his truth if we hope to accurately abide in his will.

I. No one is ever outside of God's decreed plan.

⁷ Stuart Scott, *Biblical Manhood: Masculinity, Leadership, and Decision Making*, p. 62-65

III. PRINCIPLES FOR BIBLICAL DECISION MAKING

There are a few guiding principles that must have occurred in the past and some that must be continually practiced in the present, in order to make wise, biblical decision. Only someone, transformed by the life giving power of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and walking faithfully in obedience to His word is able to make wise biblical decisions.

The Biblical Summary

Colossians 1:3-12

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of **your faith in Christ Jesus** and the love which you have for all the saints... For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be **filled with the knowledge of His will** in all **spiritual wisdom and understanding**, so that you will **walk in a manner worthy of the Lord**, to **please Him in all respects**, **bearing fruit in every good work** and **increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power**, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all **steadfastness** and **patience**; joyously **giving thanks** to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

A. **You Must Be Saved** – In order to please the Lord and do His will, you must be born again

1 Corinthians 1:18-20 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.

B. **You Must Study Scripture** – You cannot practice what you do not know.

1 Corinthians 2:7-9 ...we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Psalms 119:98-101 Your commandments make me **wiser** than my enemies, for they are ever mine. I have more **insight** than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I **understand** more than the aged, because I have observed Your precepts. I have **restrained** my feet from every evil way, that I may keep Your word.

C. **You Must Submissive** – You must submit your own will to His word

Philippians 2:3-5 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude [e]in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus

Matthew 26:39, 42 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will... He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.

D. **You Must Be Spirit Filled** – You must be controlled by His Spirit

1 Corinthians 2:10-13 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

Ephesians 5:15-18 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit

E. **You Must Be Striving for Sanctification** – Be holy, for He is holy

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Philippians 2:13-13 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your salvation with fear and trembling**; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure

IV. **The PROCESS FOR BIBLICAL DECISION MAKING** ⁸

A. **START SUBMISSIVE** – Submit your will to the will of the Lord.

- a. Continually have a humble, yielded, and dependent will before God (Rom. 12:1-2). This would be reflected in the prayer request "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done...." (Mt.6:10, Mt. 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42 - yet not as I will, but as You will... Your will be done.). Remember that knowing and doing God's Will is "so that we might walk worthily as unto the Lord..." Col 1:9-14
- b. Continually pray for wisdom – for the Spirit to assist you in bringing Scripture to apply to the situation (Jas. 1:5). “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” Wisdom is truth applied, not epiphany.
- c. Gather as much of the factual data as you can to make a wise decision (Prov.18:13). The amount of time spent on this process often depends on the weight of the decision (e.g. Jesus choosing the twelve -Luke 6:12).

⁸ Stuart Scott, Biblical Decision Making: Faithfully Walking According to God’s Will (Sermon Series)

B. SEARCH FOR COMMANDS - Study any direct commands in Scripture concerning this particular issue (2 Tim. 2:15; 3:15-17). All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable... This may take on the form of positive commands or the form of prohibitions. (Make use of a Bible concordance, Topical Bible (with caution), and other Bible reference books.)

C. SEARCH FOR PRINCIPLES – Study the applicable principles in Scripture concerning this issue (2 Tim. 2:15; 3:15-17). Wisdom is at its purest in Scripture and then starts to rely more on human reasoning, advice and experience after that (obviously less reliable). Stewardship principles; Wisdom principles; Relationship Principles; etc. This is one of the most neglected areas of decision making. (many of these questions below are from *The Discipline of Grace*, Jerry Bridges, 213).

a. WALK WITH CHRIST

- i. Is this something I can thank God for? (Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:30; Col. 3:17)
- ii. Is this something that will glorify God? (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 5:9)
- iii. Is this following the example of Christ? (Rom. 15:7-8; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 John 2:6)
- iv. Is this beneficial? Does it promote my spiritual life?
- v. Is this a practice that over time will tend to master me? Will it stimulate a desire that will be difficult to control?
- vi. Is this an occasion where my "flesh" (sinfulness) is seeking to indulge itself? (Gal. 5:13)

b. INFLUENCE ON OTHERS

- i. Is this worth imitating? (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9)
- ii. Are you not seeking outside counsel due to wanting what you want? (Prov 18:1-2; 24:6)
- iii. Is it self-serving at the expense of someone else's benefit? (Rom. 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:33)
- iv. Will my choice affect others around me? If so, in what way?
- v. Is it constructive? Will it promote the spiritual well-being of other believers if they engage in this practice that is permissible for me?"

c. NEED

- i. Is there a God-given need for me to do this? (Acts 6:1-6)
- ii. If there is a need, who needs to be doing it?
- iii. 1 John 3:17-18 - But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth

d. OPPORTUNITY

- i. Is there an opportunity to do this? Does God appear to be orchestrating circumstances (Providence) to provide you with the opportunity to do this? (2 Cor.2:12-13)
- ii. Galatians 6:10 - So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith
- iii. Philippians 4:10 - you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity
- iv. Colossians 4:5 - Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity

D. SCRUTINIZE DESIRES - Affirm that your desires are God-honoring (Ps.37:4;John 15:7).

- a. What do I want ("wish") to do?
- b. Is it edifying to others?
- c. Will it cause others to sin? What you do in moderation, others may do in excess
- d. 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-33 - All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his

neighbor...Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

- e. Will it bring glory to God? (1 Cor. 7:36,39)

E. STILL INDECISIVE = HOLD

- a. Rom.14:23;Heb.11:25 (The "holding principle" = if it involves the troubled conscience - you might possibly sin in moving ahead)
- b. Possibly go back and gather more data – both in the initial data gathering or in the commands and principles of Scripture.

F. DECIDE - Humbly and dependently make your decision and trust God (Prov.16:9, Acts 16:7)

- a. There is freedom in following the Lord if you're submissive, obedient, Spirit lead
- b. Proverbs 16:9 - The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps

Biblical Decision Making

The Decision: _____

"Holding Principle" Rom. 14:23

Attitude: Prayer fully, humbly, to please Christ

Any Factual Data (Prov. 18:13): _____

V. PITFALLS OR UNBIBLICAL DECISION MAKING ⁹

There are many methods of decision making that sound spiritual, and seem biblical, but are dangerous and deceptive. We want to be conscious and cautious about leaning on any other method of discerning the will of the Lord outside of His prescribed and revealed will in His written word.

Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, **rather than according to Christ**.

1 Corinthians 2:16 For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But **we have the mind of Christ**

2 Peter 1:16-21 So **we have the prophetic word made more sure**, to which you do well to **pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place**, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that **no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation**, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but **men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God**.

- A. **Misusing the Bible** – Intentionally or unintentionally; pulling precepts out of narratives; allegorical hermeneutic; taking Scripture out of context
- B. **Personal Advice (without checking Scripture)** – Godly people can give unbiblical advice; personal opinions; prescriptions from descriptions; subjective desires
- C. **Circumstances** – Situations, conditions, coincidences, events – usually increase pressure to make a decision; provoke a judgment; circumstance cannot override commands
- D. **Results** - end result regardless of direction; wrong means with right results is not pleasing to the Lord (Moses hitting rock; William Carey provoking wife)
- E. **Setting Up Conditions** (Gideon's fleeces) – Putting God to the test
- F. **Opened and Closed Doors** – Looking for circumstances to make decisions; “Opened doors can lead to elevator shafts”
- G. **Ideas, Inner Feelings, Desires, and Impressions** – “God laid on my heart,” Impressions can come from fear, satan, misunderstanding, physical circumstances, poor theology, the flesh, the culture
- H. **“Led by the Spirit”** – (Biblically Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18 – putting to death sin, the flesh, desires; putting on righteousness, fruit of the Spirit; holiness in order to imitate Christ or be conformed to Christ) – Spirit would never lead contrary to Scripture or in accordance with sinful desire.

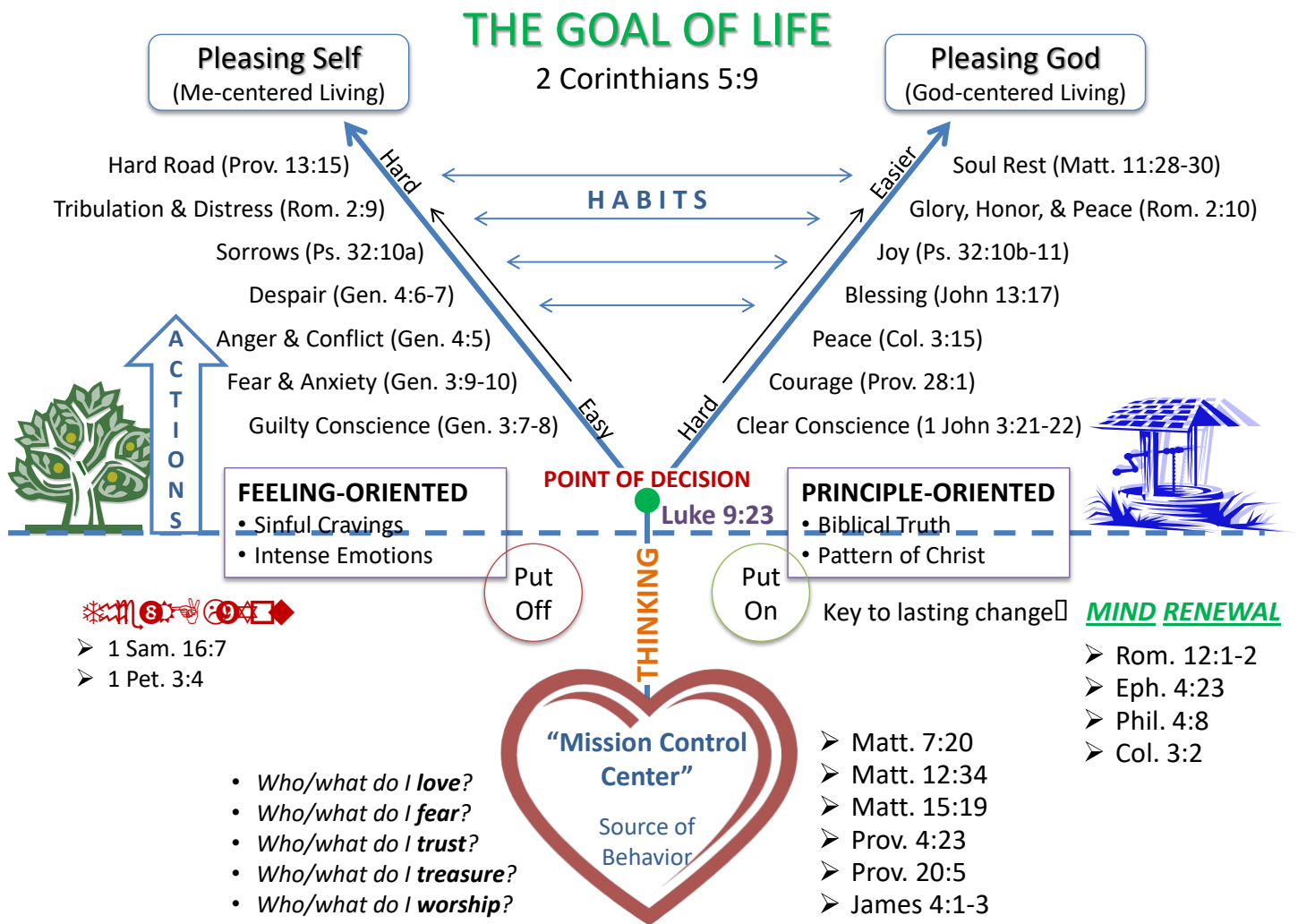
Galatians 5:16-18 - I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for **these are in opposition** to one another, **so that you may not do the things that you please**. But if you are **led by the Spirit**, you are not under the Law.

- I. **Misusing Prayer** – Waiting for God to tell you and answer through prayer; Prayer is not listening, it is speaking; We listen to His word, We speak to Him in prayer

⁹ Stuart Scott, How Do I Avoid the Pitfalls of Decision-Making (Sermon)

- J. **An Audible Voice** – “God told me,” Could be mental, satanic, organic brain problem (tumor, hallucinations); lack of sleep (after 3 days, can hear or see things); side effects of medications; reflecting or talking to self
- K. **Inner Peace** - “I have a peace about this decision,” Peace is not used for decision making in Scripture; Peace come from a lack of anxiety or lack of strife
- L. **Devices** – Flipping coins; Paper, Rock, Scissors; Drawing Straws; Once revelation was complete, we do not need devices for moral decisions
- M. **Signs** – Looking for signs; walking by sight rather than by faith;
- N. **Isolation** – No counsel; Not talking to elders; Perilous Privacy (cutting self off from the counsel, prayer, wisdom of the church) in order to do what you want
 - Proverbs 18:1** - He who separates himself seeks his own desire,
He quarrels against all sound wisdom
- O. **Dreams** – Interpreting or following direction from dreams; no way to verify; many Islamic or eastern look for dream direction; dreams are nothing more than imagination morbidly active
- P. **“Waiting” on the Lord** – Praying & waiting – might need to study & obey; “God will not believe for you or obey for you;” Wait = Trust & move; Passivity, laziness, fear, disobedience disguised in spiritual language
- Q. **Conscience** – Conscience is our guard, not our guide; Reorient, reeducate, retrain conscience with Scripture; conscience can be misinformed, hardened, darkened, dead
- R. **Reason (relying on)** – Engage your mind, but don’t rely on your own reasoning
 - Proverbs 3:5-6** - Trust in the Lord with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight
- S. **Pseudo Faith** – “I believe He will provide” “I trust the Lord” - True faith is built on the obedience of commands and principles
- T. **Fasting** – Prayed and fasted; Fasting is usually around troubled, hard times; seeking God’s will
- U. **The “Call” (all experienced based)** – Experiences rather than principles; Many callings are just desires of man attributed to the will of God; True Calling = Character; Giftedness; Desire; Confirmation
- V. **Small Group (“...where two or three are gathered...”)** – Agreement with others
- W. **Prophecy (modern day form)** – Words of encouragement & wisdom (modern “gift”)
- X. **Over analysis (on the unimportant)** – Spend more time on the weightier issues; paralysis of analysis; morbid inspection, introspection

Additional Notes



Resources for Biblical Decision Making

Jay Adams, A Call to Discernment: Distinguishing Truth From Error in Today's Church

Tim Challies, The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment

Kevin DeYoung, Just Do Something

Gary Friesen, Decision-Making and the Will of God

John MacArthur

- Found: God's Will
- Think Biblically (with Master's College Faculty)

John MacArthur & Nathan Busenitz

- Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong
- Right Thinking in a Church Gone Astray
- Right Thinking for a Culture in Chaos

Stuart Scott, Biblical Manhood: Masculinity, Leadership and Decision Making

A Study of Decision Making God's Way (unpublished D.Min project for Covenant Theological Seminary, 1996).