

DETERMINING THE WILL OF GOD: CONFLICT, COMPROMISE, AND CONFUSION

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Most of us have encountered situations in life where we have been at a loss to know what God would have us to do. Most of us have had friends or kids or other relatives or coworkers who have come to us seeking advice about problems and challenges and decisions that they face. The right direction is not always clear. As Christian people we have an interest in knowing what God would have us to do. (PROJECTOR ON--- WHAT IS GOD'S WILL FOR ME) With some issues the direction from God in the Bible is clear. In other circumstances there may be no direct guidance that the Bible offers.

One of my wife's relatives from Massachusetts years ago was going to seminary on the west coast. He ended up with a girl friend out there along with a gal he was also close to in Massachusetts. He spent a year or two trying to figure out which one he should marry. Both women had a commitment to Christ. Both had a lot of positive qualities. But he had a tough time figuring out which one he should pursue as a wife.

Some of the most difficult challenges that we Christians face in life are figuring out what God would have us to do. Whom should I marry? What career should I choose? Where should I go to school? Where should I live? When should I retire? What should I do when I retire? The Bible gives us some principles which are helpful in answering these questions. God has also promised His people the Holy Spirit to guide them. But when it comes right down to final decisions, His direction may not always seem clear to us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If you have sensed that lack of clarity, you can take heart. Four of the key leaders of the early church also struggled with these issues. In the passage before us this morning we see them confronted with situations of conflict, compromise, and confusion. In these situations they seek God's guidance. We want to look at what they learned about determining God's will.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. CONFLICT AND THE PARTNERS IN MINISTRY) In vv. 36-41 of Acts #15 we encounter CONFLICT AND THE PARTNERS IN MINISTRY. In our study of the New Testament Book of Acts we have seen that the church in Antioch in Syria had sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey. It was probably about 48 AD, and the trip perhaps took them a year. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) They went to the island of Cyprus and then up into Asia Minor.

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and gave a report about their trip. Some men from Jerusalem came and tried to tell the new Christian Gentiles that they had to become Jews to be right with God. (ANTIOCH TO JERUSALEM MAP) Paul and

Barnabas and a few others went up to Jerusalem to make sure that the church leaders were united in their theology on this crucial issue.

Last time we saw that Peter and James both defended the teaching of Paul and Barnabas. They convinced the rest of the Jerusalem church that Gentiles were justified by faith alone in Christ. A letter was drafted to the Antioch church to that effect. Gentile Christians were asked, however, to refrain from certain practices that Jewish Christians might find offensive. Judas and Silas were sent along with Paul and Barnabas as representatives of the Jerusalem church to confirm that message. The message and the representatives were well received in Antioch. Thus we saw last week that Christians should not compromise on matters of basic doctrine and truth. In other matters we ought to seek opportunities for win-win compromises. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Some time before this Jerusalem visit the Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians to the churches that had been founded on his first missionary journey. That letter indicates that some of these Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem area had been causing trouble among the new Christians there. So it was a natural reaction for Paul and Barnabas to follow up his letter with a return visit to these churches, not just to make sure that the Christians have rejected the false teaching of the Judaizers but also to strengthen and encourage them.

Thus we read in v. 36, **“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’”** There was agreement between Paul and Barnabas about the need for such a trip. But there was disagreement about who should come with them.

In vv. 37-40 we read, **“Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”**

John Mark was the young cousin of Barnabas who had gone with the two missionaries on their first trip. Unlike Paul and Barnabas he was an eyewitness of the events involving the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So he had value to the missionary team as a witness of key parts of the message about Jesus. For reasons that are not given he left Paul and Barnabas and returned to Antioch or Jerusalem before the trip was over.

Paul’s perspective as they were about to begin a second trip was that the mission was all-important. It was dangerous work. On the first journey their lives had been threatened. Paul had been stoned and almost killed. The work was so important, and the danger was so great that they had to have people on their team who were

completely dependable. Mark had not made the grade on the first trip. It was foolish to risk taking him along on this second trip.

Barnabas was originally named Joseph. Because he was such an encourager, he had been called Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” Barnabas saw the potential in Mark. His cousin was young. He had matured spiritually since his desertion on their first trip. He should be given a second chance, especially with his valuable background of having been an eyewitness to the earthly life of Jesus.

The result of this clash of perspectives was an argument. The original Greek word that Luke uses to describe it comes into English as “paroxysm,” which means “a sudden outburst,” or “a sudden attack.” Luke says that these two pillars of the faith had a sharp disagreement. Maybe they even raised their voices. They both apparently got upset.

I can imagine them saying things like this: “Look, Barnabas, I know that Mark is your cousin and that you see potential in him. But let’s be objective. He left us in the lurch back in Perga. He deserted us. How do we know that he won’t do it again? This mission is too important for us to risk taking men with us who have not been reliable. Barnabas, we have to bring somebody whom we know is dependable.”

“Look, Paul, Mark has potential. He has learned a lot since this last episode. We can’t just dump people because they blow it once. Remember when you came to Jerusalem, and none of the church leaders would take you in. They didn’t want to give you a second chance. It was me that took you under my wing then, because I saw your potential.”

“Now wait a minute, Barnabas. That’s what you said about John Mark the first time. And look what happened. He blew the mission. We gotta get somebody else.” And so they had a sharp disagreement.

Why couldn’t these two giants of the faith come to a recognition of the will of God for their missionary trip? Didn’t they know how to figure it out? Didn’t they pray about the matter? I suspect that they did. Why didn’t one of them or someone else have a word from God about His will for the situation? The truth is that God does not always provide divine revelation to even spiritual giants in regard to every decision that they make, even important ones. They had to figure it out without any clear direction from the Lord.

So who was right, and who was wrong? Who recognized the will of God, and who did not? It seems to me that neither one of them was necessarily wrong. Both of them had legitimate concerns. These concerns were within the scope of God’s revealed will.

From our perspective two thousand years later we can see that God’s ultimate plan was to have two missionary teams, and He used this disagreement to bring that to pass. As a result of this disagreement the effective outreach of the gospel was doubled.

It is important to learn from this that it is possible for godly people to have different perspectives on ministry and still be within the will of God. It is possible for husbands and wives to have different perspectives on family priorities and still be within the will of God. It is possible for Christians in business and in education and in manufacturing and in community groups and in the church to have different and conflicting perspectives and still be within the will of God.

The most important issue when different perspectives clash but still appear to be within the revealed will of God to see how the resulting conflict is handled. How do you suppose Barnabas and Paul acted toward each other after this? When Barnabas showed up on Cyprus with Mark and without Paul, how do you suppose that he answered questions about Paul's absence from the team? "Well, let me tell you. I wanted him to come along. But Paul is so stubborn and always has to have his own way. When I wanted to bring Mark along, he just refused to come with us."

And how do you suppose that Paul responded in Asia Minor when they asked why Barnabas wasn't with them? "I wanted Barnabas to come along. But he insisted on bringing this guy along who jumped ship on our last trip. The guy is his cousin. Barnabas just wouldn't listen to reason. He made such a big stink about it that he went off in a huff to Cyprus with this deserter relative of his."

The Bible tell us nothing about the response of Barnabas. But we can glean something from the New Testament about Paul's attitude. The author of Acts was Luke. He was a traveling companion of Paul during some of his missionary journeys. He wrote this book after the events described in it happened. We would expect that his personal sympathies would be inclined toward Paul more than Barnabas.

What does Luke tell us about Barnabas? "Barnabas was strong church leader but also narrow-minded and not always ready to listen to reason?" No. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 11:24) In # 11 Luke gave a one sentence evaluation of Barnabas: "**...for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.**" Period. No qualifications.

It is fascinating also to see what Paul said in the letters that he wrote after this about John Mark, the deserter. (COLOSSIANS 4:10) In Colossians #4 v. 10 he says, "**Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions--- if he comes to you, welcome him...)**" In 2 Timothy 4 v. 11 (2 TIMOTHY 4:11) Paul writes, "**Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.**" He is very useful to me for ministry. That reveals something, again, about Paul's perspective on ministry, doesn't it? The key thing is the ministry, the work. If people are faithful in the work, then they have value to Paul.

More importantly, notice the positive attitude toward this man who Paul had once regarded as not to be trusted with the challenges and dangers of missionary travel. Paul bore neither a grudge toward him or toward Barnabas. He never said anything negatively in his letters about Barnabas. We would do well to learn from his example.

When Paul and Barnabas split up, Paul saw a need to choose another partner for missionary work. There is again no indication that God gave him any special revelation about whom to pick. It seems that Paul simply made a choice based upon wisdom. Silas was indeed a wise choice. He was a leader in the Jerusalem church. When Paul would run into Jewish Christians who would be pushing the idea that Gentiles had to become Jews to be right with God, Silas would be a big asset in contradicting that idea.

Silas was also a Roman citizen. Most Jews were not. Silas and Paul, who was also a Roman citizen, would enjoy certain legal protections because of this in their missionary journeys. Silas was also a prophet, and Silas had become known to the Antioch church as a leader who had the backing of the Jerusalem church. He was a wise choice. After Paul chose Silas, v. 41 tells us, **“And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”**

In situations of conflict, then, we need to remember that one or both perspectives or proposed courses of action may be contrary to the will of God. But this incident suggests that at times two or more conflicting viewpoints may both or all be within the scope of God's revealed will. The more important issue in these situations is how conflict is handled. We don't know what was said between Barnabas and Paul. They may have said some hurtful things in the heat of their argument. But in the longer term they seemed to have a good attitude toward each other.

We likewise may disagree with fellow Christians on proposed courses of action. But we need to watch out about having sinful attitudes toward the individuals with whom we disagree. It is backbiting and gossip and slander that can cause divisions in a group of Christians.

II.

In vv. 1-5 of #16 we come to the subject of COMPROMISE AND THE PRACTICALITIES OF MINISTRY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. COMPROMISE AND THE PRACTICALITIES OF MINISTRY) Paul and his new traveling companion embark upon this second missionary journey. They head overland to visit the churches which had been established on the first missionary journey. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) They went to Derbe and Lystra in the Roman province of Galatia.

After noting this, Luke says in v. 1, **“A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

Timothy was a young man. In 1 Timothy Paul calls him **“my true child in thee faith.”** This may mean that Timothy became a follower of Jesus as a result of Paul's first visit to the city of Lystra some years earlier.

Jews normally frowned upon mixed marriages. The fact that no mention is made of a synagogue in Lystra in the description of the first missionary visit there in Acts #14 may mean that there were very few Jews in the place. So Timothy's mother Eunice may have had few Jewish men to pick from. Perhaps mixed marriages were more accepted in these regions distant from Jerusalem.

Timothy, however, had not even been circumcised. In Jewish law a child took on the religion of his or her mother. Paul also indicates in his second letter to Timothy that this young man had learned the Hebrew Scriptures from his mother. But the fact that he was not circumcised meant that Jewish law regarded him as an apostate. In Greek law the father ran the household. Perhaps Timothy's father had not permitted him to be circumcised.

The fact that Timothy had such a good reputation in the church at Lystra meant that he was a prime candidate for ministry. But his situation of not being circumcised was going to be a problem for the Jews. If Paul was going to stay on good terms with unbelieving Jews, if he wanted to be able to speak in Jewish synagogues, his having a Jew with him on his ministry team who was known to be uncircumcised would be a problem. Paul would be seen as approving Jewish apostasy.

A few commentators have argued that Paul was actually being hypocritical here. He talked about circumcision not having any value in one's relationship with God. But he insisted upon circumcising Timothy. These commentators make reference to an incident described in Galatians #2. (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 2:1) There Paul says "...I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. (TITUS 2:3) Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. (TITUS 2:4) This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. (TITUS 2:5) We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." If circumcising Titus meant compromising the gospel, then Paul was wrong to circumcise Timothy, so their argument goes.

The difference, however, is that Titus was a Gentile. Some were trying to get Titus circumcised because they thought that this was necessary for a Gentile to be right with God. Paul would not give in to that false understanding of the gospel.

The situation with Timothy did not involve compromise of the gospel. It involved compromise for the sake of the practicality of ministry. It meant doing something not to get right with God but to avoid offending unbelieving Jews so that they could get a hearing for the gospel. Timothy was being circumcised for the sake of evangelism. Being a good Christian did not mean being a bad Jew. Paul did not want to alienate Jews unnecessarily.

(1 CORINTHIANS 9:19) Thus in 1 Corinthians #9 vv. 19-23 he writes, “**Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.** **(1 CORINTHIANS 9:20)** **To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.** **(1 CORINTHIANS 9:21)** **To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.** **(1 CORINTHIANS 9:22)** **To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.** **(1 CORINTHIANS 9:23)** **I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.**”

God’s revealed will is that people come to know Him on the basis of faith alone in Jesus. Circumcision has no value in this gospel message. It has no value in bringing one closer to God. But Paul reasoned that for the sake of having Jews come to Christ, for the sake of the practicalities of ministry, he would have Timothy get circumcised. He would do everything within reason to avoid stumbling blocks that would hinder people from coming to Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We should be willing to make the same kind of compromises today. That does not mean that we do things that are sinful. It does not mean that we compromise the gospel message. It means that we don’t do things that will offend unbelievers unnecessarily and that we do practice those things that will help us gain a hearing with them for the gospel. It means that if we are around Mormons, maybe we don’t drink coffee. If we are around orthodox Jews, we don’t order bacon burgers. If we are around people who go to AA, we don’t drink alcohol. We don’t eat things, we don’t drink things, we don’t wear things that will cause unbelievers to be upset with us.

On the positive side we do things within reason that may help us to gain a hearing for the gospel. We take an interest in their hobbies. I have gone to synagogue because I had a friend who was Jewish. I had an Indian friend who was a Sikh. When his daughter died, I went to the funeral at the Sikh temple. As a youth pastor I went to games in which my kids played.

With Timothy having joined Paul and Silas, Luke notes in vv. 4 & 5 “**As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.**” They were experiencing both qualitative and quantitative growth.

III.

In vv. 6-10 we come to CONFUSION AND THE PLACE OF MINISTRY. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. CONFUSION AND THE PLACE OF MINISTRY) Verse 6 tells us, “**And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.**” The missionaries apparently headed west from Derbe and Lystra and the other towns of the area. (SECOND MISSIONARY

JOURNEY- PHRYGIA) Their intention was to go into the Roman province of Asia. Probably they were headed for the capital city of Ephesus, which was near the sea. (ASIA MAP EPHESUS)

But the Holy Spirit told them not to go there. How did He communicate that? We are not told. Perhaps it was through prophecy. Perhaps there was a vision. Maybe circumstances arose that made those plans impossible.

Luke continues in v. 7: **“And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”** (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY- PHRYGIA) The Roman province of Asia had smaller administrative districts. While they were in the district of Mysia, they wanted to go north into the district of Bithynia. But again the Lord somehow communicated that this was not the place to go. All of this must have been somewhat frustrating and confusing. Keep in mind that this was not just a matter of getting on a train one day and heading over to Asia, meeting a closed door, heading to Bithynia the next day and encountering a closed door there. Probably these guys were traveling on foot. There were long distances involved and many days of travel. They were passing places that had no churches and no exposure to the gospel. Yet the Lord was keeping them from setting up shop and preaching to these people who were spiritually lost.

They finally ended up in Troas, where Paul had a vision. Verses 9 & 10 tell us, **“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ 10 And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”** (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY- PHRYGIA) Macedonia was over in what we know as Greece. Going to Macedonia meant entering Europe. So this was a key event in that the gospel was about to be brought into another continent.

Notice also that the author uses the pronoun “we.” Apparently Luke joined the missionary team at this point. There are later indications that Luke was from Macedonia, perhaps Philippi. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We don't know exactly what the missionaries were thinking and feeling when they were wandering around in Asia Minor. I suspect that they were feeling some frustration and confusion as they tried to figure out the place of ministry where God wanted them. Day after day he was passing Gentile towns who did not know about Jesus, and the Holy Spirit somehow told him and his friends to keep walking. Asia and Ephesus seemed like logical places in which to spend time preaching. Bithynia was another area that needed to hear about Jesus. Why would the Lord not allow them to stop there? Did he not care about the lost people in these places? Were the people there somehow less deserving of exposure to the gospel?

No. God did care about the people in these places. The timing was not right. On Paul's third missionary journey he would spend two years in Ephesus. Later, in Acts #19, Luke

would record a pagan in Ephesus declaring to his fellow tradesmen, “**And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.**”

The gospel would also later reach Bithynia. The Apostle Peter (1 PETER 1:1) would begin his first epistle to Christians living in Asia Minor with the greeting, “**Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.**”

Even the Apostle Paul faced confusion in trying to determine God’s direction in his life. It should be no surprise that we sometimes may be confused in figuring out what the Lord is doing in our lives. What is often required is simply patience. Paul and Silas simply had to wait and walk until God showed them where he wanted them to be. That is often what we need as well. Patience. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Several decades ago my wife and I were forced out of a church. It was my first experience of serving as a senior pastor. I sensed that this kind of position was what God wanted me to do in life. But after only two years in this church I became the victim of church power politics. I did things the best that I could by following the Book, but I was out. I was confused. It was difficult to figure out what was going on. We had to move. I had to take a secular job. We lived with relatives. But a year later I got another church job. It simply took time and patience to discover the will of God.

The Lord does not always supernaturally reveal His will to us as individuals. He doesn’t usually want us to depend upon mystical or supernatural signs from heaven to make decisions. Paul and Barnabas had no supernatural revelation telling them what to do with Mark. Paul did not apparently have any supernatural sign revealing to him that he should choose Silas as his traveling companion. There is no evidence that Paul received direct communication from God telling him to circumcise Timothy. For days and weeks Paul and Silas did not have any clear direction from God about where they were supposed to plant themselves and begin evangelizing. It was only after days and weeks of plodding along that God’s direction became clear. In fact in the Book of Act it is only in a handful of occasions where Paul gets supernatural revelation from God about the plans he is to follow.

The four Christian leaders who headed up the two missionary teams did not have the New Testament to give them direction. We do. The New Testament along with the Old Testament provide us with the most important things that we need to know about God’s will.

It is our faithfulness to this revealed will of God to which He holds us accountable. If we stay within the parameters of this Book, we can be confident that He will guide us. For He is far more interested in our understanding of the will of God than we are.

A neighbor lady once offered to take care of a little girl while her mother was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. Before entering the hospital the mother wrote out a list of food that her daughter liked. Then she supposedly told the little girl, "My dear, eat what our kind neighbor prepares for you and remember to thank her for it." The little girl thought for a moment and then said, "I'll eat what she give me, if she gives me what I like."

How often that reflects our attitude toward God. The most important parts of God's will for our lives have already been revealed to us in the Bible. But we are tempted to pick and choose. "Thou shall not commit murder." Amen. "Thou shall not commit adultery." Amen. It's a problem in our society.

"Thou shall not covet." Well, that's a little harder to do. "Don't marry an unbeliever? But I love her. Gossip? Well, everybody does that. Pride? Well, I know a lot of people who are more prideful than I am.

Do you really want to know God's will for your life? Study the Bible. Pursue it. Be patient. If we do that, we can be confident that the Lord will guide us.