

Can I Know God's Will for My Life?



Aaron J. Werner

A Christianity which will bear witness to God's Word . . . will not be afraid to engage in an intellectual and philosophical contest with the prevailing dogmas of its day.

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How Can I Know God's Will for My Life?

Over the years, people have asked me many questions concerning Christianity. One of the most frequent questions is, "How can I know God's will for my life?" Often, people ask this question in relation to their future occupation. College students, for instance, ask, "In what should I major?" Or, "When I graduate, should I join the Army or the Peace Corps?" And, "Should I go to graduate school, or enter the workforce?" When they decide, even more questions arise. For example, "If I decide to enter the work force, which job should I select? Should I select the higher paying job, or the one that will give me more time with my family?"

Young singles often seek God's will in their personal relationships. For example, "Should I date? If so, who—the blonde or the brunette? Should I pursue the attractive athlete, or the less attractive computer genius?" They also wonder, "Should I marry, or have I been called to a life of singleness? If I am to marry, should I bring children into this unstable world?" In short, many truly want to know God's will for their lives. But, can anyone *really* know God's specific will for their individual life? I believe the answer is a resounding "yes." So, how can we know God's will for our lives?" In order to answer this question, we must first determine what we mean by God's will.

Two Components of God's Will

One can divide God's will into two parts—his *general* will and his *specific* will. God's *general* will for one's life is the same for everyone. God reveals this portion of his will to

us through the Bible.¹ This component of God’s will encompasses probably 95 percent of his total will for an individual’s life. Correspondingly, God’s *specific* will for one’s life encompasses only about five percent of his total will for any particular person. This portion of God’s will is unique to every individual. Unfortunately, the Bible does not reveal this aspect of God’s will for us. Most people, therefore, search for God’s specific will rather than his general will.

We don’t need to ask God to reveal his general will because he has already done so. For instance, we don’t need to ask him if we should marry a Christian or not because he has already told us.² Likewise, we don’t need to ask him if we should avoid sexual immorality—he has made that clear.³ Similarly, we don’t need to pray about getting a divorce,⁴ helping the poor,⁵ sharing the good news,⁶ loving our

¹Although God’s general will is also, less clearly, revealed to us externally through natural revelation, and internally through the *sensus divinitatis*, it is most clearly revealed to us through the Bible. In fact, apart from the special revelation, we would not be able, through natural revelation, to know about our standing with God. For instance, apart from the Bible, using only natural revelation, we would not be able to discern whether or not we have been created as fodder for some higher being. Just as many of the living things on this earth appear to have been created for our food, we may have been created as food for some kind of higher being. Apart from the Bible, would have no way of knowing that we are any more valuable to God than a potato is to us.

²2 Corinthians 6:14 says “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.*”

³1 Corinthians 6:18 decrees, “*Flee from sexual immorality.*”

⁴Mark 10:11-12 states, “*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.*”

⁵Matthew 6:3-4 expects us to give to the needy. It reads, “*But **when** you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*”

enemies,⁷ studying hard in school,⁸ or defending our faith.⁹ He has made all those things clear in his Word.

Just as a driver is obligated to know the driving laws, Christians are obligated to know God's general will. Ignorance is no excuse for those who have access to God's Word. But, merely knowing God's will is not sufficient. The Bible declares, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*" (James 1:22). What, then, does God's Word command all to do?

In sum, God's word commands us to avoid some things while doing other things. When we fail to do something commanded, we commit a sin of omission. When we do something forbidden, we commit a sin of commission. The most famous rules are the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God. A man once asked Jesus which of these commandments is the most important. Christ replied,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

⁶Matthew 28:19-20 commands, "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"

⁷Romans 12:17-21 states, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*"

⁸Matthew 22:37-38 Jesus replied: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.*"

⁹1 Peter 3:15-16 commands, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*"

In short, God’s general will for everyone is to love him and love others. Hence, the appropriate application of loving God and loving others causes us to obey the rest of his law. For instance, Micah inquired, “*What does the Lord require of you?*” He responded, “*To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8). But, if we apply Christ’s two great commands, we would, by default, be obeying Micah’s command. The same is true of commands such as Hebrews 13:16 which says, “*Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*” Similarly, Romans 12:18-21, which claims,

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In fact, we fulfill the great commission if we obey the command “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” The reason is that if we truly love our neighbors, we will share God’s good news with them and warn them of the danger of dying without receiving God’s grace and forgiveness.

I’m not sure if you noticed, but I intentionally selected primarily positive commands—things we should do—rather than things we should not do. I find that it’s unhelpful to fill our minds with things that we should not do. Here’s why: As a collegiate decathlete, one event I had to master was the discus. Although the event is not physically demanding, it is perhaps the most technically demanding event of the decathlon. Fortunately, I was blessed with coaches who

understood the biomechanics of the event. Unfortunately, some of these coaches ended up doing more damage than good. One such coach knew the event so well that he could point out every single mistake I made—and he did. After every throw, he pointed out everything I did wrong. Very rarely did he tell me what I did right. As a result, my mind was filled with what I should not do, rather than with what I should. Consequently, I never attained my full potential in that event.

The same thing can happen in our spiritual life. If we focus upon the things that we should not do, rather than the things we should do, then we will not reach our spiritual potential. For example, suppose I said to you, “Thinking about pink elephants is a vile sin—don’t ever do it. And, whatever you do, definitely do not think of a pink elephant wearing a red bikini—that’s an extremely wicked sin.” Most likely, now you have the image of a pink elephant wearing a red bikini stuck in your mind. I think Paul understood this truth when he wrote Philippians 4:8 which says, *“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”*

However, when college students ask the question, “What is God’s will for my life?” they usually do not mean these types of general commands. Instead, they mean God’s specific will—the five percent that is unique to them. They ask, for instance, “Should I keep my safe job in America, or should I accept a job in a dangerous country like Afghanistan or Syria?” Or, they ask, “Should I live in a safe suburb, or move into a poverty stricken and dangerous part of my city?” I think all will agree that God has called some people to

unique ministries. For instance, God called John the Baptist and many of the Old Testament prophets to eccentric lifestyles. How, then, can we know God's specific will for our lives? I believe there are six flawed ways, and two flawless ways to know God's specific will for our life.

Six Potentially Flawed Ways to Know God's Specific Will for Your Life

Normally, when Christians seek God's specific will for their lives, they depend upon one or more of the following methods. However, these common methods, or ways, to know God's specific will are, in my opinion, potentially dangerous.

First: Direct Communication

One way to know God's specific will for your life is to have him communicate it to you directly. This is the way Moses received his commission. God audibly spoke to Moses, telling him to confront Pharaoh and demand that he release the Hebrews slaves.¹⁰ There are two main problems with relying on this kind of communication.

First, although God can still communicate with us directly, he doesn't appear to do so very often. In fact, even during Biblical times, God did not speak audibly very often. The Bible records God speaking audibly only about ten or fifteen times in a 2,000-year period. That's only an average of about once every 150 years. Consequently, we should not expect to hear God's audible voice on a regular basis. That's probably why I don't know anyone who has heard God's voice audibly. Nevertheless, Adrian Rogers once was asked,

¹⁰Exodus 3.

“Does God really speak to you in an audible voice?” He responded, “Oh, no—when God speaks to me it’s much louder than any audible voice.” I think he meant that God speaks to him in an inaudible, soul-to-soul fashion. Most of us, I think, have heard God in this sense.

Second, even if God chooses to speak to us directly, albeit inaudibly, we may not hear him accurately. There is a very serious danger in depending on direct inaudible communication to know God’s specific will for our lives—namely, we might hear him wrongly. I think all of us have felt, at one time or another, that God was leading us to do something, to date someone, or to accept a certain job only to find out a few months later that the voice could not possibly have been God’s. For instance, the person you thought God was telling you to date turned out to be a false Christian, leading you astray. Or, perhaps the job you thought you were supposed to accept turned out to be an economic “dead-end.”

One such experience remains engrained in my mind. A college student named Nick approached me claiming that God had told him to build a youth center. Nick had \$5,000 with which he was to pay his university tuition. However, he felt certain that God wanted him to go to a casino and turn that \$5,000 into \$500,000. No matter what I said, I could not convince him that he had not heard from God. So what happened? Nick went to the casino, and lost all his money. He dropped out of school and joined the Air Force. Before he left he said, “Well, at least I know what God’s voice does not sound like.” Consequently, I am always *very* skeptical of persons (especially pastors) who say “God told me to do *such and such*.” Instead, I think such pastors should say “I feel like God is leading me to *so and so*.” Even though the latter

approach may delay, say, the church's next building project, it's humbler, safer, and more theologically accurate.

Today we may hear God's voice. But, if we do, it must be filtered through our sin nature. As a result, it may arrive garbled. Consequently, if we want to hear God's voice more clearly, we must restrain our sinful nature so that we can receive his word more clearly. When we do this, we transform ourselves into living sacrifices. Only then, according to Romans 12:2, we "*will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" One way to accomplish this purging is through fasting. I recommend fasting before any major decision. There are spiritual dangers associated with fasting. For instance, it can engender the type of pride experienced by the Pharisees. The potential benefits, though, seem to outweigh the risks. For instance, my wife and I fasted for several days before we felt relatively certain that God wanted us to move from paradise (West Palm Beach, Florida) to a place a little lower on the social-status totem pole—Springdale, Arkansas.

Some Christians may object to what I am saying. They claim that true believers will know Christ's voice. I am aware that Jesus said, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (John 10:27), but the context of this verse is Jesus' messiahship. In other words, the true children of God are going to recognize that Jesus is the promised messiah, the fulfillment of the prophecies, and follow him. The context of this passage is not talking about how God will communicate to his people once Jesus ascended from the earth into heaven. Instead, it is claiming that true sheep (or true followers of Christ) will recognize that Jesus is the Christ, and will follow and obey him.

Second: Angelic Communication

Another way to know God's will is to hear it from an angel. There are obvious problems with this method. The **first** is that God may not send an angel to you. The **second** is that we may have difficulty determining whether or not the angelic being is a heavenly angel or a fallen angel. According to 2 Corinthians 11:14, "*Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.*" Consequently, discerning a heavenly angel from a demon is not always as easy as some may suppose. I think that is why Galatians 1:8 warns, "*Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*" Sadly, two great religions began when their founders failed to heed this verse—Islam and Mormonism. Both Mohammad and Joseph Smith received a different gospel when they communicated with a fallen angel appearing as an angel of light. Therefore, communicating with an angel is not necessarily a reliable way to know God's specific will for your life.¹¹

Third: Advice from Mature Christians

Often college students are encouraged to seek out the advice of older, wiser, and more mature Christians when attempting to determine God's specific will. I think this can

¹¹I know that God communicated through angels in the past. For instance, he sent an angel to Mary to tell her that she was going to mother Jesus. I'm not sure of any better way to distinguish between a heavenly angel and one masquerading as a heavenly angel than to see if its message is consistent with the revealed word of God. This was true in Mary's case. Also, the angel's message was confirmed by the miracle of the virgin conception. Perhaps we don't need angelic messengers as often today, because we have more of God's revealed word than, say, Mary.

be helpful. Younger people can learn from the mistakes of their elders. However, younger people must not rely on their sincere elders since they may be sincerely wrong. As a pastor, I try to avoid giving such advice. Instead, I give those seeking God's specific will guiding principles from the Bible, and then encourage them to make their own decision regarding God's specific will. Besides, most people seem to hop from pastor to pastor until they find one that gives them what they want to hear. Can you imagine doing this with a medical doctor?¹² Although asking a mature Christian for advice can be helpful, it cannot be the deciding factor in determining God's specific will for our lives because we must live with the consequences of the decision—not the pastor.

Fourth: Opened and Closed Doors.

Some allow “open and closed doors” to determine God's specific will for their lives. The term “open door” refers to a present opportunities such as a job offer. For instance, if you want to work for Microsoft, but the only available job offer you get is with McDonalds, then God's will for you may be determined by such “doors.” There are many problems with the “open and closed door” model. **First**, sometimes many doors will be open at the same time. At other times, we may not be able to see any particular open door.

Second, simply because a door is open, it does not follow that God wants you to walk through that door. For instance, suppose you are driving to work and your car breaks down.

¹²Obviously, I'm not opposed to patients receive a second and even a third opinion. I think doing so is wise. Rather, I'm pointing out the ludicrousness of hopping from doctor to doctor until we find a doctor willing to say that we are in perfect health when, in fact, we are not.

As you are contemplating what to do, you look up and see a man walking toward you brandishing an ear-to-ear smile. Then you realize your good fortune—your car has broken down in the parking lot of a BMW dealership. When the salesman offers you a brand new BMW with no money down you think to yourself, “What perfect timing...this must be God’s will.” I think even the most naive reader would respond, “Not necessarily.” In short, simply because an open door exists, even one with impeccable timing, one should not assume that the door is necessarily God’s will.

A **third** problem with the “open and closed door” model is that sometimes, no doors will be open. Does this mean that God wants you to do nothing? Not necessarily. Sometimes, God wants us to kick open a closed door. For instance, suppose you feel that God is leading you to minister in a restricted-access nation such as Cuba. Yet, as you research ways of entering Cuba, you find no open doors. The absence of such a door does not necessarily mean that God has not called you to Cuba—you may need to make a door. Hence, open and closed doors do not seem to be a reliable way to know God’s will for one’s life.

Fifth: Coin Flipping

A fifth way that people attempt to determine God’s will is by flipping a coin. Although this seems unwise, the method actually has biblical precedent. For instance, consider how the disciples replaced Judas. Acts 1:23-26 says,

So, they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” Then they cast lots,

and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.”

Now, we know that simply because a hero of the Bible performed a particular act, that act is not necessarily proper. For instance, the fact that King David committed adultery and murder does not mean that adultery and murder are morally justifiable actions. Likewise, simply because the disciples made a choice by casting lots, does not mean that we should make our decisions in the same fashion. Nevertheless, the disciples were never condemned for making a decision in this manner.¹³ Therefore, I think that this method could be justifiable if all things are equal and you cannot decide between two excellent options. The model presumes that you have prayed, fasted, and searched the scriptures, but you are still stalemated.¹⁴ The dangerous aspect to this method is the temptation to recant on your outcome and suggest to God, “let’s try 2 out of three.” Therefore, ahead of time, you must determine that you will accept the consequence regardless of the consequences.¹⁵

Sixth: Putting Out a Fleece

A sixth method that people use to ascertain God's will is termed “putting out a fleece.” This method attained its name from Gideon who attempted to confirm God's will by placing a wool fleece on the ground and asking God to do something

¹³Some have argued that the disciples were imprudent, and should have chosen Paul to replace Judas.

¹⁴You cannot flip a coin to see if God wants you to get drunk or have an affair—he has already given us his answer regarding those matters.

¹⁵A contemporary variation of this model involves placing a “bobble-head” Jesus figure on the dashboard of your car and driving around hitting speed bumps as your ask Jesus “yes” or “no” questions.

to it. In Judges 6:36-37 Gideon said to God, “*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.*” Today, many people test God in a similar fashion. They say things like, “God if I pass biology, I will go on the mission trip.” Or, “If James asks me out, then I will go to church every week.” Sometimes people will say things like, “God, if you want me to go to seminary, then do such-and-such for me.” The problem with this method is twofold. First, the Bible say not to test God.¹⁶ Second, Gideon’s desire for the fleece represented his failure to trust God.

Two Better Ways to Know God’s Specific Will for Your Life

Now that we have dismissed six methods for ascertaining God's will, hopelessness may be approaching. Yet, one need not despair—there are at least two ways to know God's specific will.

One: Follow Your Heart

The first flawless way to know God's will is for you to follow your heart. Whenever I suggest this to perceptive Christians, I receive concerned and condemning glances. They wisely respond, “Are you sure? Doesn’t the Bible say to not trust our hearts?” Yes it does. In fact, **Jeremiah 17:9** says, “*The heart is deceitful above all things.*” So obviously, there is a catch. As we discussed earlier, perhaps 95 percent

¹⁶Is Matthew 4:7 Jesus answered, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

of God's will for your life is the same as God's will for my life. Yet, most people are primarily concerned with the five percent that is unique to them.

Indeed, most Christians seem relatively unconcerned with the 95 percent. For instance, I often ask churching-going college students if they have read the entire Bible. Unfortunately, only about ten percent answer affirmatively. This means that 90 percent of church-going college students are basing their eternal destiny on a book that they have not even read! My point is that most Christians are not concerned with the bulk of God's will for their lives. Instead, they invest an unnecessary and disproportionate amount of time attempting to find God's specific will for their individual lives. I use the term "unnecessary" because I believe that the five percent is irrelevant to persons until they are heeding the 95 percent. In other words, there is little need to discover God's specific will for your life until you are seeking and obeying his general will for your life.

Now, here is the catch. When we begin to ascertain and obey God's general will for our lives (the 95 percent), then his specific will for our lives (the five percent) will, increasingly, become the desire of our hearts. In other words, the more we obey God's general will, the more the things we want to do will be the things that he wants us to do. I think this is a point in Psalm 37:3-6 which declares, "*Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this.*" According to this passage, those who do good, trust in God, and delight themselves in the Lord will receive, from God, the desires of their hearts. Does this mean that

those who delight themselves in the Lord will receive a corvette, or a high-paying job? I don't think so. Instead, I think it means that those who delight in knowing and obeying God will have their desires changed and fulfilled. In other words, the more we obey God, the more we want (in our heart) to do his will. Consequently, in a sense, we can know God's specific will (the five percent) by following our heart in proportion to the degree in which we are obeying his general will (the 95 percent) for our lives.

I believe the New Testament reveals the same principle concealed in Psalm 37. For instance, Romans 12:1-2 reads,

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then** you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

In other words, after we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, and no longer conform to the patterns of this world, and after we have transformed and renewed our minds, then we will know God's perfect will. The reason we will know it is because the things we want to do will be his specific will. For example, if you are obeying God's general will, and you develop a strong desire to move to New York City and minister to international peoples living there, then it's probably God will that you move there. Personally, living in New York City is repulsive to me. Hence, assuming I'm obeying God's revealed will (the 95%), God has probably not called me to New York.

I believe God is insulted when we seek his specific will for our lives when we ignore his revealed will. It is futile, therefore, to ask God who to date or marry, where to live, or

what to do when we are not actively sharing our faith, helping the poor, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. But, suppose that I'm trying to obey God's general will, yet I'm still not sure what I want to do? I think the degree of certainty in knowing God's will is going to be proportional to the degree in which we are obeying his general will. Accordingly, the more *fully* we obey his general will, the more *completely* we will know his perfect or specific will. So, if you cannot decide what to do with your life, and you are attempting to obey God's general, then follow your heart, and serve him by doing what you enjoy. If that's not enough, there is a second way to know God's will for your life

Two: The Return of Christ Test

A second way to know God's will for your life is to ask yourself a question whenever confronted with a life changing decision. This question is based upon verses such as Ecclesiastes 12:14 which states, "*God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*" The New Testament reiterated this truth. For example, Romans 2:16 says, "*This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*" Paul also wrote, in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*" In fact, Jesus spoke similarly harsh words in Matthew 12:36 when he declared, "*But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.*"

In light of these verses, the question we should ask

ourselves is this: “Will my choice make me more prepared, or less prepared, for Christ’s return and the following judgment.” For instance, “Will dating person ‘A’ bring me closer to, or further from God?” Additionally, one can ask, “Will my particular career make me more ashamed, or less ashamed, when I stand before the Lord to give an account of my life?” If we honestly answer these questions, then I think we can ascertain God's will for our lives with relatively high degree of certainty.

Conclusion

Although ascertaining God's will for your life is a difficult task, being in God’s will is worth the effort. However, I think it’s dangerous to think of ourselves as either being in God will, or not being in it. The question of being in God's will is not an “either / or” issue. Rather, being in God's will is a spectrum. Consider a scale of one to ten. Let’s let a ten represent being completely in God's will, and a one being only somewhat in God's will. Most of us are somewhere in between. Where are you on that scale? Even more important, where would you like to be? However, and even more important question is, “What can you do this week to help you move up that scale?” If you are a three, what can you do to become a five? If you are a six, what can you do to become an eight? Perhaps you can commit to reading God's word this week. Perhaps you can determine to better obey the word of God that you have been reading.

However, perhaps, when you think about the scale of God's will, you realize that you are completely out of his will. In fact, you have never received his forgiveness. You have

never become a born again child of God. If that is you, then you must turn from you sin, and turn to Christ. God's first will for our lives is for us to repent—to turn from our sin, and to turn to him. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*” In other words, God does not anyone to perish. Instead, he wants to spend eternity in heaven with all. Unfortunately, our sins have separated us from him. But, if we will turn from them, and turn to him, he will wash our sins away and welcome us into his kingdom.¹⁷

¹⁷If you would like to know about salvation, see my chapter titled, “What Must I Do to Get to Heaven?”