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In His Steps: An Asian Christian View to Discerning God's Will

Philip J. J. Chen

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

IN HIS STEPS:

AN ASIAN CHRISTIAN VIEW TO DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

PHILIP J. J. CHEN

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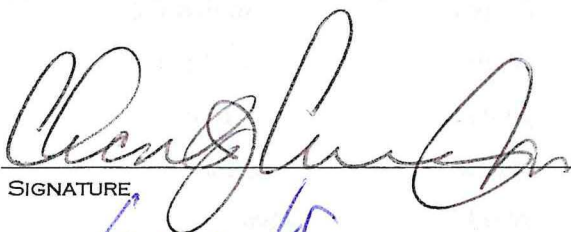
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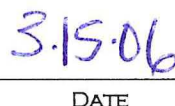
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CHAPTER 1

THE WONDER OF GOD'S VOICE AND WILL

Most Asian cultures are polytheistic, and the people of these cultures have evolved specific ways to discern the gods' wills for their lives.¹ When an individual from an Asian background converts to Christianity, he or she faces many challenges. For example, family members may pressure the believer to return to polytheism, and the believer must respond to their difficult challenge. Polytheism provides many ways to discern the will of the gods, but Christianity limits its methods to prayer, guidance from the Bible, and the direction of the Holy Spirit.² This dissertation will describe methods of spiritual discernment for Christians from polytheistic culture who seek to know God's will. This chapter describes the problems Christian converts from polytheism face; this story of a polytheist who became a follower of Christ illustrates the challenge.

A Heart in Search of the True Living God

A young girl who grew up in a polytheistic culture went to the temple almost every day and asked her gods for peace and wealth. She used Chinese divining blocks (two half-moon-shaped pieces of wood that were cast in the temple) to make decisions. She followed the instructions of the Chinese almanac for her daily life. Throughout

¹ George W. Braswell, Jr., *Understanding World Religion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1983), 26.

² Chester K. Lehman, *The Holy Spirit and the Holy Life* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 39.

her youth she sought direction by drawing lots and consulting fortunetellers. Her middle-class family included a brother with Down's Syndrome, and she did everything she could to help her brother mentally and physically. Although she had prayed for his healing since he was born, she saw no improvement in his condition. She came to believe that his illness was a curse against her, that she must have done something bad to him in their previous lives. She would have to repay him for her past actions by bearing the burden of his pain in the current life.

Her first romantic relationship, which was with a foreigner, turned into another curse when she became pregnant. To avoid bringing any more shame on her traditional family, she quickly found her ideal mate, asked her gods' blessing, and consulted a fortuneteller (Palm reading) to make sure the marriage would be a perfect match. The couple wed, but in three years' time the marriage deteriorated and ended in divorce. She wondered why her gods had not protected her. She had done everything she was taught. Perhaps all she did was not enough to save her marriage, or perhaps she had unknowingly done something wrong. After her miserable marriage, she visited other temples and consulted spiritual mediums who predicted bad luck and caused her worry. She was fearful constantly, but continued to seek the help of her gods whenever she faced problems.

Her tragic life replayed itself constantly in her memory, and she questioned why she was born and why she had to bear her household's pain and suffering. She began to believe her life was a meaningless joke. As time passed the gods faded from her mind; she began to doubt their existence, and soon became an atheist. She started to believe

gods and temples were for people who lived helpless lives, and for people who needed make-believe gods to provide them comfort and peace. She now believed that if she wanted to have a good life, she had to be strong and make it happen because everything depended on her own thoughts and choices. As she worked to stand against the cruel world, she distanced herself from her friends, and her life became lonely and distressed.

One day, she attended a church service where she heard a sermon on the topic, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” She longed to have a true friend, and Jesus seemed to be that person. The church’s environment felt peaceful and calm, and she liked the people and setting. She felt God’s presence even though she did not understand it, and she accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Savior. Her life was soon filled with more questions than before, and she had to deal with her daily problem of understanding God’s will. She did not know how to hear God’s voice. In the past, she believed she heard God’s will from fortunetellers or spiritual mediums that advised her and guided her daily. In Christianity, however, she could not hear God in person as she had heard fortunetellers. When she prayed she felt as if she were talking to herself, and Jesus Christ did not show her where to live, what to do, and where to go. She lost her sense of direction and her ability to solve the everyday problems of life. She wanted to please God, yet He would not show her how.

She learned how to pray, read the Bible, and fellowship daily with other believers, but the Lord never seemed to show Himself. She could only understand God through the Bible, but it seemed like a mystery book because the more she read, the more confused she became. She prayed about her needs and decisions, but the Lord did not answer. She

wondered if the Christian God was truly the living God.³ She wondered why He did not show her what to do as the fortunetellers had done.

Her sinful nature caught up with her, and soon she was living with a Christian brother outside of marriage. Knowing that this displeased God caused her great agony, but she discovered that many Christians' behaviors were worse than her own. They drank and lived immorally, but acted holy and religious when they came to church. She wondered why God was not solving their problems. Were they also unable to know His will and hear His voice? Why did God not make Christianity simple, like polytheism with its divining blocks and fortunetellers?

The Christian God was hard for her to understand, and she began to think He was silent and revealed His will only to certain people. She began to think that average church members, rather than hearing God's voice, received their direction from church leaders. The woman had difficulty discerning the difference between God's will, the demands of church leaders, and her own will. How she wished that she could find an easy way. If God were listening to her prayers, why did He not give her guidance?

This story highlights several questions: Does God have a unique purpose and will for each person? If everything Christians believe about God is true, why does he not save them from the hardships of life?

³ Han Jung, *Does God Exist?* trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 514-517.

An Introduction to Chinese Religions and Culture

This section analyzes three major religions most likely to influence Chinese people. It also deals with cultural issues that threaten Chinese Christians in general and the story of the young woman in particular.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India, spread to China, and is one of the earliest religions. Siddhartha Gautama, who was later known as Buddha, was born about 560 B.C. in Lumbini, India, near the border of what is now Nepal.⁴ According to legend, he saw four things that forever changed his life: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a beggar. Deeply distressed by the suffering he saw, he decided to leave his palatial life as a prince and find the answer to the problems of pain and human suffering.

While searching for answers, Gautama often meditated under a fig tree⁵ where he experienced the highest degree of god-consciousness, which he called *Nirvana*. Gautama became known as Buddha, which means “enlightened one.” Buddha never stated he was a divine entity; he said he was merely a human being who had awoken from the darkness of error to live in freedom from selfishness.⁶ He believed he had discovered the answers to pain and suffering, and he proclaimed his “Four Noble Truths”:

⁴ Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2001), 98.

⁵ This was known as the Bohdi tree, or “the tree of wisdom.”

⁶ William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 224.

1. Suffering is universal. God-consciousness (*Nirvana*) is the only release from the cycle of suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is craving (selfish desire). People crave when, ignorant of the nature of reality, they fall victim to *tanha* (attachment or desire).
3. The cure for suffering is to overcome ignorance and eliminate craving.
4. Craving can be suppressed by following the Middle Way and the Noble Eight-fold path.

Buddha isolated *tanha* as the cause of humanity's inability to escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, and he developed the Eight-fold Path by which Buddhists could rid themselves of *tanha*.⁷

Buddha claimed that suffering was part of life, and everyone needed to endure life's misfortunes because people could not control the circumstances they faced. A Buddhist would assume a brother with Down's syndrome was a test from the gods, for suffering was a tool the gods used to punish people. People simply were to accept what the gods had planned for their lives.

Confucianism

Although Confucius was born almost twenty-six centuries ago, his books are still used in classrooms from elementary school through college in many Asian countries. Confucius lived during a time of frequent warfare following the collapse of the Zhou dynasty, with its system of moral education through ritual and music. Confucius

⁷ Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, 101.

advocated that people extend the existing family ethics of filial piety and fraternal duty (respect and obedience to one's parents and elder brothers) to the monarch and his officials.⁸

Confucianism was not only a system of ethics of philosophy of life. It also had a ritual aspect which included the cult of Heaven, the cult of Confucians, and the cult of ancestors. The ritual system was hierarchical: the worship of Heaven was performed as a prerogative by the emperor, the worship of Confucius was mandated by edict for all government officials, and the worship of ancestors was practiced by all people.⁹

Taoism

The founder of Taoism, Lao-Tzu, was also born about twenty-six centuries ago. Legends say his mother dreamed of a falling star that entered her bosom, and she became pregnant. The pregnancy lasted over eight years. She gave birth through her left side to an old man with snow-white hair. Hence the name "Lao-Tzu," which means "old son," as well as "venerable master."¹⁰ Lao-Tzu wrote *Dao De Ching*, a book of about 5,300 words which embodied his spiritual insights and provided for humans' spiritual growth. The

⁸ Braswell, *Understanding World Religion*, 32.

⁹ Eerdmans, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*, 244.

¹⁰ Henry Wie, *The Guiding Light of Lao Tzu* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1982), 1-2.

Bible is the world's most translated book, and the ancient Chinese classic is in second place.¹¹

The special meanings of Lao-Tzu's "Way" (*dao*) and "power" (*de*), which differ from the Confucian concept of "virtue" (*dao de*), set him apart from other Chinese philosophers. Although the Way is viewed differently by each individual, it is basically Lao-Tzu's observation of the regular laws and characteristics of the activities of all things in nature. These act as a mirror in human affairs and provide insight into human character.¹² Lao-Tzu believed both that all things spring from the Way and that the Way is present within all things. When the Way is expressed in human life and fulfills its role, it is power (*de*).¹³ The central defining principle of Taoism is the *Dao* (Way), which is commonly used to mean road, way, method, principle, truth, or words.¹⁴ Put simply, Lao-Tzu used the Way of nature to understand the ways of humans and to observe people, events, and things from a natural perspective. Lamenting the disparity between the eternal character of the Way and the transitory nature of human existence is a basic feature of Taoist life.¹⁵

¹¹ Ching-ju Chang, "Laozi is Very Straightforward," trans. David Mayer, *Sinorama Magazine* 1 (January 1999):88, <http://www.sinorama.com.tw/en/search/> (accessed 23 December 2003).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fenngang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 45.

¹⁵ Chang, "Laozi is Very Straightforward."

Taoism maintains the belief that people can become either heavenly immortals or earthly immortals through discipline.¹⁶ Although ascension is the highest ideal, a heavenly immortal can never return to earth, whereas earthly immortals can exist among humans.¹⁷ Lao-Tzu said, “The ways of men are conditioned by those of Heaven, the ways of Heaven by those of the Dao (Way) and the Tao came into being by itself.”¹⁸ The Tao is, therefore, the principle of the universe and also a pattern for human behavior, often called “uncontrived action.”

Lao-Tzu wanted people to return to their natural state, which was “completely empty, perfectly serene.”¹⁹ He believed that like the Way of nature, every person or thing had the power of its own inner spontaneity, and, if that spontaneity were respected, could progress toward the good.²⁰ “Taoism is an important resource for life to recuperate and regenerate; it give deep consolation to the mind and the soul.”²¹ Asians are taught that, in

¹⁶ Immortals were regarded as distinct from gods. Later, confusion crept in and the characteristics of gods and immortals commingled to form a single “god-immortal” that was hard to classify. The playful side of such a deity is reflective of the immortal half. See Ching-ju Chang, “It’s a God’s Life,” trans. David Mayer, *Sinorama Magazine* 7 (July 1998): 32, <http://www.sinorama.com.tw/en/search/> (accessed 23 December 2003).

¹⁷ Li Feng-mao in Chang, “It’s a God’s Life.”

¹⁸ Eerdmans, *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the World’s Religions*, 252.

¹⁹ Lit-Sen Cheng, *Asia’s Religions: Christianity’s Momentous Encounter with Paganism* (Phillipsburg, NY: P and R Publishing, 1904.) 63.

²⁰ Chang, “Laozi is Very Straightforward.”

²¹ Eva Wong, *Harmonizing Yin and Yang: A Manual of Taoist Yoga: Internal, External, and Sexual* (Boston, MA: Shamhala, 1997), 38.

addition to allowing people to retain the truest part of their humanity in this chaotic world, Lao-Tzu's philosophy helps people sort out many aspects of their lives.²²

Juxtaposing Confucianism and Taoism: A Common Practice in Asia

An Asian folk-saying states, "While the goal of the Confucian was to become a sage, a servant of society, the goal of the Taoist was to become an Immortal (a *hsien*).²³ Confucianism and Taoism revived belief in personal deities and the practice of ritualistic prayer and appeasement. The proponents of both religions practiced the art of alchemy in combination with yoga and meditation to provide immortality. They were eclectic in their beliefs, including belief in different gods.²⁴

Although the earliest forms of Chinese religion are not known, there has always been a belief in the balance of nature, an idea that was later defined in the concept of yin and yang: the forces of light and dark, soft and hard, or female and male. If there is one idea or characteristic that informs the entire history of the development of Chinese religion, it is a "consciousness of concern."²⁵ This entails trying to know who one is and where one stands in relation to the gods and other people. Philosophical Taoism acted like the yin versus Confucianism's yang, and the ruling literati read both Confucian and Taoist literature and were under their influence for centuries. For example, a well-

²² Ibid.

²³ Eerdmans, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*, 251.

²⁴ Martin Lu, *Confucianism: Its Relevance to Modern Society* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1983), 38.

²⁵ Ibid., 246.

balanced, well-educated person seeking to be selected as an imperial bureaucrat or to be qualified for government office emphasized Confucianism. The same person was compelled to pursue personal spiritual cultivation as addressed in Taoism. This person served as a role model by holding highly respected social status and humbling himself by perusing the Tao (the truth or the way).²⁶ Taoism focuses more on the spiritual formation of Chinese culture while many legends mix with historic folk-tales in Confucianism.

Traditional Chinese Culture

Traditional Chinese culture is passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. The cultural elements are not dictated by written records, and they lack a unified form. Although some of the rituals have lost their meaning, people still practice them as traditions. A few of the most important cultural rituals are:

1. Ancestor Worship. This Chinese cultural ritual is the one most commonly practiced and dates back to the Chou Dynasty (1325-1122 B.C.). The Chinese believe that the soul of each deceased ancestor resided in three places: one part goes to heaven, the second remains in the grave to receive sacrifices, and the third is localized in the ancestral tablet.²⁷

The soul has to be assisted on the journey to heaven; therefore, at Chinese funerals, elaborate rituals are meticulously carried out to ensure that the soul is amply provided for. The evil spirits who oppose the deceased are propitiated by loud wailing

²⁶ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 45.

²⁷ Eerdmans, *Eerdmans' Handbook on the World's Religions*, 247.

and the offering of sacrifices. An additional element of ancestor worship, the ancestral tablet, is found in nearly every Chinese home. This tablet is given joss sticks and wine every day and night as a blessing to the ancestor. Chinese fear that if no one offers joss sticks, food, and wine for them when they pass away, and if they lack an ancestral tablet, their souls may wander around without a place to stay.

2. Exalted sorceresses. Spirit mediums are primarily women in the Chinese culture, perhaps because of their lower social status or because women are more in tune with the spirit world. Although almost all of the “martial” *jitong* (乩童)²⁸ are male, an estimated 80 percent of all *jitong* supposedly capable of communicating with the gods are female, according to Cheng Chih-ming, director of the Institute of Religion and Cultural studies at Nanhua Magana College.²⁹ Kuo Yeh-tzu, head of the Sungshan Tsu Huei Temple in Taipei, says, “Women are more sensitive and vulnerable than men. It’s easier for them to empathize with the sufferings of others, so it’s especially easy for gods to enter their bodies.”³⁰

3. Temple practices. The Chinese rite known as *shou jing* is performed by female volunteers at temples. The women wave a joss stick in front and back of the subject to drive away whatever is troubling the person physically or emotionally. People also go to

²⁸ Those who flagellate themselves with nail-studded boards fashioned from the snouts of saw sharks.

²⁹ Hua-chih Pu, “Staff and Distaff,” trans. David Mayer, *Sinorama Magazine* 11 (November 1998): 102, <http://www.sinorama.com.tw/en/search/> (accessed 23 December 2003).

³⁰ Ibid.

the temple to learn the future by drawing lots (抽籤). They obtain cryptic, largely unintelligible messages which, when interpreted, provide advice on how to manage their affairs.³¹

4. The almanac (黃曆). Early Chinese astronomers studied celestial phenomena and the four seasons, then identified twenty-four different categories of natural phenomena that repeat certain patterns each year. Based on these studies, they established a set of life principles and called them the almanac.³² The almanac shows people how to bring about good and avoid evil in daily life. Many people read it every day to find out how to avoid violating the taboos of the gods.

The young woman in the introductory story of this paper was influenced by a number of the cultural traditions listed above, and she is not alone. According to a recent survey by Yeh, about 5,000 private in-house shrines exist, and millions of people perform *shou jing* (收驚), draw lots (抽籤), cast out evil spirits, act as sorcerers or sorceresses and establish ancestral tablets.³³

How Buddhism Affects Converts to Christianity

Buddhists who become Christians often retain a mindset of merits and virtues because these merits and virtues were the tools for attaining Nirvana in their previous

³¹ Da Liu, *The Tao and Chinese Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 160.

³² John Marcos Yeh, *Good Ways to Avoid Evil When We Are in Christ* (Houston, TX: Glory Press, 1999), 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

belief system. Once they become Christians, they feel they must do something to please the Lord, with or without knowing it to be God's will. They believe that as long as their works are good for the kingdom of God, He will eventually give them credit for their actions.³⁴

They have difficulty grasping the meaning of grace, the free gift of eternal life, and acceptance of Christ as their Savior without using their own efforts. Strobel gives an example of a similar mindset, "The author met a woman once who was struck on the 'believe + become = receive' plan. Her biggest hang-up was that if she didn't scrub her life clean first, she would end up making a commitment to Christ but not being able to live a life that would honor Him. She believed that Jesus would then reject her."³⁵ This thinking is almost exactly how Christians with Buddhist mindsets think. Their prayers reflect this confusion, "Lord, if you give me what I've asked for, I will repay you by offering this or that to you in thanks for listening to my prayer," or "I am doing my best to serve You, Lord, so please allow me to have this."³⁶

How Taoism Affects Converts to Christianity

Taoist converts differ from Buddhist converts. They have been taught to seek immortality (*hsien* 仙) and practice cultural rituals such as *shou jing* (收驚), the drawing

³⁴ Tang i-chieh, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Washington, D.C.: The University of Peking, 1991), 9.

³⁵ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 119.

³⁶ Robert J. Kuglin, *Handbook on the Holy Spirit* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publication, 1883), 33.

of lots (抽籤), and ancestor worship. When they become Christians, they wonder what they can do to sustain eternal life, what God's will is, and how they can find it. They may also ask whether God is truly the greatest God of all, because they come from a polytheistic background. They have a tendency to revert to their old practices of asking sorceresses or fortunetellers for a glimpse into the future, for direction on how to please God, and for assurances of eternal life. Merely believing in Jesus Christ and accepting him as their personal Savior seems too easy.³⁷

Christians who come from a strong Taoist background may ask many questions without receiving answers from God, and they are often confused and wonder which way is God's way. For example, they might want to buy a house. Where should they buy? Which house is God's will for them? Decision-making used to be clear and simple; they just had to go to the shrine and use divining blocks. The author of this paper has observed that they do not know God's will or hear God's voice, and they are afraid to make decisions without knowing God's will. At the same time they claim to be alert to God's calling and ready to act under God's direction, but often they do not grasp God's will for them. Their disappointment in not hearing from the Lord frustrates them. They wonder about their place in God's kingdom, and if they have eternal life. Until they know God's will and hear His voice, they are not assured that God will grant them His promises.

³⁷ Da Liu, *The Tao and Chinese Culture*, 142.

Conclusion

Individuals raised in Asian cultures who have practiced polytheism find the notion “to live by faith” as abstract, hard to understand, and difficult to grasp. They need to learn to abandon their expectation of relying on someone or something visible. They must learn that God is Spirit; He cannot be seen or touched, but His presence can be known. When the girl was moved by the Holy Spirit and felt peace and calm, she was aware of God’s presence. If she seeks Him ceaselessly, He will continually guide her in inexplicable ways and eventually she will know she walks in God’s will.

This paper explores the mystery of God’s will and how it can be revealed. The experiences of Old and New Testament characters will be described, including Abraham, Job, and Paul. The paper will analyze how they knew God’s will and plan and how they followed and obeyed God’s will.

The paper will also describe the lives of the saints, including St. Augustine, St. Ignatius, and Watchman Nee. For example, Nee discusses how revelation, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, is the key to knowing God’s will. The Word of God is very important, but without revelation it is merely knowledge. To reveal God’s will, the Word of God must go hand in hand with the Holy Spirit’s revelation. For this reason, it is necessary to seek the Spirit of truth in order to know God’s will.

In addition, the paper will include other people’s discernment experiences, examine different types of discernment, and identify common obstacles. The author of this paper will describe how he discerns God’s Will. The writer defines “discern” as

Charles M. Olsen did, “to ‘see’ or to ‘know’ or to ‘acknowledge’ the movement of God.”³⁸ It is important for Christians to discern God’s will.

The paper will examine the difference between God’s will and God’s plan, and explain how Christians can know the voice of the Heavenly Father. Christians are called to walk in the path God has for them, enjoy the purpose God has ordained for their lives, and look forward to the destiny God has planned for them. This dissertation describes how to search for God’s will and helps Christians discover it in their lives.

³⁸ Charles M. Olsen *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1995), 88.

CHAPTER 2

GOD'S WILL IN THE SCRIPTURES

The Bible reports people's experience with God, and biblical characters teach readers how to know God's will. This chapter describes the experience of Abraham, Job, and Paul as examples of individuals who understood and acted upon their understanding of God's will. Abraham was called "the friend of God and the father of faith,"¹ Job found God's will in suffering, and Paul knew the will of God in his daily walk.

Abraham

Abraham did not always recognize God's will immediately, and a number of times he took matters into his own hands attempting to "help God out."² At those times, perhaps he did not know God's will fully. But eventually he learned to discern God's will.

Abraham's Walk with God

When does God make promises? When does God tell individuals what will happen in their lives? When Christians walk with God, He shows them what to do and

¹ Amos W. Miller, *Abraham: Friend of God* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), 3.

² Theodore H. Epp, *God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1970), 30.

helps them mature in the faith.³ “Faith is the decision to accept an unseen reality, specifically the reality of God and his promises. If we have faith, we can act on it in obedience to God’s will.”⁴ Men and women who walk in faith will grow in faith when they step out of the boat as Peter did (Matt. 14:28-33), and God will never let them sink.⁵ This requires faith and trust and it is like our muscles. If we lack exercise, they become weak.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (1 Cor. 4: 16-18)

Understanding and following God’s will can be a long and difficult path to follow, but individuals must stay in His will to receive His promises. Abraham’s circumstances were very difficult and included starvation in the Promised Land, a barren wife, and Canaanite enemies living in the land. God’s promises can also be very difficult, and Christians must grow into them because God often uses difficult circumstances to promote growth.⁶ Christians are called to leave their present circumstances and walk in faith.

³ Henry Dieterich and Ralph Martin, *Faith: A Guide to Following God* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1988), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵ Frank A Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 26.

⁶ Thomas Verner Moore, *The Life of Man with God* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), 228-29.

Abraham's family and offspring believed in God's promises, although it took several hundred years for the promises to be fulfilled.⁷ From the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob until Moses, they trusted whole-heartedly and finally claimed the land of Canaan. As Christians look beyond their current circumstances, they can see God's true intentions because God puts them in circumstances that promote change. At the same time, however, Christians should not expect God to put them into comfortable places, because they are the salt of the earth. God puts them in troubled places to change those situations, and God gives them the strength and ability to perform the task (Ps. 32: 8). He has chosen Christians to become His seed and accomplish His will, as did Abraham, Isaac, and the saints.⁸ Believers are seeds in God's hand, and God casts them into gardens and fields. If they land on hard ground, Christ is with them and aids them: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world"(1 John 4: 4).

Abraham built his relationship with God, which is exemplified by four places in the Promised Land where he built altars to the Lord. He built the first altar at the great tree of Moreh in Shechem after he arrived in Canaan and had been received the promise that his offspring would inherit the land (Gen. 12: 6-7). The second altar was built with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east (Gen.12:8), and the third altar was placed in

⁷ Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*, Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series 315, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 265.

⁸ M.R. De Haan, *Adventures in Faith: Studies in the Life of Abraham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953), 18.

Hebron near the great trees of Mamre (Gen. 13:18). The last altar was constructed in Moriah, where he went to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:2,9).

The Altar at Schechem

Abraham built an altar at Schechem which is in the heart of Canaan⁹ and means “back and shoulder.”¹⁰ The shoulder is a strong part of the body and allows individuals to carry objects hands alone cannot bear. Shechem, therefore, signifies strength and power, and God put His strength into Canaan for the sake of His chosen people. Canaan is not only the land of milk and honey; it is also the place where God reveals His unlimited power and strength. He carries the children of Israel and exercises His might in the Promised Land. God used Shechem to teach Abraham that He is the source of all things: “God is the Creator and source of all human and worldly action and reality and the power par excellence in contrast to human and natural weakness and impermanence.” “God is unique in two senses: there is no ‘second’ to God and nothing is truly comparable to God.”¹¹ In Him there is nothing lacking.

Abraham built his Schechem altar at the great tree of Moreh, which means “teacher.”¹² The tree location teaches Abraham about God, who and what He is and how He relates to individuals. This could be described as discipleship training given to

⁹ Henri Gaubert, *Abraham: Loved by God* (New York: Hastings House, 1968), 61.

¹⁰ F.W. Grant, *Genesis in the Light of the New Testament* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1945), 80.

¹¹ Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimate Realities* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 42.

¹² *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. “Moreh,” <http://blueletterbible.org> (accessed 19 November 2003).

Abraham by God so that Abraham would understand and trust God in the land of promise. Abraham came to Canaan through God's calling, but he did not fully experience God's anointing, and Abraham had a shallow understanding of God.¹³ God wanted to give Abraham a solid education and experience His power and strength. God wanted Abraham to know and experience Him, and trust in His strength because God knew what Abraham would face in the future.

The Altar at Bethel

The second altar Abraham created was located in the hills with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. Bethel means "house of God" and was the location of an ancient seat of worship in Ephraim on the border of Benjamin. On the east was Ai, which means "heap of ruins."¹⁴

At Bethel, God brought Abraham to the house of God to be with Him because Bethel was the place for God's children, and the Son of God was in charge of this house. "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (Heb. 3:6). All of God's children are invited to the house of God because they are part of God's family, part of Christ, and part of the Lord's body. Believers have strength given them by God in Shechem, and this strength and power is used to build the house of God and to deal with the needs of Christ's body, the church. The house of God is composed of many brothers and sisters in

¹³ Angel Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of Believers*, trans. Robert J. Olsen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 55.

¹⁴ Grant, *Genesis in the Light of the New Testament*, 81.

Christ, and each is a living stone for the house of God. “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2: 4-5).

Abraham was a living stone designed so God’s house could be established in Canaan. The house of God is constructed with individual stones placed together to form the structure. The stones are individual persons who can learn to love and serve one another. In the house of God, personal will or desire should diminish, and each person can help provide shelter for the rest. The house of God is not about what the stones want to do; it is the builder who decides the design, where to go, and how to function. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8).

When believers face Bethel, their backs face Ai, and Ai represents the problem of the flesh. “This is the place of ruins, which represents our old self.”¹⁵ If the challenges of the flesh are not dealt with, believers cannot fully experience God and God’s family. They must either enter the house of God as the body of Christ, or they will become diseased, not fulfill their potential, and become problems in Christ’s church. They should avoid Ai, but should also avoid standing sideways between the two points. They should be facing Bethel fully.

¹⁵ Watchman Nee, “Abraham and Canaan,” in *Watchman Nee Sermons Collection*, 2, no. 15 (Taipei: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1997), 44.

The Altar at Hebron

The third altar Abraham built in Canaan was erected near Hebron, which means “association” and signifies a place of fellowship.¹⁶ Christians are called to be in the house of God and children of God. As God’s children, it is vital to have a good relationship with the Heavenly Father, and fellowship with brothers and sisters in the faith is also essential. As the body of Christ, fellowship between Christ, brothers, and sisters is desirable and unavoidable.

The altar at Hebron was built near the trees of Mamre, which means “strength and fatness”¹⁷ and suggests that where there is fellowship, the body will be fat and strong. All riches come from fellowship with God, and God will meet them because the father knows the needs of His children. Believers will have abundance from the Father because the Bible declares, “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours” (1 Cor. 3:21), and “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (Eph. 1:22). Christians are the body of Christ and the church of God “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph. 1:23).

¹⁶ *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. “Hebron.”

¹⁷ *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. “Mamre.”

The Altar at Moriah

The fourth altar was built to burn Isaac as a living sacrifice, and was located at Moriah, which means, “chosen by Jehovah.”¹⁸ Abraham named it “Jehovah-jireh,” which translates, “the Lord provides.”¹⁹ This name gives a foreshadowing or predictive word about the real Son of God who would hang upon this same mountain at Calvary, in the land of Moriah.²⁰ Moriah is the place of total personal surrender to God, the place for God alone, and the place to honor and glorify Him. Moriah was a high point of Abraham’s life; he chose between God the giver, and Isaac the gift, and Abraham completely submitted to the giver.²¹ God wants loyal believers to worship Him without any competing attachments. “He wants us to have a relationship with him, not with his gifts or his works.”²²

The altars Abraham built for the Lord demonstrate that he walked with God by experiencing His power and strength at Schechem, self-denial at Bethel, fellowship with God at Hebron, and finally total surrender before almighty God at Moriah.

¹⁸ *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. “Moriah.”

¹⁹ Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of Believers*, 117.

²⁰ De Haan, *Adventures in Faith: Studies in the Life of Abraham*, 158.

²¹ Miller, *Abraham Friend of God*, 175.

²² Nee, “*Abraham and Canaan*,” 109.

Abraham's Understanding of "Obey and Follow God's Will"

Abraham did not fully understand God's plan or heart until late in life,²³ and God prepared Abraham for the momentous command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Through that trial, God taught Abraham in many different areas: the value of waiting for promises, believing unseen promises, listening to God's instruction, and surrendering self to God. God waited patiently for Abraham to understand His will, and God knew that the process would take a lifetime of learning and following. God did not let go of Abraham despite his weaknesses, fears, and mistakes, and God used circumstances to help Abraham recognize and obey God.

The author of this paper has observed that many people would like to know God's will and walk with God, but they are convinced their weaknesses, fears, and mistakes make it impossible. They might say something such as: "I do not seem to have what it takes to live a victorious life. I am afraid I will undermine His plans for me. I make bad choices, I fear stepping out in faith, and I am weak in the face of temptation." They can be encouraged, knowing that even Abraham struggled in faith and obedience.

Abraham and Sarah struggled to obey God's will and command. In fact it was Abraham's father, Terah (which means "delay"²⁴), who first set out for Canaan, but he stopped in Ur. Abraham did not start to move toward Canaan until his later years when

²³ De Haan, *Adventures in Faith: Studies in the Life of Abraham*, 153.

²⁴ Grant, *Genesis in the Light of the New Testament*, 79.

his father, Terah, died in Haran.²⁵ Moses decided to go to Egypt without guidance or counsel from the Lord, and “In the Old Testament, going to Egypt is frequently the alternative to trusting in the Lord.”²⁶ Abraham also stayed with his nephew Lot until their relationship deteriorated and circumstances forced them to separate. He also listened to his wife’s attempt to discern God’s will for him by taking Hagar as his concubine and fathering Ishmael, who could not inherit God’s promise.²⁷ He may have thought he was helping God fulfill the promise, but God did not honor it (Gen. 17:17-20). His failure to wait for God’s timing in this instance was an incorrect response to God’s promises.²⁸

In times of trouble and famine, Abraham did not fully understand God’s guidance and he went down to Egypt. When a similar situation happened to his son Isaac, God said to Isaac, “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live” (Gen. 26:2). The circumstances were the same, but the outcomes were different because Abraham did not heed God’s instruction, while Isaac heard the Lord’s counsel. Despite the famine, “Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him” (Gen. 26:12). God will make a difference as believers allow Him to be the center of their lives, and He keeps his promises and turns negative situations into blessings.

²⁵ Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P. and R. Publishing, 1999), 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁷ De Haan, *Adventures in Faith: Studies in the Life of Abraham*, 112.

²⁸ Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*, 67.

In another instance, Abraham did not seek God's counsel regarding whether he should leave his nephew, Lot, behind in Ur when God called Abraham out of Ur.²⁹ "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there" (Gen. 11:31). "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him" (Gen. 12:4a). In fact, his father Terah seemed to be the one making the decision for all of them.³⁰ Lot was not a good choice of companions, and he fought with his uncle without acknowledging that he was a younger member of the family (Gen. 13:8). Lot's descendants also became a problem for Abraham's descendants.³¹ Could this be because Abraham did not fully understand God's instruction in these matters? Abraham probably should have left his relatives behind, including Lot, as the Lord commanded: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1).

God waited until Lot was no longer in the picture to promise Abraham the land (Gen. 13:14-15), and God waited for Abraham to become His obedient tool before He promised, through Abraham, the blessing of Jesus Christ.³² God waited patiently for Abraham to know Him and come to full faith in Him. Later in Abraham's life when God

²⁹ Gene A. Getz, *Abraham: Trials and Triumphs* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1975), 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

³¹ See: Num. 21:24; Judg. 3:13, 3:29, 11:4-15; 1 Kings 11:1, 33; 2 Kings 3:24; 2 Sam. 8:2, 10:8-19; Ezek. 25:2.

³² Getz, *Abraham: Trials and Triumphs*, 24.

wanted him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham passed the test of faith and obedience. Abraham finally followed God's will, and he believed God's promises even when he could not see the whole picture.

What Did Abraham Discern as God's Will for His Life?

Abraham was an extraordinary man, and he was willing to follow God's calling. He did not discern God's will easily, nor was he always fully obedient, but he trusted that the God who was real to him would not fail.³³ Abraham learned to hear, know, and obey God through his life's events. God called Abraham twice: once in Ur and again in Haran. The first calling brought Abraham to Haran, but he and his group stopped and lived there.³⁴ God did not forget Abraham, but called him one more time.³⁵ God did not let Abraham go his own way and, instead, called him again to his journey. Abraham learned to discern God's will by facing trials. He often failed, but eventually learned from his trials, trusted God's ways, and made certain God was in command.

For example, there was a famine at Bethel when Abraham arrived there, so he and his family moved to Egypt, but he lacked trust in God. He experienced the drought in Canaan, but knew the Nile River in Egypt had water for him and his animals. The Nile was easy and fast to reach, and Abraham chose the easier solution to his problems

³³ Ibid., 136.

³⁴ C Donald Cole, *Abraham: God's Man of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 14.

³⁵ Ibid., 47.

without seeking God's direction. God, however, was focused on the Promised Land, while Abraham was concerned about drought and took his family to Egypt.

Abraham needed help, but he did not ask for help from the Lord. He made his own decision and moved to Egypt instead of relying upon God's promises. God provided wells for Isaac in a similar situation, and He provided a well for Abraham's servant (Gen. 26:1-6, 12-18; Gen. 26:15); however, God would not show Abraham a well site "until he is certain that he is staying in Canaan."³⁶ Abraham had followed God's will, but he veered away and needed to trust God in order to discern His will. Abraham eventually passed the test.

In a second instance of a failed test, Sarah suggested that Abraham should take Hagar as his concubine because Sarah was old and they believed she could not have children. Abraham was eighty-six years old, and he felt he needed to do something to help God fulfill His promise of offspring. Abraham listened to his wife Sarah and took Hagar as his second wife (Gen.16:3), and she gave birth to Ishmael. Abraham used his own plan to provide a son for God, but Ishmael was not the son God had promised. Ishmael represents the human tendency to decide how God's plans are to be realized, which God does not accept. "God's will and promise is God's problem and he will figure out a way to fulfill it."³⁷

³⁶ Steve Schell, "Digging Wells," audiocassette of Sunday sermon presented at Northwest Foursquare Church, Federal Way, WA, 6 April 2002.

³⁷ Nee, "Abraham and Canaan," 72.

The author of this paper believes the most important questions regarding God's will are: "Does the Lord want me to do this work? Or am I the one doing this work for the Lord's sake and mine?" The truth is that the results may or may not be important, but the one who commands the work is important. Abraham learned from his mistakes and eventually trusted and obeyed God's will. It took him almost ninety-nine years to learn to discern God's will, and he waited before he became a trustworthy instrument for God.

Job

Job did not know God's will, and attempted to understand where God was and why God allowed trials to come against Job. Job's experiences cast more light on God's intentions and allow an understanding of His will. The understanding comes through trial. Before exploring how Job understands God through trial, however, it may be useful to consider how his friends understood God's actions. The Asian view of God is somewhat similar to that of Job's friends.

What Did Job's Friends Understand About God?

Job's friends used their own knowledge and judgments to determine God's will; however, God's will cannot be understood by worldly knowledge. Although Job's first friend, Eliphaz, spoke kindly and graciously to Job, Eliphaz thought Job must have sinned and was punished by God for the sin(s).³⁸ He believed that the righteous never

³⁸ Theodore Henry Robinson, *Job and His Friends* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 53.

suffer and that only the wicked perish under God's anger.³⁹ He advised Job to fear God and admit his sin, but also suggested that Job's trouble could have come from his children's sin. Eliphaz created a list of possible sins Job might have committed and encouraged him to admit to one or two.⁴⁰ Eliphaz may have meant well, but he believed Job's troubles were self-created and a product of Job's actions. His concept of God was a judging God with very clear rules and principles that governed His people.

According to Eliphaz, it is God's will that people obey and follow God if they want blessings, and they should be prepared for consequences if they sin. His God is a just God who takes no excuses for human mistakes and has a set of standards for humankind to follow. Job knew God in a more profound way than Eliphaz. Job knew God to be just (Job 6:29) and he claimed he had not sinned against God (Job 7:20). He searched for God's compassion (Job 7:20-21). Eliphaz's concept of God is similar to Asian Christians in that they believe suffering is the consequence of sins. They believe God punishes people for sins committed in the past. Asians find it difficult to receive and accept God's salvation by faith.

Job's second friend, Bildad, challenged Job to look at tradition and history, and learn the cause of suffering from his ancestors (Job 8:8-9). He believed that "God cannot distort justice or mistreat the righteous"⁴¹ because God does not allow the innocent to

³⁹ Roy B. Zuck, *Job* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 32.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Job and His Friends*, 55.

⁴¹ Paul Ciholas, *Consider My Servant Job: Meditations on Life's Struggles and God's Faithfulness*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 114.

suffer. Because Job claimed to be innocent, however, Bildad mercilessly declared, “Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless” (Job 8:13).

Bildad assumed that Job forgot God was in control, and he told Job to return to the Lord (Job 8:5) because God would respond to his call (Job 8:6) and would not abandon the innocent. Bildad also told Job that God was in control of the universe, in power over heaven and earth, managing every aspect of life. He used God’s absolute and almighty traits to try to undermine Job’s self-righteousness and accusations against God (Job 25:1-6). However, Job understood God in this aspect no less than Bildad. Job knew no one can be righteous before God (Job 9:2), and yet he still searched for God’s mercy (Job 10:8-9).

God’s will, according to Bildad, is beyond human grasp because God is omnipotent and humans have no right to intervene in God’s business. Humanity should follow and be humble before God because God is controller of all things and human fulfillment is found in following His instructions. Bildad does not comfort Job in his suffering or help with his problem. He simply preaches God’s absoluteness from a traditional view of human life.

Job’s third friend, Zophar, proclaimed that God’s wisdom was far beyond any possible human aspiration.⁴² God, the absolute authority, could not be understood by human rationality because God was supernatural and far beyond the human mind’s

⁴² James A. Warton, *Job* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 62.

understanding (Job 11:7-10). God's supernatural nature, mind, and will were above all and beyond all, the source of all unexplained things.

Zophar believed that what humans could understand about God was His view of morality. Good moral behavior received blessing from the Lord, while evildoers received punishment because God applied His scales of justice to human behavior and determined His judgments (Job 11:13-20). When people experienced unexplained curses, Zophar believed they must have sinned against God (Job 20:29). In light of this, Zophar encouraged Job to admit he had sinned because, if Job did so, the blessed life could still be open to him.⁴³

God's will, according to Zophar, is framed in morality, but at the same time is high above human comprehension.⁴⁴ Zophar's concept of God's will seems to contradict itself because he believed humans cannot understand God or His will, but His will must follow the guidelines of morality. Zophar implied that Job's former wealth and well-being were driven by his greed for property and power, and now God was allowing his destruction.⁴⁵ Since God is so high above humankind, they need doctrines to guide them in order to please the God who is unknowable. However, Zophar's argument and understanding of God was not new to Job, and Job claimed himself to have knowledge of God superior to that of Zophar (Job 13:2).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Qing Qian Liu, "A Chat about Job's View of God," *Christianstudy* 1:9, 2003, <http://christianstudy.com> (accessed 19 November 2003).

⁴⁵ Wharton, *Job*, 94.

Similar to Bildad and Zophar's view, Asian Christians believe they must build merit and credit with God by doing good things in accord with their understanding of God's instructions. They believe that without merits and credits, they would never be able to receive God's blessing.

Job's fourth friend, Elihu, believed "that affliction was sent by a God of love in order to discipline and purify."⁴⁶ Elihu told Job that "God speaks to man through sickness"⁴⁷ and that with "repentance of the sick person or a gracious atonement provided by the angel, the result is restoration to vigorous health, and spiritual renewal."⁴⁸ In fact, "Elihu views suffering as protective, rather than retributive, as a means of keeping man from death rather than as a means of punishment leading to death."⁴⁹ Suffering is a tool the Lord uses to train and equip humanity.

In the eye of Elihu God was fair and just, and God and human standards of righteousness were just different. Humans might think they were righteous, but before almighty God this self-righteousness was far from the target (Job 35:6-8). Human minds could not understand the fullness of God, His presence, nor his will or plan and, because God had total authority, humans had no right to question God. Since God was beyond human understanding, He was not subject to human righteousness and standards; therefore, when individuals encountered God, they could only be humble before Him. By

⁴⁶ Ray C. Stedman, *Lesson from Job* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovering Publishing, 1997), 6.

⁴⁷ Zuck, *Job*, 146.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 148.

telling Job about the universe and nature's wonders, Elihu encouraged Job to humble himself before the Lord.

God's will according to Elihu is to walk forward in life and trust that the Lord will reveal His path. Do not worry about going the wrong way because God brings individuals back to His will through circumstances, friends, events, and the word of God. Elihu may not know God's will, but he knows everything is within God's purpose. God is working out His best for people, but individuals can miss His purpose and plan because they are limited in their thinking and by circumstances. His way is higher than their way.

What Did Job Know About God's Will?

Job did not know God's will and plan at all, and when suffering came, it caused him to wonder where God was. "As his pain increases his frustration grows because he cannot find any way to get into contact and argue the point with God and get some answers to his problem."⁵⁰ He wanted to know what he had done for God to punish him (Job 13:23) and he asked his friends, "Why am I suffering without a reason? Why is God silent?" According to Old Testament scholar Paul Ciholas, "There is no sense of fair play when God can destroy at will from a distance but never comes close enough for a serious debate."⁵¹ Job was so desperate for God's answer that he argued with God. God's will

⁵⁰ Ray C. Stedman, *Expository Studies in Job: Behind Suffering* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981), 100.

⁵¹ Ciholas, *Consider My Servant Job: Meditations on Life's Struggles and God's Faithfulness*, 188.

was not revealed to him, and he begged the Lord to turn away his wrath (Job 7:20). Job even thought God saw Job as an enemy (Job 19:11).

God did not answer Job's prayer when he called for help because God was silent, and Job could not find Him. Job was in the dark throughout this event until the Lord talked to him in the wind. Then God discussed His will with Job by revealing for him the plan of His universe, creation, and His management of the whole world. Furthermore, God showed Job two animals, the behemoth and the leviathan, to remind him that all creatures, including Job, are "parts of the same creative process, made for the same purpose, having both existed in God's mind from all eternity."⁵² As a result Job became silent before God (Job 40:1-5). When Job was "drawn into the mysteries of creation, it was enough to marvel at life, even when he could explain very little of it."⁵³ Job was humbled as God let him know what he could not control anything, and that God was even able to bring down Satan.

The author of this paper believes that Job's view of God is beyond the view of his friends. He knows that God is in control of all his suffering, but he begins to doubt God's ability to judge fairly and justly when it takes so long to end the suffering. He believes he is a righteous man and undeserving of suffering because he has not sinned against God's commands or regulations (Job 31:5-40). Job created a world that should function

⁵² Ibid., 253.

⁵³ Liu, "A Chat about Job's View of God."

according to his ideas, but God created a universe that follows God's will, not Job's. Job has created a god that is unreal, a god that should listen to his commands.⁵⁴

When Job considers the universe he believes God is in control of everything, and he knows there are purposes for everything. He understands the purpose of his suffering because he trusts that God does the best for him. When he sees the best of the Lord's will for him, contentment and peace enter into Job's heart and he submits to God's authority (Job 42:1-6).

What Can Be Learned from Job's Experience?

The author of this paper believes four lessons can be learned through Job's experience. The first lesson is how not to comfort suffering friends. If an individual attempts to comfort someone, and does not understand God's will in that unique circumstance, it is best to be silent and not offer explanations. The problem with Job's friends was that, although much of their theology was correct, they answered Job's words without understanding what was behind them. In addition they did not know God's plan for Job. "There was apparently no understanding that perhaps there were aspects of God and dimensions to his wisdom that they had not yet seen."⁵⁵ The difference between their theologies and the teachings of the Spirit was that they lacked compassion and love. "Theology can be very clear and right, but when one is dealing with the hurting problems of life a deeper dimension must be added—that compassion Jesus manifested, that

⁵⁴ "Job," trans. Iris C. Ko, Victor Chi, and Alwin Li, in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Wai-wing Chan, vol. 3 (Hong Kong: China Translation and Printing Services, 1988), 1549.

⁵⁵ Ray. C. Stedman, *The Cry of the Spirit: Job* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing, 1997), 5.

sympathy that identifies with hurt and opens the door of the spirit to receive more light and love.”⁵⁶ Doctrinal ideas and rules might be helpful guides, but the love of God should be manifested through them.

Second, Job’s three friends combined their theology with their own logic and determined what was right and wrong for humans and God. They used their own minds and understanding to help God judge Job. Their words sounded well intended, but did not have life in them, and they blocked access to the entrance of heaven (Luke 11:52).

Third, none of Job’s friends prayed with him. They never asked God for help in opening their minds and illuminating their understandings so they could help their friend. The narrative is full of Job’s prayer, but none of his friends prayed for Job or to God for guidance. If they had prayed, they might have known how best to answer Job in his suffering; God might have revealed Satan’s intention to use them, and they might have avoided causing further pain. Unfortunately, “Satan is there in the background using these friends as channels for what the apostle Paul calls ‘the fiery darts of the wicked one’ (Eph. 6:6). It is a good reminder to beware lest we become a channel for Satan’s accusations against someone who is suffering as Job is suffering here.”⁵⁷

Fourth, Job teaches the reader how to act when faced with suffering. Job did not sin against God with his mouth, and he never cursed God or denied God’s existence. He did use his mouth, however, to contend with almighty God (Job 40:2). He tried to control

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.

God by asking God to provide an explanation for his miserable life, and Job believed that the Lord's judgment was unfair to him. He may not have thought he was higher than God, but he thought he was equally righteous and just, and he put himself on the same level with God. The word "humble" was not in Job's vocabulary at the time. Christians can emulate Job in not sinning with their mouths, but they should also learn to be humble. A great lesson from Job is that God uses difficulties to train individuals and make them pure in His sight.

God has promised to listen and respond to individual difficulties, situations and hardships (Matt. 11:28-30). God will listen and give comfort, but even if He does not, believers should willingly submit to His plan. God intends the best for His followers, even if His plan may not appear to be good at the moment. God's will is God's desire for His children, and it may come through suffering, pain, or joy, because God has the absolute power to grant His mercy, blessings, grace, and love to everyone as He wishes (Exod. 33:19).

Paul

God forced Paul to know God's will (Acts 9:1-19). The Lord came upon Paul in a brilliant light which changed "his former conception of God as lawgiver and turned him to his new apostolic emphasis on God as spiritual procreator."⁵⁸ This amazing experience was the turning point of Paul's life. God had chosen him for a special calling: he was to

⁵⁸ John L. White, *The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), xxiii.

be God's servant by acting as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13, Eph. 3:1). Paul, however, had to go through the long process of learning to obey and deny himself so he could walk with Christ. Paul, like everyone, could not always achieve the good he strove for (Rom. 7:15). His story teaches much about learning God's will.

How Did Paul Follow or Understand God's Will?

Before the Damascus-road experience, Paul did not comprehend nor accept Jesus Christ as Messiah. In the name of Yahweh, he searched for Christians to kill or capture under warrants from the priests in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:13-14, Acts 8:1, 9:1-2). He served the temple leadership zealously and believed he was loyally and wholeheartedly serving Yahweh. Paul knew the Jewish traditions, but did not have the revelation of the Holy Spirit; he had the Word of God, but did not have insight from God. Biblical scholar John L. White describes Paul's motive: "Paul aspired to lay this Jesus to rest once (and) for all by destroying the people who kept his scandal alive."⁵⁹ Paul's life style was violent and determined (Titus 3:3-5), and he supported the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1,4,22). Paul had persecuted the church cruelly and tried to destroy it because he was zealous for his ancestors' traditions and beliefs (Gal. 1:13-14). He thought he was acting in God's will, believing the Christians to be a cult that should be eliminated.

Paul's initial concept of doing God's will was based on his understanding of his ancestors' faith and beliefs. He had knowledge of God, but not the experience of God provided later on the Damascus road. When Paul encountered God's presence, he moved

⁵⁹ Ibid., xxiv.

beyond the faith of his fathers and mothers. When Jesus was vindicated by God's revelation to Paul, Paul realized Jesus was Messiah.⁶⁰ He was so contrite about his pre-revelation lifestyle that he associated himself with "Gentile converts who did not meet traditional admittance requirements."⁶¹

Paul's Process of Understanding God's Will

After the vision on the road to Damascus, Paul knew something of God's will. He knew he was called to be God's servant, and he began learning how to know God's will and obey it through Christ's body. He submitted himself to the church's authority by going to Salamis to preach the gospel (Acts 13: 2-3,6). Paul may not have known how to discern God's will completely at this point, but he knew how to put himself under the church's authority, follow the church's discernment, and obey the church's vision.⁶²

Paul learned to know God's will and listen to His voice. Paul was learned, yet he had much to unlearn, and much that he rejected for the sake of Christ.⁶³ For example, during John Mark's difficulties and return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), Paul was still more in the flesh than the spirit and did not allow Mark to mature in Christ because he disliked having Mark on the mission team. Paul had less compassion than he should have had in this circumstance. As Pollock noted, "The argument between Paul and Barnabas was

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., xxiii.

⁶² Walther Von Loewenich, *Paul: His Life and Work*, trans. Gordon E. Harris (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 54.

⁶³ Archibald T. Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Paul: A Study of Development in Paul's Career* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 19.

fierce which ended their partnership.”⁶⁴ Paul had much to learn before he could write, “Love is patient and kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” (1 Cor. 13:4). Paul did not see the work of God, especially His hand on Mark, and he was more aligned with the flesh than with God’s heart. Paul was self-centered and ambitious to do the Lord’s work; however, he lacked compassion for his coworkers who were infants in Christ.

In other instances, evidence suggests Paul did not understand God’s will until God revealed it to him. Acts 16, for example, describes Paul’s thwarted traveling plans. Paul was in the region of Phrygia and Galatia and planned to go to Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit did not allow it and guided Paul and his team to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Paul’s plan was not God’s desire, but Paul obeyed and followed the Holy Spirit’s leading when he understood it. Paul was learning to put himself under the authority of the Holy Spirit and Christ.

These experiences helped Paul recognize his role and purpose for Christ. He learned progressively that he should die to the world, where he should put himself in relationship to Christ on the cross, and why he should live for Christ and Paul’s brothers and sisters. Paul learned to walk in God’s will through different situations. In the flesh, he had refused to take Mark along on the mission trip as Barnabas wished to do;⁶⁵ however, he proclaimed in his later letters that Mark greatly assisted his missionary work (2 Tim.

⁶⁴ John Charles Pollock, *The Apostle: A Life of Paul* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 86.

⁶⁵ Frederick F. Bruce, *The Pauline Circle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 75.

4:11). The desires of Paul's heart were not always God's desires, but he learned to submit to Christ's authority with the Holy Spirit's guidance.⁶⁶

Paul knew the Holy Spirit directed him to Jerusalem even though tragedy awaited him (Acts 20:22-23). "But," as Robertson notes, "he does not care for that, if only he may really accomplish his course and his ministry."⁶⁷ This differed from the Macedonia experience because Paul understood God's desire in this circumstance.

The state of Paul's spiritual life at this point is reflected in his proclamation: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). "For him life meant Christ, no more, no less. He was Christ's slave."⁶⁸ He could rejoice "even in the dangers and the failures and the disappointments, because out of them grew a larger, a richer, a diviner life."⁶⁹

Paul could see God's hand moving in his life, and the Spirit revealed God so that Paul could see the future and events that would happen. This was evidenced by his successful predictions when he was shipwrecked while traveling to Rome. He predicted a storm (Acts 27:10), and the ship sailed into a hurricane (Acts 27:14). After a few days in the roaring sea, he proclaimed that an angel had spoken to him and had announced that

⁶⁶ Knofel Staton, *How to Know the Will of God* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard, 1976), 32.

⁶⁷ Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Paul: A Study of Development in Paul's Career*, 216.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁹ Lyman Abbott, *The Life and Letters of Paul the Apostle* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1898), 315.

the ship would be destroyed, but their lives would be spared (Acts 27:22). After fourteen days, he was proved correct when all the shipwrecked men came to the island of Malta (Acts 28:1).

A further examination of Paul's experience reveals additional amazing events in his spiritual journey. He even claimed to speak for God. Paul's experience and spiritual development affirms that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, believers can know and do God's will because they belong to the Lord (Rom. 14:8). This is a central affirmation and provides a biblical basis for this paper's thesis: An individual can understand God's will for his/her life regardless of the individual's cultural background.

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul gave his readers advice and several commands from the Lord. The Corinthian narrative describes how Paul was in Christ, and how he talked for Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. First, Paul made it clear that he was the one speaking when he encouraged people to remain single: "I say this as a concession, not as a command" (1 Cor. 7:6). In the next few verses Paul claims his words became God's words. "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord)" (1 Cor. 7:10a). In another instance Paul said, "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)" (Acts 7:12). When he did not know the Lord's will he said, "I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1 Cor 7:25). Paul claimed he knew the difference between his words and the Lord's words, and he claimed he was in God's will when he spoke to the Corinthian church. This is how he lived in God's will.

What Can We Learn from Paul?

First, Paul chose to be used by God, and his heart was zealous for the Lord and His kingdom before he knew Christ. The Lord saw a heart dedicated to Jehovah, but it was also a heart that did not know God's plan and God's will. After his conversion, he learned to know God's will progressively. As he did, he learned to live for Christ, like Christ, and eventually he learned to live as Christ.⁷⁰ Christians would do well to emulate Paul's life following the pattern he experienced.

Second, Christians are called to live for Christ, and Paul knew what that life involved (Phil. 1:13). He believed the most important thing in life is living (or dying) for the Lord (Rom. 14:7-8), and, in living for Christ, he worked for Christ (Phil. 1:20-21, 24). Paul suffered for Christ countless times (2 Cor. 11:23-33), and he used his sufferings to encourage followers of Christ, reminding them that suffering leads to glory.⁷¹ He told Christians to prepare for suffering and to remember that suffering is an essential tool for training God's people.⁷²

Many people live for pleasure, ambition, fame, and wealth, and people work for themselves in this world.⁷³ If Christians do not live for Christ they do everything for their gratification, but when they live for Christ, they work for Christ. This perspective

⁷⁰ John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 117.

⁷¹ Thomas W. Buckley, *Apostle to the Nations: The Life and Letters of St. Paul* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), 201.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Yu-Ming Chia, *Perfect Salvation* (Hong Kong: Bellman House Publishers, 1987), 298.

changes everything Christians encounter and gives them different values and meanings. They think of the Lord and others before they think of themselves, and they work, eat, play, study, and even dress for the Lord. They are willing to suffer for the Lord.

Third, Christians are called to live like Christ. Paul told Christians to bear Christ's image in every aspect of life in order to let the world know they are Christians (Phil. 1:20).⁷⁴ Paul said Christians should display Christ's characteristics so others can see authentic discipleship (1 Cor. 2: 14-15). Paul acted like Christ when he healed the sick and fed the hungry, fulfilling Jesus' call to "do even greater things" (John 14:12, Acts 19:12). He also "put on" Christ so that he looked Christ-like, and he called Christ's followers to do the same (Rom. 13:14, Gal. 3:27). Christians can demonstrate the characteristics of the Lord: self-control, kindness, love, joy, peace, and compassion (1 Tim. 1:7, Rom. 14:17), and act as Christ did by emulating His works.

Fourth, Christians can learn to live "in" Christ (Phil. 1:21). Paul ran and finished his race for Christ, and he fought his war for the Lord (2 Tim 4:7). The Lord did not deny his reward, for Paul had followed faithfully and loyally.⁷⁵ He grew into maturity and the fullness of Christ while not claiming that he had reached his goal. He used the imagery of a good athlete,⁷⁶ ran for the goal ahead of him (Phil. 3:13-14), and found abundant life in Christ.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁵ Buckley, *Apostle to the Nations: The Life and Letters of St. Paul*, 494.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 370.

Like Paul, Christians can take the baton, run the race, grow in maturity, seek to win the race, and glorify the Lord. As Christians build trust and faith in Jesus and know He is God and Savior, they grow toward full maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:13). As they run and mature, surrender themselves, and realize that “to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21), they experience abundant life (Luke 18:29, John 10:10). They can have peace in times of trouble, know Christ is in control, and trust in His promises to give them the best in this life and in the life to come (Luke 18:30).

Paul called Christians to fight the good fight and dedicate everything to the Lord, just as Paul did: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul reminded his readers of Christ and the importance of being in Christ’s will, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

Conclusion

When Jesus was on earth, He did only the will of His Father who sent Him. Likewise, Christians are called to live like Christ, they should be able to have close relationship with God like Jesus, and know God’s will like Jesus. Asian Christians may encounter difficulty when they start learning to have relationship with God and God remains silent. Doubt may start to grow when God is silent, and Asian Christians might easily believe themselves to have done something wrong that displeased God. Abraham, Job, and Paul offer biblical examples of knowing God’s will in one’s walk with God.

Even when God remained silent, they lived and walked by faith, believing God would eventually fulfill His promises. We should also be able to trace the footprints of the historical saints, and discover their Christian journey by following God's will.

CHAPTER 3

FOOTPRINTS OF THE SAINTS IN HISTORY

This chapter presents three historical saints who described their relationships with God and their knowledge of God's will, and who provided important lessons and insights for twenty-first century Christians. Their stories tell us the journey of the Christian's walk and faith. They are: St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and Watchman Nee.

St. Augustine of Hippo

St. Augustine lived from A.D. 354-430¹ and was zealous for the Lord after his conversion. His behavior was defective in his early life, but he finally sought the truth in Christ and understood God's will. His dedication to the Lord and his understanding of God are a model for Christians to follow.

How Did Augustine Walk with God?

Augustine's early life was characterized by "his inability to control his sexual desires."² At age seventeen he took a concubine who bore a son, Adeodatus (translated as

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 96.

² Ibid.

“given by God”), before taking a wife in a marriage arranged by his Christian mother.³

The Lord, however, had placed the search for truth in Augustine’s heart which was rooted in his “high minded and truth seeking” nature.⁴ His worldly knowledge did not satisfy his inner longing for truth, so he searched until he found peace in Christ. The Lord knocked at his heart through the testimonies of friends, using them to change Augustine and stir his heart for the true living God.⁵ He struggled within himself and was invited toward truth by the Holy Spirit, yet was pulled away from the Lord by his sinful nature.

Augustine had a critical experience that led to or crystallized his conversion. While in a deep discussion with friends, he ran from the group and entered a garden. He seemed to hear the voice of a child who said, “Take, read.” He read from Romans 13: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Christ and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.” Historian Kenneth Latourette says, “This crisis precipitated [his] conversion.”⁶ Augustine’s conversion was a significant, essential step in call and will, and “no other Christian after Paul was to have so wide, deep, and prolonged an influence upon the Christianity of Western Europe.”⁷

³ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 160.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ E.C. Butler, “St. Anthony,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01553d.htm> (accessed 24 November 2003).

⁶ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 97.

⁷ Ibid.

After being baptized by Bishop Ambrose in Milan, Augustine went to Africa and built his first monastery. Five years after building his second monastery at Hippo Regius, where he was an elder, he became bishop of Hippo Regius. He served the Lord and the church for thirty-five years until his death, and he protected Christian beliefs from Donatism and Pelagianism, defending the truths of God and of Christianity.⁸

How Did Augustine Discern God's Will?

The Struggle between Good and Evil

Augustine's *The City of God* provides insight into his theology and the book can be divided into two parts: the City of Satan and the City of God. In the first ten chapters, Augustine discusses worldly religions, how their gods fail, human free will, God's prescience, the roots of ancient Rome's ethics, and how people build kingdoms. In the second part of the book, Augustine discusses the kingdom of God. The book describes the beginning of the world, angels, the creation of humanity, death as punishment, the earthly city (with Cain as its symbol) versus the heavenly city (with Abel as its symbol), Noah to Abraham, Abraham through the kings of Israel until Jesus Christ, and the end of these two cities, including the punishment of Satan.⁹ In *The City of God*, Augustine described, among other topics, the mental and emotional struggle between good and evil,

⁸ D. F. Wright and S. B. Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Arnold M. K. Yeung (Taipei: Campus Evangelical Fellowship, 1997), 1; Aurelius Augustine, *Selected Works of Aurelius Augustine* (Kowloon, Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council, 1996) 32.

⁹ Augustine, *Selected Works*, 27.

and how the inner person is constantly threatened by the conflict between wrong and right.

Differentiating between Good and Evil and Knowing God's Will

An individual's ability to know God's will begins with loving God, and Augustine stressed love for God, and how God loves humanity.¹⁰ God has given humans the whole of creation as a gift, but humans want more because they love themselves instead of God. They love the gifts more than the giver and seek to grasp, control, and dominate the universe. Individuals seek to lead others rather than being led by God, and they want what they cannot have and are not content with what they possess. Humans want to be equal with God, counsel Him, and act according to their desires, interests, and dreams, which are usually the opposite of the Lord's. Individuals behave "from a distorted appetite for being like God" through human attempts to dominate the whole, but "end up becoming like beasts."¹¹

These human tendencies can be counteracted by being in God, which enables individuals to love God and all creation. This allows humans to have a single vision of "Love-as-a-whole-in-coordination-with-its-parts."¹² Augustine explained this point:

If you find pleasure in bodily things, praise God for them, and direct your love to their maker, lest because of things that please you, you may displease

¹⁰ Eugene Portalei, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Library of Catholic Thought, trans. Ralph J. Bastian (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), 221.

¹¹ Aurelius Augustine, *De Trinitate: The Trinity*, trans. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: Augustinian Heritage Institute, 1991), 12.11.16.

¹² Gerald W. Schlabach, "Contenance, Consumption and Other Abuses; Or Why an Augustinian Ethic Is Worth the Bother," *Society of Christian Ethics* (8 January 2000): 4.

him. If you find pleasure in souls, let them be in love with God. In themselves they are but shifting things; in him they stand firm; else they would pass and perish. In him, therefore, let them be loved, and with you carry to him as many as you can.¹³

Bring all right or wrong acts and intentions to God, for this is the way to love others as ourselves, as the Lord commands (John 13:34). As persons are in God and deny themselves, they will love what God loves and reflect the love toward His creation. They will know what God wants because they are one with Him; therefore, they must be in God in order to know God's will.

The concept of being "in God" or uniting oneself to Him by knowledge and love is for Augustine the beginning and the end of everything, including knowledge of God's will.¹⁴ There is nothing beyond God, and God is everything including the heavens and the earth. Augustine pointed out that "in God" covers whatever people can and cannot see, including their bodies, souls, and spirits.

Love: The Key to Discernment

Augustine's theology of "being in God" describes his way to discern God's will because, when individuals are in God and know God, they will know the way of the Lord (John 14:20, 1 John 2:24).¹⁵ Christ did not do things on His own, but through the Father in Heaven, and believers will be like Christ when they believe the father and Christ is in

¹³ Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 4.12,18.

¹⁴ Portalei, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 279.

¹⁵ Ibid., 232.

them. They will not seek their own glory and pleasure, but they will be guided to do the Lord's kingdom work through the Holy Spirit's revelation of Christ.

Since God is love and love is God, love is the basic rule guiding discernment; and believers learn to know God only by loving Him.¹⁶ Anything against the love of God is not God's will, and believers can only truly love when they are "in God." If they love what God loves and put themselves in God, they will turn their attention toward God instead of themselves. If they are not "in God," they turn their attention toward themselves instead of God. If they are not "in God," they cannot truly love God or His creation because they will show partiality. Individuals may say they love a neighbor, but they may love themselves more. Friends and enemies are easy to choose and love or hate in different ways, but Jesus said believers are to love their enemies (Luke 6:27-31).

The only way to love perfectly is to obey the Lord's calling, but, as Augustine acknowledged, humans have the problem of free will.¹⁷ Free will can be a hindrance to God's love and God's will because, when believers do not choose God's will, they choose their own will or the will of evil. Humanity's free will can become the battleground of unseen beings and forces when people choose to sin against God (2 Cor. 10:4). Nevertheless, the universe created by God has certain rules and regulations; if individuals please God they will be blessed, but if they sin against God, the punishment of the Law comes upon them in the eternal sense. If the exercise of free will directs one

¹⁶ William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 115.

¹⁷ Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 86.

to love and desire God and the individual makes mistakes, God will guide him/her back to His loving arms.

The Father in heaven looks at people's hearts and sees their deeper beings. When someone does something wrong and sins against God, God knows that person's heart and soul because God knows everyone's deepest desires, desires they may not know themselves (1 Sam. 16:7). The author of this paper believes that if individuals are willing to let God guide their hearts, they will find where God wants them to be and what His will is for them. "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3). This conforms to this paper's thesis that believers can understand God's will for their lives regardless of cultural backgrounds.

What Augustine Teaches About God's Will

First, it is important for a believer to examine his/her heart and ask some difficult questions: "Do I really love God as I claim, or is it just words without commitment?" "What is my purpose in life?" God has put His expectations in individuals' hearts, but they can choose to obey or go astray (Luke 6:45). Augustine's life and experiences demonstrate the intense process he underwent as he dealt with these and other vital questions. God gives free will and individuals choose whatever they want, but only one thing ultimately matters: does that person love God and others? (Matt. 22:34-40). If the answer is yes, then the person has a seed planted deep in the heart and in good soil (Mark 13:19). Allow it to grow, and God will guide the believer toward maturity and within

God's will and plan. Augustine sought something that would satisfy him, and he attempted to fill the emptiness of his heart with sex and philosophy, but only God could fill it.

Second, it is important for a believer who seeks God's will to have Augustine's persistence and seek after God's truth because persistence after God's truth helps Christians know God's will. A lack of persistence hinders the flow of God's grace upon believers.¹⁸

Third, it is important for a believer who seeks God's direction to find a mentor(s) who can give spiritual guidance. Augustine was amazed and instructed by the words spoken by the Valerius, his predecessor as bishop of Hippo.¹⁹ Likewise, Joshua followed Moses who designated Joshua as his successor,²⁰ the disciples followed Jesus (1 Pet. 2:21), and Paul taught Timothy (2 Tim. 4:1-5). When someone becomes troubled or confused by worldly things, the mentor in Christ can help identify God's will. A mentor who has learned from personal experience can provide godly advice and comfort (Matt 11:28-30).

Fourth, Augustine's experience teaches that Christians can be totally dedicated to the Lord and His will for the believer. Augustine sold all his belongings, left his sinful life, totally dedicated himself to the Lord, and became a model for all other Christians. He spent over thirty years before the Lord's presence because he knew there was no

¹⁸ Augustine, *Selected Works*, 309.

¹⁹ Portalei, *Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 20.

²⁰ Henri Gaubert, *Abraham: Loved by God*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard (New York: Hastings House, 1968), 70.

place he could rest but in the Lord.²¹ Augustine fought for his beliefs against Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism. He proclaimed the truth for the Lord, left worldly pleasures early in his life, and thereby understood God's will for him.

Fifth, Augustine demonstrated how to make God the first priority in life. Being "in God" places God at the head of all, and when God's will comes prior to all other issues, Christians seek to accomplish His will in their lives. Without His will, life is empty and without purpose (Acts 5:38). Christians can bury their flesh and its desires, put Christ ahead of everything, and be guided by the Holy Spirit in God's will. Like Augustine, believers cannot escape their flesh, but they can trust what the Lord has done in His will for them and be victorious in His name (1 Cor 9:27).

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Loyola's early days were known for his gambling, womanizing, and brawling until he was wounded while fighting against the French forces.²² After his conversion, which occurred during his convalescence, "he was dominated all his life by a desire to imitate Christ. His *Spiritual Exercises*, written over a number of years, are a series of reflections, examination of conscience, and prayers, grouped according to a traditional set of four steps leading to mystical union with God."²³ Later, his followers became the group called Jesuits. His life goals were to:

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² Victor Shepherd, "Ignatius Loyola," 23 June 1998, <http://www.victorshepherd.on.ca/Heritage/ignatius.htm> (accessed 15 November 2003), 1-3.

²³ J.H. Pollen, "St. Ignatius Loyola," ed. Marie Jutras, 2003, <http://www.ignatiushistory.info/> (accessed 26 November 2003), 1-10.

1. renew the Roman Catholic Church through extensive education and encourage the frequent use of the sacraments.
2. conduct extensive missionary work in non-Christian countries.
3. compose a suitable response to the growing challenge of Protestantism.²⁴

How Did Ignatius of Loyola Walk with God?

Ignatius (c.1491-1556) “shared in some of the vices common to men” in his youth before he committed to Christianity.²⁵ This all changed when he read two books while convalescing in his hometown. While he was reading these two books, one on the lives of the saints and one about Jesus Christ written by a Carthusian, the Lord changed him completely.²⁶ Worldly thoughts lost their hold and heavenly ideas grew clearer and clearer.

When Ignatius left Loyola (after his injury was healed), he had no definite plans for the future, except that he wished to rival what all the saints had done in the way of penance. His first care was to make a general confession at the famous sanctuary of Montserrat, where, after three days of self-examination, and carefully noting his sins, he confessed, gave to the poor the rich clothes in which he had come, and put on garment of sack-cloth reaching to his feet. His sword and dagger he suspended at Our Lady’s altar, and passed the night watching before them.²⁷

His life had changed like the apostle Paul’s, and he became the tool of God. At Manresa in a Dominican monastery, he followed spiritual disciplines that later became

²⁴ Shepherd, “Ignatius Loyola,” 3.

²⁵ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 843.

²⁶ Ibid., 844.

²⁷ Pollen, “St. Ignatius Loyola,” 2.

his *Spiritual Exercises*.²⁸ He was accused by the Inquisitors, jailed twice, and he had legal proceedings brought against him at Azpeitia in 1515, at Alcal in 1526 and 1527, at Venice in 1437, and at Rome in 1538.²⁹ The source of all of these difficulties was his missionary desire to preach the Word of God. He attracted followers and preached to them, but at that time a lay person who preached without license or supervision was automatically suspected of heresy.

He was concerned about the salvation of men and women. He spoke to large crowds, but he also “worked quietly in the hospitals sweeping floors, making beds, emptying bedpans and burying the dead. He struggled to rehabilitate as many prostitutes as possible, accommodating them in a house where they could be educated and prepared for marriage.”³⁰ He had not intended to become a spiritual leader, but his love for the Lord led him in that direction.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Loyola directed his followers to take an event in the life of Christ, imagine the scene in detail, replay the episode in their minds, and try to feel as if they had witnessed an event, and then to use this experience as a motive for love, gratitude, and dedication to the service of God. He also encouraged his readers to put the disciplines into four-week action plans, focusing on a different theme each week. He said, “The first week focused on God’s love and our rejection of God through sin. The second week focused on the life of Jesus from his birth through his public ministry. The third

²⁸ Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 376.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Shepherd, “Ignatius Loyola,” 2.

week focused on Jesus' passion and death. The fourth week focused on the risen Christ and the world that is being renewed."³¹

Ignatius, through his desire to imitate Christ, developed a process for discerning God's will. He pushed his followers to think and act like Christ, and the process showed them how they could see God in all things.³² He disciplined himself by following the Bible's rules and regulations, and reorganized the rules and regulations so common people could understand and learn them. He described how the mind and heart could encounter the Spirit and discern what is from God and what is not.³³

How Did Ignatius of Loyola Discern God's Will?

The Lord told Christians they could hear the Holy Spirit guiding them from within, but Christians live in a reality that may make it difficult to hear God's voice and determine where He leads them. When they struggle with these issues, they can use Loyola's techniques to analyze their thoughts and find God's will. Silf provides an outline of the exercises:³⁴

1. Discover who I really am,
2. Direct myself toward God,
3. Notice God's action in my life,
4. Respond to the movements of my heart,
5. Discover the nature of my deepest desire,

³¹ Carole Spencer, "Historical Models for Spiritual Formation in the Church," (D.Min. Diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2003).

³² John A. Hardon, *Retreat with the Lord: A Popular Guide to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1993), 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁴ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), 2.

6. Seek God's will,
7. Become free of all that distracts me from my deepest desire,
8. Make choices in line with my truest self,
9. Connect my lived experience with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ,
10. Respond to God's love for me, and
11. Find God in all things.

Each step informs the believer what God is doing and what the believer should do.

By following the steps, a Christian can realize the true nature of God's purpose and see where the hand of God is and what God may have planned. Believers can know their inner selves better, especially their deepest desires, and can accept who they are in Christ. Tetlow suggests, "As you accept the true God as your God, you deepen your ability to accept yourself as you are—not as you might have been, or could become, or ought to be. You say yes to the self God is creating in you. You accept God's acceptance of you, and this brings with it deep gratitude to God."³⁵

Because Christians may not be content with what and who they are, they may want to know what will happen to them in the future. They want to control their own destiny and reshape their inner and outer selves. Unfortunately, they often do not fully trust God to control their futures. God allowed them free will to choose, and they frequently choose to follow their desires instead of God's desire and will.

Ignatius identified rules to discern the Holy Spirit's voice, and there are several aspects of his spiritual exercises that are important in this paper:

1. Christians should seek holiness and purity because the Lord can give them spiritual joy and gladness in the time of trouble brought on by the enemy. They should,

³⁵ Joseph A. Tetlow, *Ignatius Loyola: Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 58.

however, guard against moving from one mortal sin to another because the enemy can hold them as his prisoners. If they continue sinning, they will go from good to bad and from bad to worse, enjoying temporary pleasures provided by the enemy.³⁶

2. Believers should let God stir their hearts until they are able to love Him as He loves them. “Consolation when some interior movement is stirred in the soul makes a person catch fire with love of the Creator and Lord. As a result, he can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all.”³⁷

3. Christians should distinguish consolation from self-reliance. When consolation comes without cause, and there is no deceit in it, God is the sole owner of that event. If the soul remains warm, it indicates that the spiritual experience, instead of a good angel, has become the guide. The Lord wants Christians to wait instead of going forward as usual.³⁸

4. Believers should take care that their restless minds and souls are in God’s hand, for, unless they are, all kinds of temptations will result. Earthly things may become the soul’s primary desire, and Christians will be confused by the influence of darkness. They will be overtaken by “desolation,” rather than consolation.³⁹

5. Disciples should be aware of angels, and which angels are consoling them. Both good and bad angels can console the soul; good angels benefit the soul that Christians

³⁶ Ibid., 165.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1973), 36.

³⁹ Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1993), 35.

might grow from good to better, but bad angels lead them from good to worse. The bad angel can be disguised as an angel of light and bring holy thoughts, kindness of heart, and other things that glorify the Lord. Eventually, however, the Christian's desire for the Lord may diminish, and the bad angel will succeed in deceits. It is clear that the thoughts are from the bad angel, "if . . . the thought which he brings ends in something bad, of distracting tendency, or less good than what the soul had previously proposed to do."⁴⁰ On the other hand, if the thoughts from the beginning to the end are good, it is a sign of a good angel. The touch of a good angel is soft, sweet, tender, silent and gentle, unlike the hard touch, dispute, quarrelling, and loudness of the bad angel.

6. Christians can learn from past weakness. When they are tempted and led to a negative place, they can be helped by looking back immediately to the good beginning of their journey. They can examine how they fell away from the sweetness and joy of the Lord, and came to a miserable spiritual situation. After these examinations, they may be able to guard against future similar deceits from the evil spirit.⁴¹

What Can Be Learned from Ignatius of Loyola?

Ignatius teaches the value of a full-hearted desire to be Christlike. Ignatius followed the Lord and preached the gospel bravely in times of trouble. He offered basic rules for discerning God's will and guidelines to identify the way to Christ. In addition to his spiritual exercises, Christians can learn from his devotion and discipline. He took many

⁴⁰ Mullan Elder, "The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola," 2003, <http://www.ccel.org/i/ignatius/exercises/exercises.html> (accessed 12 December 2003), 1-25.

⁴¹ Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Mottola, ed. Robert Gleason (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

opportunities to spread the gospel, even though he was imprisoned at least twice and stopped from spreading the gospel for at least three years.⁴²

Ignatius also teaches the important concepts of consolation and desolation. He taught that consolation comes from the good angel and desolation from the bad angel. Silf has categorized these two words and clarifies the difference between the good and the bad when they enter the soul. She has also provided examples of what to do in times of desolation or consolation. First, she describes tools to recognize the difference between desolation and consolation. Desolation turns Christians into themselves, drives them from community, makes them dismiss things that are important to them, takes over their consciousness and crowds out long-term visions, covers up important memories, and drains energy. Consolation directs the focus outside and beyond the Christian, lifts hearts so believers can see the joys and sorrows of other people, bonds the faithful more closely to the human community, generates new inspiration and ideas, restores balance and refreshes inner vision, indicates where God is active in lives and where He is leading, and releases new energy.⁴³

Second, Silf describes what Christians can do. In desolation, they can tell God how they feel and ask for help, seek out companionship, not reject decisions they made in consolation, stand still and remember their inner maps, recall a time of consolation and return to it in imagination, look for someone who needs help and turn attentions toward them, and go back to the first step. In consolation, Christians tell God how they feel and

⁴² Shepherd, "Ignatius Loyola," 2.

⁴³ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 52-53.

thank Him, store the experience in memory and return to it when times are difficult, add this experience to their life maps, use energy to further their deepest desires, let the surplus energy fuel the things they avoid, do them, and go back to the first step.⁴⁴

Although Ignatius teaches many valuable lessons, the writer of this paper believes a few important cautionary points relate to his spiritual exercises:

1. The Holy Spirit is not emphasized; rather, angels play the dominant role in Ignatius' spiritual exercises. The angel does not equal the Holy Spirit, and God's plan and will are not revealed in these exercises. These exercises address personal needs and growth in the spiritual realm, and may not discern the Spirit of God. God, however, might use them to reveal His Spirit and way.

2. The good and bad angels are not Christ or the Holy Spirit because God is beyond good and bad and cannot be categorized this way. Christians do not look to please God by being good. They recognize what the Lord has done through Christ and realize what the Holy Spirit reveals to them.

3. Ignatius divided the spiritual world into two parts: the good and the bad, God and evil. The world is more than good and bad, and there are things beyond good and bad. For example, the tree of life and the will of God are missing from Ignatius' discernment method, but he offers basic discernment tools for Christians.

4. Ignatius' discernment exercises omit humanity's free will, but free will is basic in choosing between good and evil. Personal desire plays a very important role in Christianity, and it is important to stand for God against evil.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 68.

5. Ignatius did not differentiate between the mind and the spirit. If everything is spiritual and guided by the upper realm, individuals have no control over what happens. This is congruent with the Word of God; rather, Christians are given the power to unlock the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19).

6. The exercises may give too much responsibility to Satan. He can set traps for individuals, but if they do not reach for the tree of knowledge, the fruit cannot be eaten. Christians should discern the spirits, but when they recognize the Spirit of God, the Spirit of evil, or their own desires, they make choices and decide what to obey.

7. Tetlow writes, “Discernment does not mean finding out what I feel. It means finding out what I desire and out of what dynamic I desire it, what I enact and what I intend by my enactment.”⁴⁵ Discernment involves asking, “What was my last decision?” “Why did I carry it out?” and, “Is it toward God, evil, or my own desire?”⁴⁶ For the author of this paper, discernment is finding out the will of God and pursuing a course to please the Lord. On the other hand, Ignatius analyzed each thought and emotion rationally, attempting to determine God’s will rather than hearing and believing the Holy Spirit’s revelations. Christians need not analyze God’s will; they need to surrender and obey it.

8. Ignatius’ spiritual exercises, like certain Asian customs, are helpful in discerning good and bad spirits. In Asian culture, individuals believe there are good gods who bless

⁴⁵ Joseph A. Tetlow, *Choosing Christ in the World* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989), 3.

⁴⁶ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 76.

people's lives and may give them good moral standards, but these gods differ from the God of Christianity. The temple's mediators help people discern between good and bad angels, and they decide what can be done to protect people from the evil angel's attacks. They may exorcise evil spirits and invite good spirits to bless the person. This discernment of spirits, common in polytheistic cultures, differs from Christian discernment; however, Ignatius' exercises may not differentiate between the Holy Spirit and other spirits.

One universal truth is important: although individuals have free will, God has total authority over His will and power.⁴⁷ When individuals know or discern God's will, they may allow God to have His way if they surrender their will to His interests. Ignatius's discernment rules may help a new believer and the person's direction, but Christians can grow because the Holy Spirit reveals God's truth in many ways.

Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee was a zealous follower of Christ. He started the "little flock movement" of "house churches,"⁴⁸ which reached a size of 150,000-300,000 and lasted through eleven years of war in China. He was jailed for about twenty years.⁴⁹ His contemporaries heard little about him because of mainland China's closed-door policy.

⁴⁷ Portalei, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 183.

⁴⁸ Dana Roberts, *Understanding Watchman Nee* (Plainfield, NJ: Haven Books, 1980), 23.

⁴⁹ Leslie Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men* (London: OMF Books, 1974), 90.

In the following sections, the author of this paper will analyze Watchman Nee's walk with Christ, discover how this Chinese spiritual leader discerned God's will, and learn how he walked with and listened to Christ.

How Did Watchman Nee Walk with God?

Nee's Early Experiences

Watchman Nee's early Christian life was influenced by Miss Yu at a Bible school in Shanghai⁵⁰ and Miss M.E. Barber, a British missionary.⁵¹ From Miss Yu, Nee learned to allow the Holy Spirit speak to his heart through God's Word.⁵² Miss Barber instructed him in the victorious-life concept through the filling of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ Miss Barber realized that Watchman Nee had brought no one to the Lord in the year following his salvation, and she "spoke to Nee frankly, 'You are unable to lead people to the Lord because there is something between God and you. It may be some hidden sins not yet completely dealt with, or something for which you are indebted to someone.'⁵⁴ She taught Nee how to bear testimony, reminding him that he must speak to God first before speaking to people.

⁵⁰ Robert, *Understanding Watchman Nee*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Kwang-his Weigh, *Watchman Nee's Testimony*, 1993, <http://www.watchmannee.org/testimonies.html> (accessed 2 December 2003), 45.

As Nee faced the trials of life, he learned and grew. One of the most important lessons he learned was that churches sometimes oppress the truth of God's Word, trying to please people rather than God. Nee believe that "in the church, right and wrong have no place; all that counts is bearing the cross and accepting its breaking. This produces the overflowing of God's life and accomplishes His will."⁵⁵ Watchman Nee describes how he took up his cross:

When I first became aware of my illness in 1924, I was feeling sick, there was pain in my chest, and I had a slight fever...but I did not want to meet the Lord without having completed my work. I was very depressed. I asked the Lord, "What is Your will for me? If You wish me to lay down my life, I am not afraid to die." For half a year I could not grasp the Lord's will, but there was joy in my heart, and I believed the Lord could never be wrong.⁵⁶

My disease became so aggravated that I could not even lie down...Satan said to me, "Since you will soon be dying, why not die in comparative comfort rather than in pain? I retorted, "The Lord wants me just like this; get out of here!"...I prayed: "Now let Your servant depart in peace." At the same time my disease worsened . . . I could not sleep peacefully at night, and when I awoke I turned incessantly from side to side...I said, 'Let this be my end. I realize I am going to die soon.'⁵⁷

The Bible says, "By faith you stand," but I was still lying in bed. A conflict arose in my mind: Should I get up and stand or remain lying down? We all know that human beings love themselves and consider it more comfortable to die in bed than to die standing. . . . Satan said to me, "Are you trying to stand when you can't even sit up?" I retorted, "God told me to stand," and I rose to my feet.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid. 32.

⁵⁶ Watchman Nee, "Self Awakening and the Light of God," in *Revival News*, in *Watchman Nee Sermons Collections 9* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1991), 43.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Nee was near death, but by faith he walked and was healed. His experience taught him to trust God by hearing and believing in God. Nee understood that the mercy of God was upon him.

How Did Watchman Nee Discern God's Will?

Abandoning Self Will

Watchman Nee believed God's will was the center of everything, and he taught believers to work and study with God's will in their hearts so that their lives would constantly engage God's will. Nee believed the most important factor in knowing God's will was abandonment on one's personal will. He described that he often had his own ideas and desires hidden deep in his heart, which prevented him from finding God's will. He suggested that believers may appear to be searching for God's will, but their minds are actually filled with their own opinions, thoughts, and ideas. The Bible says the heart "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9) When individuals cling to their own wills, their hearts may not truly seek God's will even though they pray for God's will to be done. They may not recognize His will, and although they know His will, they may not want to do it because of their personal desires and will.

Nee believed what individuals call "God's will" may actually be carefully packaged personal ideas. When this the case, it is meaningless to seek God's will because a self-focused heart blocks an understanding of God's will: "We often lose sight of God's

will because of our little sins, hidden desires, slanting opinions, and fallacies, and furthermore, because we have lost sight of God.”⁵⁹

Christians can “allow the light of God to shine upon us.”⁶⁰ Without God’s revelation individuals will be in the darkness, even though they read the Bible daily, because they can miss the blessing and the presence of God. Without God’s revelation, believers may be like the Pharisees who “diligently studied the Scriptures because [they thought] that by them [they would] possess eternal life” (John 5:39). Yesterday’s revelation may remain today’s knowledge, which is no longer a prompting from God. If Christians are not careful, spiritual insights may become head knowledge with no power behind it. Believers who focus on God daily allow the Holy Spirit to give them new insights and revelations every time they read the Bible.⁶¹

Even when believers know the Word of God thoroughly, they still need to die to sin and live for Christ and others (Rom. 6:11). When Christians understand God’s will, it is not usually a question of “good or bad,” or “to follow or not to follow.” It is often a question of “want to or don’t want to” or “obey or disobey.” When believers hear and understand God’s will, they must decide whether or not they will follow it.

⁵⁹ Watchman Nee, “How Can We Know God’s Will?” in *Watchman Nee Sermons Collection* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1991), 99,103.

⁶⁰ Watchman Nee, “Triumphal Life,” in *How Could We Have Victorious Life? in Watchman Nee Sermons Collection* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1991), 88,109.

⁶¹ John Oswald Sanders, *Enjoying Intimacy with God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 82.

Hearing the Prompting of God through Devotions and Prayer

God's prompting inspiration is the key in discerning God's will. Watchman Nee discussed this prompting "intuition" as "the sensing organ of the human spirit. That knowledge which comes to us without any help from the mind, emotion or volition comes intuitively. The revelations of God and all the movements of the Holy Spirit are known to the believer through his intuition."⁶² According to historian Dana Roberts, intuition brings Christians into a knowledge of spiritual things.⁶³

Nee believed emotions and mind are characteristics of the soul rather than one of the Spirit; therefore, the mind and emotions are secondary in discerning God's will. "Well do we begin if we follow intuition instead of thought. To perform God's will a Christian need simply heed the direction of intuition. There is no necessity to ask others, or even to ask yourself."⁶⁴ Nee believed that if someone heeds the mind, that person is walking after the flesh and going astray. It is a great mistake to elevate the mind as the organ for direct fellowship with God or for receiving revelation from Him; nevertheless, the mind is not entirely useless. Its role is to assist intuition.⁶⁵

In order to become a "spiritual man" and know God's will fully, believers should pay attention to their inner voices or light, which comes from the prompting voice of intuition. How can Christians know God is speaking to them? When they pray, do their

⁶² Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Man 1* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship, 1977), 32.

⁶³ Roberts, *Understanding Watchman Nee*, 89.

⁶⁴ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Man 2* (New York: Christian Fellowship, 1977), 31, 74.

⁶⁵ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Man 3* (New York: Christian Fellowship, 1977), 23-24.

devotions or daydream-prompting thoughts often come from nowhere? Perhaps these promptings come from God. These can be checked through God's Word and the particular circumstances. Nee thought every Christian can discern God's voice through the prompting of intuition.

Intuition (which should not be confused with God's Word, the Holy Spirit, or circumstance) may be difficult to follow and very demanding of effort and commitment. Offerings to God that do not cost something could hardly function as a symbol of commitment or repentance.⁶⁶ The critical issue is not how much someone knows about God or God's Word, but rather how one follows God's instruction and obeys His command.

Learning God's Timing and Resting in Him Daily

Watchman Nee described three tools to understand God's will: the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and circumstances.⁶⁷ When these factors coalesce in a particular matter, it identifies God's will, and Christians can use these factors in seeking God's will. Christians use practical understanding to handle minor daily problems without consulting the Lord's will intensively. When they believe it is time to consult God's will they may become nervous, worried, and impatient because the Lord seems far away, and God's will is not understood. They may become confused about conflicting thoughts, or cannot discern the will of God because they have not sought His will.

⁶⁶ Leslie C. Allen *The Communicator's Commentary : 1,2 Chronicles*, gen. ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982)143.

⁶⁷ Nee, "How Can We Know God's Will?" 100.

Nee believes it is important to understand that God may not immediately reveal His will or may delay the revelation of His will. Christians can act when the time is right, but when the Lord delays, they can wait and do whatever God last required of them.⁶⁸ God's will waits for God's timing, and a Christian's belief provides the best results through trust in Him and knowing He is there even in the darkest pit. Believers may move ahead of God, doing things for the Lord without seeing God's will, and doing what the individual thinks is best. Disciples sometimes make decisions for the Lord because they believe God is too busy and has insufficient time for the small things in life. When God delays in answering prayer, believers may use the time to refocus through the Word of God and the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

People make many tiny mistakes-small lies, anger, jealousy, and laziness-in their daily lives which hinder communication with the holy and just God. If believers do not hate sin, the light of God is not in them, and if they depend on emotion and mind, God is not with them. Even Paul did not trust his emotions and mind to do things for the Lord (1 Cor 4:4-5), and Christians should wait on the Lord because He has His own time schedule to reveal truth. Judge nothing, therefore, before the appointed time and wait until the Lord comes because He will enlighten what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of a person's heart.⁶⁹

Many Christians are busy and hurry to do God's work without letting God into the effort. It is important for Christians to know the difference between God's will and their

⁶⁸ Nee, *Spiritual Knowledge*, 161.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 57.

own. For example, Jesus had His own will (John 5:30), but Jesus did nothing without understanding the Heavenly Father's intention (John 5:30). Jesus had his own will, but he chose to obey and follow the will of his Father in heaven. Jesus was not passive in obeying his Father's command; rather, he deliberately chose to work in God's will. Jesus did not always want to obey the Father's will; however, he demonstrated that God's will was his highest priority.⁷⁰ The author of this paper believes Christ's example provides two lessons:

1. It challenges Christians to believe God's truth. For example, the scripture reports that Christ is the vine and believers are the branches; he is the head and disciples are the body; he is in them and they are in him; they believe they have eternal life because he died for them. It is important for Christians to accept these facts.

2. It challenges Christians to use faith and claim God's blessing. Christians believe they have salvation through faith, but often what they believe is intellectual knowledge that does not apply to their hearts. For example, many Christians believe Christ's promise, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27), but they might be worried and upset.⁷¹ It is important for Christians to have faith to walk their journeys. Nee emphasizes that God's will is found in waiting for God's timing, believing

⁷⁰ Watchman Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1973), 14.

⁷¹ Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: John* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 302.

God gives the best, trusting Him without a doubt, and knowing He is with believers even in the darkest pit.

What Christians Can Learn from Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee teaches Christians much about discerning God's will. For example, believers need not depend on circumstances because they may be tests from the Lord to train them in daily life and transform them from evil intentions and ways. Christians should be humble and willing to choose God's will and follow it even though the path is difficult. Nee's life and legacy also teaches the following points:

1. Remember the three guides Nee provided to discern God's will: the Holy Spirit, God's Word, and circumstances. Nee assumes that God never contradicts Himself. God's Word is the basic guideline, the Holy Spirit provides inner harmony, and circumstance provides outward confirmation. When these three factors are in place and the believer experiences a sense of peace, the Christian can know this is God's will.⁷² Nee strongly emphasized the balance between the Word and the Holy Spirit, for God's Word is dead without the revelation of the Holy Spirit (John 5:39).

2. The Christian can maintain a seeking heart and be persistent in the pursuit of God's will. Believers may have doubts when the Lord delays answers, and they may complain and use their own efforts to solve problems. Christians ought know that any delay in answer to prayer enables them to learn or to know something they never knew

⁷² Nee, "How Can We Know God's Will?" 100.

before.⁷³ but Nee never stopped believing in God. He was faithful and true until the end of his life, and constantly sought the Lord and examined his heart.

3. When believers understand God's plan, they can announce the will of God. God burdens His people's hearts when He wants something done, and the burdens motivate Christians to pray that His will be done. Christians can announce: "This is one of the voices of God that is calling us to pray or act."⁷⁴

4. Nee suggests Christians be wary of self-centeredness. Both "I cannot" and "I am able" are self-centered statements, because humans think about themselves more than anything else and assume the whole world was created exclusively for their pleasure.⁷⁵ Christians may forget Christ is alive within them and they can do all things through Him, but without Christ they are nothing (Matt. 19:26).

5. Christians can believe they know God's voice. They are God's instruments, and when God decides to use them, He will put it on their hearts. They will feel the sorrow and the pain of the Father's heart and will pray about the issues or discuss them with other Christians. Christians believe God has called them into positions to accomplish His work, but they must not work ahead of God or behind God. Rather, they are called to walk side by side with Him.⁷⁶ Nee suggests Christians should not make God wait too

⁷³ Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 122.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-5.

⁷⁵ J. Willcock, *The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1896), 389.

⁷⁶ Watchman Nee, *Not I But Christ* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1973), 117.

long and not make God pursue them. Christians can trust God for the timing, and God wants believers to be prepared as clean vessels, ready for His revelation.

Studying historical Christians' daily walks with God, and their ways of discerning God's will, reveals that discerning God's will is approachable. If the hindrance of self is removed, believers can be clean vessels through the daily cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. Believers need only surrender to God's guidance and the doors to discerning His will are open and inviting. Likewise, Asian Christians need to believe God has already forgiven their sins and trust God even when He is silent. They must learn to deny themselves and continue believing that God will reveal His will in His time.

How do we discern God's will in our lives? The historical Christian exemplars in this chapter developed ways of discerning God's will. This paper examines how the church develops ways of discerning God's will to support Christians in their efforts to walk in God's will.

CHAPTER 4

DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

For purposes of this paper, the writer defines “discern” as Charles M. Olsen did, “to ‘see’ or to ‘know’ or to ‘acknowledge’ the movement of God.”¹ It is important for Christians to discern God’s will. Morris wrote:

God does not play games with us as though the divine will were hidden and only God knows what it is. We do not have to sneak up on God or be clever enough to solve the riddle. If we love and walk with God, God and we create the path that bring us to our awareness of the divine will as we move along together. Discerning God’s will is living fully in the profoundly personal and fulfilling relationship with God that God offers us in Jesus Christ.”²

God’s will is nothing more, nothing less, and nothing other than God’s desire.³

God desires that Christians become His friends and walk with Him in His creation, but God gives humans the freedom to choose whether or not they respond positively and obey Him. “God loves us very much and wants us to find God’s will even more than we want it.”⁴ There are, however, many wills in the world besides His will, and it is vital that Christians discern His intentions. God gives humans choices: “The will of God

¹ Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1995), 88.

² Danny E. Morris, *Yearning to Know God's Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 29-30.

³ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Bethesda, MD: Alban, 1997), 64.

⁴ Ben Campbell Johnson, *Discerning God's Will* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 23.

always stands up under investigation. The will of God doesn't demand a blind, ignorant response but affords space for questioning and groping."⁵ Individuals cannot do God's will until they surrender their intentions to God's because "God will never hold one responsible beyond his [*sic*] capacity to perform; of this we may rest assured."⁶

Every believer seeks to know God's will and obey it, but they may not discern God's will clearly. The discernment of God's will can be divided into three categories from the author's point of view: personal discernment, church discernment, and ethical discernment.

Personal discernment should not be confused with ethical discernment because personal is knowing where a Christian should go and what the Lord wants the believer to do. Ethical discernment is more concerned with personal character and behavior. Church discernment involves group processes and how church members follow, hear, and obey God's will.

Personal Discernment

The author of this paper believes personal discernment is foundational for ethical and church discernment, and is based on belief in God and conviction for Christ. Individuals may pretend they are exceedingly spiritual, but are not so. The Lord knows their true desire (Psa 139:23). People may fool the whole world with their disguises, but they cannot fool the Lord because He knows their intentions and hearts.

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ William S. Deal, *Problems of the Spirit-Filled Life* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1961), 147.

Personal discernment is important because Christians seek to act in ways that honor and glorify God, and they believe He loved them first and want to love Him in return (1 John 4:19). The world, however, is full of temptations that divert Christians and “Satan will persecute those who belong to the world.”⁷ It is important for Christians to discover what the Lord intends for them. This paper is based on the assumption that God’s will is knowable regardless of an individual’s cultural background.

Principles of Personal Discernment

The first foundational stone of personal discernment is individual salvation. One must accept Jesus Christ as personal savior. “The Bible points out that it is impossible for us to see further into God’s will unless we are willing to obey that will which we have already seen.”⁸ God’s first desire since the beginning of the world is authentic relationships with His creatures. The writer of John who asserted that God sent His only begotten son to die for human sin in order that they could have a genuine relationship with Him again proves this. The letter to the writer of Timothy said that God “wants everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3-4). MacArthur describes “The first thing about God’s will—He wants man to be saved.”⁹

The second foundation stone of personal discernment is a Christian’s love and desire for the Lord and His will (Psa 40:8). Without that motivation it is pointless to

⁷ Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy, *The Common Made Holy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 339.

⁸ George Sweeting, *How to Discover the Will of God* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide, 1975), 53.

⁹ John MacArthur, Jr., *Found: God's Will* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1972), 10.

know God's will because a person's heart will not be set toward the Lord. It is necessary that a person seeks to walk in His path even in times of suffering and still love Him when surrounded by chaos. Love for the Lord is the reason Christians should know His will in the first place after they receive Him as Lord.

The third foundation stone is the display of good behavior and love for others. Glisson wrote "If we are to know the will of God, we must do it."¹⁰ Christians are called to love enemies and neighbors because God loves the whole world (Luke 10:27). In order to know God's will, Christians understand that "we are called to lavish God's love on others."¹¹ God might use neighbors and enemies to teach His will and their actions could be part of God's plan (Prov 16:4).

The fourth foundation stone of personal discernment is the acknowledgement of individual self-centeredness. Denial of self and glorification of the Lord requires a struggle of heart and mind. The writer of James suggested, "But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:14). Christians need strength from the Lord to help them overcome temptation.

Biblical Examples of Personal Discernment

The story of Samuel who chose a king for Israel exemplifies personal discernment. Because of Samuel's prior experience in choosing King Saul, he thought God would choose Jesse's firstborn son, but the Lord told Samuel the firstborn was not to be king.

¹⁰ Jerry Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God's Will* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986), 71.

¹¹ Gary L. Thomas, *Authentic Faith: The Power of a Fire-Tested Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 30.

“But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at” (1 Sam 16:7). The Lord looks at a person’s heart.

The story of Jonah is another example of personal discernment. Jonah heard God’s voice and knew His will, but Jonah did not obey and follow; instead he went in the opposite direction. A Christian may hear the God’s voice and know His will, but resist following.¹² There may be many reasons to disobey; however, when the Lord chooses someone as His tool, He will often train and discipline this person until he or she surrenders his or her will to God, until the person willingly opens his or her heart to the Lord’s will. The Lord used circumstances and bent Jonah’s will to His. Jonah gave the authority back to the Lord and obeyed his calling to Nineveh.

Balaam’s story also illustrates personal discernment. Balaam talked to God, knew that Israel was a blessed people, and realized God was in control of everything. “I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God” (Num 22:18). Balaam, however, did not obey God’s voice because of the lure of silver and gold (Num 22). His story illustrates that knowledge of God’s will is different from obedience to God’s will. Balaam understood God’s will, but his heart was filled with desire for possessions. He could not resist the temptation of wealth, and he attempted to convince God to approve his own plans.¹³ Even a donkey spoke to Balaam in hopes that he would repent (Num 22: 28-30). However, in the end, he made the evil subjects seduce God’s

¹² Sweeting, *How to Discover the Will of God*, 30.

¹³ Strauss, *Decisions! Decisions! How God Shows the Way*, 63.

people into sin. The Lord gave him many chances, but he chose not to take them. He prayed against Israel, but the Lord turned his prayers into blessings. Finally, he advised the king in a way that led the Israelites into sin. “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD” (Num 31:16). Balaam knew God’s will, but his heart was consumed with the possessions of this world. He heard the voice and knew the will of God, but his free will led him down a different path.

Historical Examples of Personal Discernment

Many Christians have discerned God’s will. Through their experiences and walks with God, they have discovered ways to understand God’s will and come to conclusions regarding God’s plans. These include St. Augustine, St. Ignatius, and Watchman Nee described in Chapter Three of this paper, and a number of other Christians who have experienced the will of God through their devotional practices.

Methodist theologian Leslie Weatherhead described his techniques to discern God’s will. He suggested looking to the following guides to understand God’s will: conscience, common sense, the advice of a friend, the biographies of great persons who walked with Christ, the voice of the church, and the inner light of God who speaks directly to his elect.¹⁴

Sinclair Ferguson provides three key steps to discern God’s will. First, God’s guidance requires patience by the believer. His leading does not usually appear as a direct

¹⁴ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1973), 40.

assurance or revelation, but rather through life's circumstances that God controls, and through the guidance of the God's word. Second, it is essential that Christians understand the role their own thinking plays in the discernment of God's will. Knowing God's will is much more a matter of thinking than of feeling.¹⁵ Lastly, the discovery of God's will and its accomplishment involves free will that God created in humanity.¹⁶

Knowing God has a purpose is different from obeying God's will. Someone may anticipate God's will and not wait for His instruction at all. Frederick Meyer suggested that discerning God's will includes waiting for the Lord. Meyer suggests five principles for discerning God's will.

1. Surrender our own will to the Lord. In everything, we do not have certain special choices. We should stand in a neutral position.
2. Seek to understand the will of the Holy Spirit by referring to God's Word.
3. Be cautious about circumstances, which the Lord has prepared for us.
4. Follow the Lord's instruction, which is revealed by the Holy Spirit.
5. Wait on the Lord.¹⁷

"Waiting on the Lord" is one a discernment method that every Christian can practice, but many Christians believe they know God's will and do what they think is pleasing and gives honor to God. "Without a willingness to wait, we will be regularly frustrated with God and may become disillusioned with our faith."¹⁸ We do not know

¹⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 34-35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Frederick. B. Meyer, *Ephesians: A Devotional Commentary* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1953), 58.

¹⁸ Thomas, *Authentic Faith*, 39.

that God is near and wishes believers would listen to His instruction and follow Him.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prove 3:5).

Sinclair Ferguson describes why Christians have difficulty waiting on the Lord:

1. They are reluctant to accept their worldly status as pilgrims (Heb 11:10).
2. They are unwilling to bow to the sovereign providences of God (Prov 40:2-4).
3. They lack faith in the goodness of God (Rom 8:32).
4. They are too easily influenced by the attitudes of the times in which they live.¹⁹

Morris and Olsen provide the following practical insights for examining God’s will:

1. The cultural framework of a group helps identify the focus for discernment of God’s will because the guiding principles are informed by the values, beliefs, and purpose of the discerning community.
2. Grounding in a guiding principle provides the basis for the discernment process.
3. Let go of ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that the person involved in discernment can consider the matter.
4. Use the group’s traditions and connect them with religious and biblical stories, themes, and images.
5. Listen for the prompting of the Spirit of God in the voices of the discerning community, and the expressions of others who may be affected by the discernment.
6. Use playful imagination and identify options that lie within the guiding principle.
7. Use prayer and discussion to improve each option until they are refined and effective.
8. Consider and test the options in response to the leading of God’s Spirit.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will*, 107-10.

Personal Discernment: God's Will and His Instruction

“Waiting is the portal of hope, a very necessary element of spirituality.”²² On the other hand, “Impatience can lead us into any number of spiritually harmful activities. It can foster a spirit of rebellion that seeks immediate release.”²³ God often uses the inner and outer circumstances of individuals to reveal His will. “God places a burden on the hearts of His people when He wishes to accomplish something. It is then incumbent upon us to pray that His will be done. If we do not, the burden becomes heavier under the prompting of the Spirit.”²⁴ The desire to do God's will may become stronger and stronger until the individual acts on it.

God never contradicts any part of Himself, including His Word. “If we feel a desire to do something that conflicts with the plain teaching of the Bible, we may be sure the prompting comes from the world, the flesh, or the devil.”²⁵ An individual who follows God's will honors the Word of God, agrees with the Word of God, and is in harmony with the Holy Spirit. “We must be a people who have been dealt with by the Holy Spirit. When we are in harmony with the Spirit, we will be in harmony with each other, and can pray effective prayers.”²⁶

²² Thomas, *Authentic Faith*, 49.

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship, 1973), 35.

²⁵ Coder, *God's Will for Your Life*, 94.

²⁶ Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 46.

Waiting for the Lord is a difficult task, but discerning His prompting is even more difficult because “Self often seeks a confirmation from the Bible for what it wants.”²⁷ As a result, Christians may convince themselves that they hear the voice of God when, in fact, they hear their own inner thoughts. It is possible to discern the voice of God in unexpected promptings. The most important element in this discernment is motive. The Book of Jeremiah suggests, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). Some Christians may disguise themselves as saints in front of others, but God knows their hearts. The scriptural records: “All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart” (Prov 21:2). “Would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?” (Psa 44:21). “He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man” (John 2:25). The Lord knows the Christian’s heart, therefore, the Christian must be true to his/her heart and to the Lord’s will.

Free will and self play a very important role in knowing God’s will. “Self, being the sin nature and the source of our sins, also speaks to us. And if we listen to the self nature, it will produce sins.”²⁸ As a consequence, believers may hear the voice and know the will of God, but if they are not willing to follow His will, their efforts are for naught. If they seek to know God’s will, they must have the desire to serve or please the Lord. Balaam is a life example of this fact because he knew God’s will, but he did not obey. He wanted control of God instead of obeying God, and he loved the world and himself more

²⁷ Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God's Will*, 96.

²⁸ Ibid., 93.

than God. The key to being blessed is to obey God's will and seek first His kingdom (Matt 6:33).

The author of this paper has developed the following guidelines, from his personal experience. To discover God's will:

1. Pray until you feel that the prompting of the Lord has come.
2. Ask for advice from true believers in Christ.
3. Rethink the prompting or advice, and ask, "Would it benefit me or God?" and "Would it bless me or God?"
4. If the prompting or advice is not from the Bible, disregard it; however, if it is according to the Bible's teaching, do it.
5. If God is silent on certain issues, you should remain still and wait in faith until God's further revelation comes.
6. Use a sense of peace and fruit as a guide for personal discernment. If believers feel peace in their hearts, continue with confidence, knowing this is God's will.

Christians can look beyond the facts and trust that the Lord gives them the best (Matt 7:7-11). They can walk in faith if they do not know the future, and they can put their faith in Him (Matt 10:26-33). If Christians lack these elements, they may ask the Lord to give them faith to walk His path, because He gives faith (Luke 17:5).

Ethical Discernment

To discern God's ethical will, every believer must be "morally upright in our Christian walk [following] God's requirement."²⁹ The world is in major chaos. Many different ethical values are propounded because of differences in culture, belief, education, and personal character. In this chaos, Christians can identify and follow a set of ethics. Ethical standards change, and it appears that ethical standards are degenerating. A Presbyterian biblical scholar, D. James Kennedy wrote, "The more impurities and contaminants they may pour and dump into their hearts, the happier they are going to be."³⁰ For example, young people pursue variety in love and sex before marriage.³¹ Sex is no longer reserved for married couples; rather, it is available for whoever wants it. There is a difference between people and other creatures because the other creatures lack an understanding of ethics or ethical behavior. Ethical means "Conforming to accepted standards: consistent with agreed principles of correct moral conduct."³²

Worldly (community) ethical discernment is based on local laws or traditions,³³ and different times and cultures have different ethical views that may vary dramatically. Americans think bigamy is unacceptable because of their culture, but some Muslim men

²⁹ Ibid., 152.

³⁰ D. James Kennedy, *Delighting God: How to Live at the Center of God's Will* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1993), 101.

³¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 74.

³² *MSN Encarta*, s.v. "ethical," http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/ethical.html (accessed September 3, 2005).

³³ David W. Gill, *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 46.

have multiple wives. In ancient biblical times men had multiple wives (Gen. 4:19) and a widow married her husband's brother to preserve the deceased brother's family line (Gen. 8:6-10).

Different Views on Ethical Discernment

Many authors have written on ethical issues. For example, theologian Peter Thomas Geach provides a description of classical virtue theory and discusses the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.³⁴ Pastor and professor John Knox believes that ethical discernment is a denial of self and having Christ as the center of life: "It means denying the self itself; it means a radical reorientation of life, the will of God rather than one's own will becoming the center."³⁵ Ethnologist and theologian James M. Gustafson claims that Jesus Christ is the base and standard of the moral life: "Jesus Christ is the starting point; Jesus Christ the Incarnation of God, Jesus Christ is the judgment of God, Jesus Christ the elect of God, Jesus Christ the victor over sin and death. Jesus Christ is the reality of moral life."³⁶ Biblical scholar Edward Collins Vacek writes that love is the central idea in all ethical issues. He frames the ethical issue into four points: God loves humanity; they love God; God and they form a community; God and humanity cooperate.³⁷ It is similar to Jesus'

³⁴ Peter T Geach, *The Virtues* (New York: Cambridge University, 1977), 55.

³⁵ John Knox, *The Ethic of Jesus in the Teaching of the Church* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), 21.

³⁶ James M Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 12.

³⁷ Edward C. Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1994), XV.

commandment: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31).

The Historical Church’s View of Ethics

This section provides an overview of the church’s approaches to ethics and includes four periods: the early church, the church in the Middle Ages, the church in the Reformation, and the contemporary church.

Ethics in the Early Church

Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, wrote *The Duties of the Clergy* based on Cicero’s book, *De Officiis*. He Christianized Cicero’s teaching under a Stoic influence, which later became the basis of ethics known as natural law.³⁸

Early church doctrines and ethical concepts were influenced by philosophy and other religions. Churches found their unique identities and developed canon law, which regulated behavior and specified punishments. The emphasis on standards and rules influenced the development of asceticism and monasticism. The monastery became the highest ethical training ground and standard for monks and Christian believers at that time.³⁹

³⁸ D. F. Wright and S. B. Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Arnold M. K. Yeung (Taipei: Campus Evangelical Fellowship, 1997), 354.

³⁹ Rosemary Morris, *Monks and Laymen in Byzantium, 843-1118* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 16.

Ethical influences in the early church also came with other forces. Although St. Augustine's life had been impure before he became a believer, he was concerned with ethics. He came to believe that grace was humanity's only hope and encouraged people to obey and follow God's revelation. Faith, hope, and love were the basis of his ethics, and he stressed the importance of a daily life that was pleasing to God.⁴⁰ St. Augustine's theory became a guide for other Christians.

Ethics of the Church in the Middle Ages

From the early church to the reformation, the experience of the Christian life brought great impact in that period owing the intense spread of the Christian doctrine.⁴¹ Bishop Hildebert of Tours wrote *Philosophia Moralis* and Abelard wrote *Ethica*, but the most influential writer was Lombard who wrote *Sententiae*.⁴² In his third chapter, he discussed the believer's virtues: faith, hope, and love. Furthermore, he described the fruits of the spirit, the Ten Commandments, and the difference between the laws and the gospel.

Thomas Aquinas also wrote about moral matters in *Summa Theologica*. "After a general consideration of virtues and vices and other points pertaining to moral matter in

⁴⁰ Wright and Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 355.

⁴¹ Peter Byrne and S. James Leslie, *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 558.

⁴² Wright and Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 355.

general,” he wrote in the prologue to *Secunda Secundae*, “it is necessary to consider each of these one by one.”⁴³ He spent a great deal of time talking about morality in theology.

The ethics of the church in the Middle Ages merged with mysticism, and was based both on St. Augustine and on Platonism.⁴⁴ Christian ethics became focused on the unity of humanity and God which released individuals from their inner being through the power of Christ. The ethicists of the Middle Ages emphasized inner life and holy living, and this influenced later Christian ethics.⁴⁵

Ethics of the Church in the Reformation

Martin Luther believed humans have both freedom and ethical bearings, but crimes and sin had twisted ethics, making them into bondage for people. Only God could transform people into new beings, and through faith people became free from their sinful natures. This faith allows them to live in the love of God, facilitated obedience to the Word of God, and enabled them to live for Christ in the world. Christ had given this new life to them.⁴⁶

Additional Reformation leaders wrote about ethics. Philip Melancthon, in his 1534 book *Loci*, developed a philosophically based ethics system and thought God

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classic, 1981).

⁴⁴ Wright and Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 356.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

created natural law, which became the basis of his ethics.⁴⁷ Thomas Venatorius wrote about ethics in his book, *De virtute Christiana libri tres*. He employed Paul's notion, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Venatorius taught humans can become righteous before the Lord through faith. In addition to justification by faith, Venatorius believed the ethics people practiced were influenced by their society.⁴⁸ John Calvin wrote about ethics in *Christian Institutes II*.⁴⁹ He proclaimed that the Christian's life was about serving the Lord spiritually, and that denying oneself was a tribute to the Creator.⁵⁰

Ethics of the Contemporary Church

After the Reformation, Christians disagreed about ethical knowledge based on prior principles,⁵¹ and in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment influenced ethics. Some Enlightenment thinkers questioned held assumptions about creation, religion, and ethics. They no longer kept the traditions of the church, and developed different ideas about God, revelation, and empirical truth. Some people hoped they could keep the spiritual dogmas, but they looked for a basis in reason and empiricism. Three variations developed in three different countries: Materialism was developed among French

⁴⁷ Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1992), 19.

⁴⁸ Wright and Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 356.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1813).

⁵¹ *Encyclopedia Americana Volume 10* (Danbury, CT: Grolier, 1998), 614.

theologians and Deism was important to the English.⁵² Rationality grew to be the basis of mainstream German ethical belief.⁵³

Many theologians moved away from the constraint of creed or dogma. J. Butler emphasized conscience, Immanuel Kant focused on rational ethics, Robert Barclay spoke about the light of the Holy Spirit, and Walter Rauschenbusch developed the ethics of the Social Gospel.⁵⁴

In the nineteenth century, ethic as thought and theory was influenced by Kant's concepts. He believed ethical standards were inborn in all people's hearts and were developed through their experiences. He believed that Christians could examine themselves and survey their own inner hearts accurately.⁵⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who lived under the oppression of the Nazis. His ethics centered on the need to live and die for Christ in daily life, including the workplace, and he believed Christians should suffer and be martyred for the Lord. This was partially based on his belief that Christians would be willing to die for others because through death Christians would see Jesus.

Bonhoeffer's teacher, Karl Barth, had different ideas about ethics which he described in *Church Dogmatics*. He thought that humans were total failures, and it was

⁵² Wright and Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 728.

⁵³ Ibid., 357.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1084.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 357.

only in Jesus Christ that individuals could have life and a new beginning.⁵⁶ Brunner added another element to Barth's theory by claiming that people could not know right or wrong, but if they knew what was good (God's will), they would obey. On the other hand, they could not be responsible for things they did not know or hear from God. More recently, moral theology has been employed and revised in ethical models based upon divine command or rule theories and usually moderated by the principles of proportionate reason or situational ethics.

Ethical standards from the beginning of the church until the present have included a plethora of approaches and assumptions. The next section provides Biblical examples of ethical concepts, and asks the question, "Are there scriptural models to follow?"

Biblical Examples of Ethics

The Bible describes ethical concepts and models that Christians from a variety of cultures can follow. Paul asserts that God placed the law into human hearts (Rom 2:14-16). Sweeting suggests individuals know what they should do, but they must be willing to do it and obey God's will and the Lord's command.⁵⁷ "Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defend them" (Rom 2:15). A number of Biblical figures serve as positive and negative examples of the biblical ethic.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 358.

⁵⁷ Sweeting, *How to Discover the Will of God*, 53.

Joseph is a positive example of the biblical ethic in his dealings with Potiphar's wife (Gen 29). Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials and the captain of the guard, bought Joseph from the Ishmaelites who had taken him to Egypt (Gen 37:36). The scripture says the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, but Potiphar's wife was attracted to him and tried to seduce him. Joseph continually refused to sleep with her until one day she grabbed his clothes and he ran away naked (Gen 39: 6-18). He was wrongly accused and put into jail, but he valued God more than the lust of his flesh. His conscience told him what right and wrong before God, and his story teaches believers to fear God, because they know what is morally correct.

Sinful Achan is an example of a different biblical ethic (Gen 39). Greed and covetousness entered his heart, and he took two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels from Babylonia (Josh 7:21). Based on Achan's actions, all the Israelites had sinned against God: "But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel" (Josh 7:1). "Do not covet" is one of the commands of the Lord given on Mount Sinai (Exod 20:1-17); Achan's story teaches that greed can become a trap and God's people should turn their eyes away from its temptation.

Ananias and his wife provide a New Testament example of key issues in biblical ethic. They sold their property, kept some of the selling price, and cheated the Apostles and the church. As a result they died (Acts 5:1-12). Peter told them that they were not lying to the church alone, but to God "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And

after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:4). This story teaches that what is done in the dark may be revealed in the light. Christians are called to be honest and sincere when they worship the one and only true God.

Jesus and Ethics

Jesus told Christians to love their neighbors as themselves (Matt 22:39). He used stories to show love of all, even strangers, and His love had no boundaries of color or race (Luke 10:33). He emphasized the concept: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). These are the golden rules for Christians.

The reality is that humans make mistakes. They sin and may be found doing wrong, as was this woman: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group" (John 8:3). Jesus, however, did not punish or condemn her; instead He told her, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Christians have help from the Lord, can look to their inner hearts, and can find God's moral compass. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). God also promises that the Holy Spirit dwells within believers, guides them, and gives them His revelation. God makes believers to be light of the world the testimony of Jesus Christ. "But the fruit of

the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things, there is no law” (Gal 5:22-23).

Jesus Christ is a Christian’s purpose in life; He is the center of Christian ethics. Jesus Christ is the sanctifier because He makes individuals holy before the Lord through His blood on the cross. Jesus Christ is our righteousness. Without Him, we live in sin against God. Jesus Christ is the Christian model for all ethical issues; He is the pattern to follow. Nevertheless, Christians should know that ethical discernment is not only based on the above statements, but also on the Bible’s words “which reveal how we as Christians should live.”⁵⁸ Christians have the Bible’s words as their mirror, the Holy Spirit as their guide, their consciences as their scale, and Jesus as their model and compass.

Church Discernment

The third category is church discernment, which is based on the establishment of the clear personal and ethical categories developed in the preceding portion of this chapter. Well established personal and ethical categories are necessary because without them individuals bring their own standards of discernment to the church, and the result might be chaos in the church. Because people will not agree on any issue, Christ must be the center of all discernment. If Christians miss this point, they will have no common ground to stand on when they make decisions as body of Christ. The first basic issue in church discernment is to understand who and what comprises the church. According to

⁵⁸ Anderson and Saucy, *The Common Made Holy*, 176.

the writer of Matthew, Jesus said, when two or three believers gather, Jesus Christ is with them (Matt 18:20).

The word “church” is probably derived from the Greek word, *kuriakos*, which translates “of or for a lord” and is “assumed to be original of the Teutonic *kirk*, *kirchs*, or *church*.”⁵⁹ In the New Testament, the word translated in English as church is *ecclesia*.⁶⁰ *Ecclesia* is used in the New Testament in the following senses:

1. An assembly in the classical Greek sense (Acts 19: 32, 39, 41).
2. As the whole body of the redeemed, all those whom the Father has given to Christ, or the invisible catholic church (Eph 5:23, 25, 27, 29; Heb 12:23).
3. A few Christians associated together in observing the ordinances of the gospel (Rom 16:4, Col 4:15).
4. All the Christians in a particular city, whether assembled together in one place or in several places for religious worship (Acts 13:1, 1 Cor 1:2, Acts 8:1, Rev 2:1).
5. The whole body of professing Christians throughout the world (1 Cor 15:9, Gal 1:13, Matt 16:18).

Many church groups, such as prayer groups, have the potential for spiritual discernment but do not have complicated business items to attend to and long-range decisions to make. Every group in the church, however, is called to utilize spiritual discernment as a means for people to grow together, whether the group has a complicated

⁵⁹ Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 458.

⁶⁰ William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 240.

task to accomplish or not. Each group is called to care for the goals, interests, and concerns of its participants, and to be a vital spiritual factor within the congregation.⁶¹

Prayer is the first step toward knowing God's will because "The person who desires to know God's will must have a life of prayer."⁶² Prayer is also the first step toward discerning God's will as a church, and Nee stated that God cannot do anything without the cooperation of the church in prayer.⁶³ Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). God gave authority to the church and prayer should surround that authority.

God desires fellowship with His children in their daily work and life. When they desire His will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven, there is a harmony of wills through which God expresses His power and glory. To do this effectively, Christians must deny themselves before the Lord, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and walk according to His commands. The difficult task for individuals is that they bring their worldly ideas and methods to the church and make decisions based on their experiences. Sometimes they do whatever seems correct at the moment, when God wants them to see beyond the facts and grasp the truth He has planned for them.

⁶¹ Morris, *Yearning to Know God's Will*, 131-32.

⁶² Dwight L. Carlson, *Living God's Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), 122.

⁶³ Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 45-47.; The author of this paper believes Lee does not mean to take away from God's sovereignty; there is a difference between a God who cannot do something and a God who will not do something.

It is possible for Christians to see the truth instead of only the bare function of their environments. For example, the servant of Elisha saw the army with horses and chariots coming to attack. He saw the facts, but he did not see the truth until Elisha prayed his eyes would be opened to see the army of the Lord. “Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:15-17). The earthly facts may lead believers to the wrong decisions because they fail to see the hand of the Lord. Their limited perspective may become what they rely on in their decision-making process. This could be a mistake.

As Christians discern God’s will for the church, they should have a desire for God’s plan and the willingness to obey when they know His will. God will tell them His will because He desires them to walk in His will. Nee suggested three “Imposing Principles” that help Christians to walk and discern God’s will for the church:

1. Pronouncing the Will of God: God places a burden on the hearts of His people when He wishes to accomplish something.⁶⁴ It is then incumbent upon the people to pray that His will be done. If they do not, the burden becomes heavier under the prompting of the Spirit.

2. Harmony in the Holy Spirit: Christians must be a people who have been changed by the Holy Spirit. When they are in harmony with the Spirit, they will be in harmony with each other and can pray effective prayers.

⁶⁴ Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 42.

3. Gathered Together: Christians come together because they are called to gather, not because they decide that it is a good thing to do.⁶⁵

When church members gather to know the will of God, they should pray as Matthew 6:5-13 directs: First, not as the hypocrites because prayer should glorify God, not the one who prays. Proper prayer will be rewarded. Second, do not pray as the Gentiles pray. Instead, pray with an attitude of trust, faith, expectation, and heart's desire. If believers plead with God for what they selfishly desire, He will ignore them, or sometimes He lets go and gives them what they desire. No one can prove that he or she truly hears the voice of God. It is possible, however, to hear from God through life events. The author of this paper believes Christians are sometimes unable to hear God because they are too focused on themselves, have too many of our own ideas, tell God what to do, and consistently choose their own will over God's. Campbell writes, "We do not know a face-to-face relation with God that is free of distortion. All of us know this alienation from self and God. We all experience the uncertainty of what our lives are to be and what choices we should make. This confusion regarding the will of God for our lives creates the need for discernment."⁶⁶

Biblical Examples of Church Discernment

The Bible is the church's tool for church and group discernment and the following biblical examples establish principles for church discernment. The first tool is that

⁶⁵ Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 101-102.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Discerning God's Will*, 26.

churches can discern God's will through the guiding of the Holy Spirit. In fact, "One of the major purposes of the Holy Spirit is to be a counselor, teacher, and guide."⁶⁷ An example of this occurred when the New Testament apostles dealt with the problem of circumcision between the Jews and the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-29). The believers at Jerusalem argued for circumcision, but when Peter and Paul spoke the believers knew that they had spoken God's truth, and they were silent before God's presence. They made a decision with unity in their hearts because they knew Christ and His will. They were seeking to benefit God, not themselves. Although some insisted the Gentiles should be circumcised, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles and the believers, and let them see the truth of God's purpose.

The second scriptural tool for believers to discern God's will is the casting of lots. After Judas had betrayed Jesus and hung himself, the apostles decided another apostle should take his place. They chose Matthias as one of the twelve apostles by using lots (Acts 1:23-26). The tradition of casting lots is widely used in Asian culture and religions and casting lots is practiced in Taoism and Buddhism to know the future or destiny. Old Testament narratives describe casting lots as one way to discern God's will. For example the Israelites used lots to distribute the land: "Be sure that the land is distributed by lot. What each group inherits will be according to the names for its ancestral tribe" (Num 26:55). They also used lots to decide who would attack the enemy: "But now this is what we'll do to Gibeah: We'll go up against it as the lot directs" (Judg 20:9).

⁶⁷ Carlson, *Living God's Will*, 126.

The third tool to discern God's will is a person's orientation, because a believer's desire and will must be in the right place to discern correctly the will of God. For example, King Ahab's advisor was deceived by a lying spirit. The story goes like this:

Now Zedekiah son of Kenaanah had made iron horns and he declared, "This is what the LORD says: 'With these you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.'" All the other prophets were prophesying the same thing. "Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious," they said, "for the LORD will give it into the king's hand." The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, "Look, as one man the other prophets are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favorably."...but Micaiah answered, "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'" Micaiah continued, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?' One suggested this, and another that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' 'By what means?' the LORD asked. 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.' So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you." (1 Kings 22:10-23)

When we decide to please men instead of God, our discernment will not align with God's will, individually or corporately.

These examples provide three lessons: First, God uses individuals to discern His will, but believer's hearts should not submit to the world or toward evil. Believers should please God instead of themselves or others. The second principle is to be cautious and humble, and listen to other Christians, because individuals may make mistakes when hearing the voice of God. In addition, when the church makes decisions, confess and obey, especially since they provide personal peace. Third, realize that the church will

have a unified spirit when it seeks God's kingdom first. When the church's decisions make some Christians feel uneasy, pray until the Lord provides more insight or changes the situation.

The Believer's Role in Church Discernment

Church discernment is not a search based on self-interest, but seeks only to please the Lord. From the moment people seek first the kingdom of God in their hearts, they are in God's will.⁶⁸ Church discernment is not a specific learned method; it is every individual acting and living for the Lord, and every believer will have unity in Christ with the Holy Spirit's help. This unity in Christ causes Christians to discern God's will for the church accurately. Church members can set proper priorities because the church is the body of Christ and the extension of Christ into the world. There are four basics of church discernment and Christian tasks:

First, Christians are called to worship and glorify their Father in Heaven through the salvation of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Eph 1:4-6).

Second, the church is commanded by Christ to preach the gospel to the world. "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'" (Mark

⁶⁸ Kennedy *Delighting God*, 124.

⁶⁹ *Ibids.*, 30.

16:15, Matt 28:19-20, Eph 3:8). Gospel preaching has no limit or boundary when spoken accurately. Paul stated, “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Phil 1:18). Christians can have the Lord’s heart, accept different ways of presenting the gospel to the world, and be more open minded regarding how and when to do the work of the gospel. God’s work is God’s business, and Christians are the tools in His hand that can follow and obey. Christians should give up everything, including their hearts, minds, plans, and desires, to the Lord so that His kingdom grows (Matt 19:16-26).

Third, Christians are to teach, lead, and discipline other Christians. The church is the place to educate God’s people, and Jesus gave gifts to the church in order for the church to grow physically and spiritually. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13). Education, however, is sometimes weak within the church because Christians bring too many worldly traditions into the church. “My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good” (Jer 4:22). Christians can be taught by God’s people in order to play their part in the body of Christ.

Fourth, Christians can share their testimonies with everyone. The authentic body of Christ proclaims His name in private and announces His kingdom to the ends of the earth. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Christians see the needs of peoples of different races and feel God’s compassion for them (Matt 25:31-46). Christians have hearts for the whole world because “He so loved the world”(John 3:16).

The Importance of Unity in Church Discernment

The church can have unity in Christ in regard to discernment, and Sweeting provides important points about this issue.

1. All Christians are called to serve the same God (John 17:1-11).
2. Christians belong to Jesus Christ, who is their savior. “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:11-21). Christ is in Christians and they are in Christ.
3. Christians are in the same Spirit, which was sent by Jesus Christ: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16). The Holy Spirit dwells in all believers and, therefore, they should discern the same things. They can examine themselves when they have views different from their Christian friends or the

Bible, for the Lord will not contradict Himself or His written Word, nor bring disharmony to His body.⁷⁰

4. God and His son are one (John 17:11), and Christians should be one in Christ. He is the head; Christians are the body (Col 1:18) and they can live in harmony with each other, for they are all part of Christ and represent Him in this world: “So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:5). “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you” (Rom 12:3).

5. Christians are in the same world, so they need to help each other on the road to eternity (John 17:14-17). The Bible tells Christians to love their brothers and sisters, and even their enemies (Luke 6:27-31). Christians can pray for and encourage one another: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

6. Christians are one with the Lord and, at the same time, one with their brothers and sisters. The world knows them through the mark of Christ, who “leads us in triumphal procession . . . and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him” (2 Cor 2:14). Because Christians are His disciples, His fragrance becomes part of them, and people know they are sent by God and may believe God through their fragrance. “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I

⁷⁰ Sweeting, *How to Discover the Will of God*, 57.

am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

7. Christians will be in heaven forever as He promised: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). At the same time, the world is a training ground for God’s people to learn to work together in unity. When church discernment yields different answers, it is only because believers are not completely in Christ when they discuss whatever an issue. When they go back to the source, Jesus Christ, they will find the right answer and experience unity.

CHAPTER 5

KNOWING YOU ARE IN GOD'S WILL

Christians often find themselves at life's crossroads that "depend upon God's supply or our own intellect and resources."¹ Christians make choices and decisions every day on the simplest and the most complex questions and issues. A key question in all this decision-making is: which decisions please God, and which ones are His will?

The author of Jeremiah wrote: "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you said, 'We will not walk in it'" (Jer 6:16). Christians need to "find out what pleases the Lord"(Eph 5:10). Believers ought to choose rightly between good and evil, give good advice, and treasure the truth. A key question is: how does one do this? The answer begins by listening to God's voice, for His sheep know their master's voice (John 10:27). To do the will of God is the greatest knowledge and the greatest achievement. "Truly it can be said that inside the will of God there is no failure. Outside the will of God there can be no real success. Knowing and obeying God's will is the key to any and all victory in the Christian's life."²

¹ Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy, *The Common Made Holy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 258.

² George Sweeting, *How to Discover the Will of God* (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 73-74.

Hearing God's Voice and Communicating with Him

Jesus taught the disciples how communicate with the Father in heaven. Jesus' example of prayer (Matt 6:9-12) models the spirit, style, and form Christians should pray, including three heart desires toward God, three requests, three praises, and a forgiving spirit.³

The three heart desires toward God:

1. "Hallowed be thy name": each person must be brought personally to the place where his or her utmost desire is to glorify God before others.
2. "Thy kingdom come": as citizens of the kingdom, Christians should want the kingdom to expand and include as many persons as possible.
3. "Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth": God waits for His children to pray before He demonstrates His power. His will on earth is ultimately the triumph and glory of God's kingdom.⁴

The three requests:

1. "Give us this day our daily bread": Believers should learn to rely on God alone for the daily supply of their needs.⁵
2. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors": whenever an offense weighs on a believer's conscience, faith is drained away. When someone believes he/she has offended someone, that person will lack boldness. Also, when a Christian refuses to forgive,

³ Watchman Nee, *The Prayer Ministry of the Church* (Taipei: Christian Fellowship, 1973), 43.

⁴ Herman C. Waetjen, *Praying the Lord's Prayer: An Ageless Prayer for Today* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 72.

⁵ Donald W. Shriver, *The Lord's Prayer: A Way of Life* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 52.

the Christian weakens relationships with other Christians, and consequently, church life relations and activities.⁶

3. “Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”: Christians must not believe they are strong enough in themselves to face temptation. They must pray for deliverance so that they are not rendered ineffective by the evil one.⁷

The Three praises:

The “kingdom, power, and glory” are all God’s and the Lord’s authority is manifested through the power of the Holy Spirit. His people and church will live in His glory because He will be all in all.⁸

Christians listen for the voice of God, and His voice may be heard through promptings in prayers, devotions, and daily life. Believers may treasure the thoughts that come out of the blue because the prompting of God’s inspiration enables them to discern God’s will. The voice of God, which the author of this paper calls revelation from the Holy Spirit, may be missing in the lives of contemporary Christians. They rarely spend time waiting for God’s voice. This paper’s author believes Christians talk to God frequently but rarely hear His voice. Perhaps they do not wait for the Lord to speak to them, or perhaps they lack the sensitivity to know the Lord has already spoken. Prayer is not only expression to God but also listening to Him because prayer is communication between believers and the Heavenly Father.

⁶ George F. Vicedom, *The Lord’s Prayer: A Prayer for Mission*, trans. Edward Schroeder and Marie Schroeder (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1967), 95.

⁷ Waetjen, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer*, 104.

⁸ Vicedom, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 139.

When Christians practice the disciplines of prayer, devotion, or even daydream, prompting thoughts may come from nowhere, but these promptings might be from God. They must be tested by reference to His Word and the circumstances. God's sheep know His voice (John 10: 3-4, 27-28) so if the faithful believe they are His sheep and He is their shepherd, they will know when He speaks. Christians must first believe God intends to speak to them, and they should be alert and watch for His movement in their lives. God will not disappoint believers; He will reveal His truth to them if they honestly seek His will because "He does not have two wills regarding the same thing."⁹

Christians must beware of their emotions and thinking, because these impulses can lead them in the wrong direction (Deut 11:16). Even Paul did not trust his feelings: "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:4). Sometimes, if Christians are not discerning, they may think their thoughts and emotions can inform them of God's will. At the same time, it is very important to pay attention to the inner voice or light, which comes from the prompting voice of intuition (Prov 2:1-5).

As believers, it is important to follow the revelation of intuition, not thoughts alone. Those who heed thoughts alone walk after the flesh and may be led astray. It is a great mistake to elevate the brain as the organ for direct fellowship with God or for receiving revelation from Him; nevertheless, the brain and its thoughts are not useless. Their role is to assist intuition.¹⁰ To obey God's will, an individual must die to the flesh and live for Christ.

⁹ Jerry Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God's Will* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986), 74.

¹⁰ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Man 3* (New York: Christian Fellowship, 1977), 23-24.

Intuition (which is not to be confused with God's word, the Holy Spirit, or circumstance) may be difficult to understand, trust, authenticate, or follow.

Christians do well to know themselves, but through the Holy Spirit's help and not through self-examination alone. If God delays in answering prayers, believers may refocus themselves through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit's revelation. If persons are still in the flesh, why should God answer their prayers? God is not pleased if those who pray live in sin and lack the holy and victorious life He intended.

It is also important to wait for the Lord because He has His own timing for revealing truth (Psa 40:1-3); therefore, believers should judge nothing before God's appointed time, but wait until the Lord speaks. "But If God has already told you what to do about the matter, you don't need to study, to try and compensate with great religious acts, or even to pray about it. You do need to be obedient to what He has revealed."¹¹ He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the actions and the motives of people's hearts (Eph 5:11-12). God's will is found in waiting for God's timing, believing God will provide the best, trusting Him without doubt, and knowing He is there even in the darkest pit (Psa 130:1-2).

Walk by Faith and Make Good Choices

Christians who believe in Christ and are guided by the Holy Spirit can trust their decisions. "The right and the responsibility to choose is the greatest power we possess other than the presence of God in our lives. We can choose to pray or not to pray, to read our

¹¹ Dwight L. Carlson, *Living God's Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976), 106.

Bible or read books that aren't edifying. Every child of God can choose to walk by the Spirit or walk by the flesh."¹² God, however, has given many examples of His provision: through the Bible, the testimonies of spiritual people, circumstances, and through His creation. Nevertheless, it requires courage to say no to the world.¹³

Biblical Examples of Walking by Faith

God's will for Abraham was to make him a father for his people and for all nations and to bless all humanity through him. It took more than ninety-nine years, however, for Abraham to fulfill in God's will. Over those years, Abraham's life included good and bad times and through these experiences, he became a man that pleased God. Human beings are shaped through life experiences by God as a potter shapes a pot fit for use. "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa 64:8).

The Bible also demonstrates God's desire to show Satan that people can love Him for who He is and not for His blessings. This desire allowed Satan to scheme against Job. Since God allowed Job's suffering, it became part of God's plan. Suffering may not be God's will, but sometimes it is within His plan. Job, however, did not know God's will and plan, so he called for a mediator to defend him and ask for mercy on his behalf before God (1 Tim 2:5).

¹² Anderson and Saucy, *The Common Made Holy*, 153.

¹³ Ralph Heynen, *The Art of Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963), 150.

Today Jesus mediates and the Holy Spirit guides Christians if they walk with faith and believe God is with them every step of the way. “If He showed us the whole plan of His will, we might decided that we do not want to follow it.”¹⁴

Paul’s life is another example of how to walk in faith. He knew God willed for him to be the Gentiles’ apostle (Rom 11:13) but his path was difficult. He told the Corinthian church about his misfortunes:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one; three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; I spent a night and a day in the open sea; in danger from rivers; in danger from bandits; in danger from my own countrymen; in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city; in danger in the country; in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers; I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked; Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)

Although it was difficult, Paul’s hardships enabled him to accomplish God’s will. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). “We must be careful to note that God does not say that all things are good, for they are not. Rather, all things work together for good.”¹⁵

Determining the Lord’s Direction and Will in Daily Life

Although discernment can be challenging, there are some rules and guidelines that can help reveal God’s will. It is important to remember, however, that these guidelines are

¹⁴ Richard L. Strauss, *Decisions! Decisions! How God Shows the Way* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1979), 38.

¹⁵ Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1977), 207.

not absolute. The following guidelines can be helpful to believers attempting to discern God's will based upon their life experiences:

1. The desire to please God pleases Him. An individual's motive is more important than a perfect attempt at discerning God's will. Even if a person is unsure of God's will, he/she can make decisions through God's guidance .

2. God will not guide the unwilling. If a person is willing to do God's will, then he/she will know God's will (John 17:17). God's will is not merely an option for Christians, but a greater calling.

3. God's will always serves Him and others and not the individual. God's will serves His glory and honor, not personal comfort.

4. The Bible provides the primary basis of His will and must have the final word in matters. "It declares that it will certainly be fulfilled. It will not be frustrated by men, angels, or anything else (Daniel 4:35). The sinner who tries to defy God's plan may shake his fist to the heavens, but God will determine how many times he shakes it and whether that man will live to shake his fist tomorrow (James 4:15)."¹⁶

5. God influences the individual before He changes personal behavior. Until a person has the heart and the fragrance of Christ, he/she is not equipped for the job of fulfilling God's plan.¹⁷

¹⁶ Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 202.

¹⁷ Steve Schell, "A Guidance Checklist," Sunday sermon presented at Northwest Foursquare Church in Federal Way, WA, 2000, audiocassette.

6. God makes each person with a purpose (Eph 2:10). Human beings are constantly confronted with choices throughout their lives. Although each person is God's creation, individuals bear different amounts of fruit according to his/her faith.¹⁸

7. Faithful contentment precedes expansion (Psa 37:3-4). A Christian must humbly serve God whatever the situation. Personal ambition must be set aside so that a believer can be content with what the Lord has given.

8. God's will starts from the point of disobedience. He wants to bring individuals back to Him and for them to obey His will. He wants his children to learn from mistakes so they can testify to His majesty. God expects all humanity to devote themselves completely to His will.¹⁹

9. Believers must discern between God's permissive will and His directed will. Christians may appeal to God for something, but these requests may not be in God's will. God's directed will is clear and sure, it cannot be misinterpreted. God grants power and strength to withstand any hardship if a person is in His will.²⁰

10. A right answer is not enough unless it is from God. Christians must wait until they hear His voice. "Wherever God is, there is His will."²¹ God's presence and voice is

¹⁸ Dan Webster and McAllister Dawson, *Discussion Manual for Student Relationships*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Christian Communication, 1983), 17.

¹⁹ Ernest Gordon and Peter Funk, *Guidebook for the New Christian* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 26.

²⁰ Schell, "A Guidance Checklist."

²¹ Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God's Will*, 62.

wherever He dwells. A person, therefore, must not look for shortcuts to His will and instead read the Bible, fellowship with God, and wait to hear His voice.²²

11. God leads by faith, not fear. He is always leading believers toward a goal. God desires faith, not fear. Furthermore, there is no operating principle of life that has greater significance in our daily walk than the concept of faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6). "Faith is the only means by which we relate to God."²³

12. Believers should prepare for big challenges through smaller experiences. David learned to kill lions before he could kill Goliath. Individuals must equip themselves for God's will through daily challenges. He wants people to learn and use their abilities for His glory.²⁴

13. Believers must move before God moves. As Christians move first in faith, God will meet them because they are obedient.²⁵

14. When in doubt, a Christian should wait. Christians must be patient and the Lord will provide the right answer.²⁶ He wants to reveal His will to believers. He is the God of certainty.

15. If God is silent, a Christian ought to continue their original calling and wait for the next instruction. Christians must not become impatient and assume they know God's will.

²² Schell, "A Guidance Checklist."

²³ Anderson and Saucy, *The Common Made Holy*, 185.

²⁴ Charles G. Coleman, *Divine Guidance* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), 28.

²⁵ Schell, "A Guidance Checklist."

²⁶ Webster and Dawson, *Discussion Manual for Student Relationships*, 22.

16. Suffering is a test from God to strengthen and purify His people.²⁷ God permits all suffering even to His most faithful like Job.

Understanding God's Use of Satan and Free Will

God trains, purifies, and chooses people in many different ways. He sometimes allows Satan's scheming or human free will to fulfill His own will.

God has always had a plan for humankind. In the beginning, He put two special trees in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and the rest of His creation: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. God commanded Adam and Eve, saying, "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17). God's plan included the knowledge of evil from the beginning of the world.

The author of this paper believes God allowed Satan to use the tree of knowledge to test human hearts. "Thus all evil, either directly or indirectly, is traced to the misuse of freedom delegated to His creations by God."²⁸ God gave Satan the authority to manipulate good and evil to test human beings. Satan controls all the world's fame and riches in order to tempt people into sin. "Satan is trying to defeat us is by tempting us to do evil and he uses both the world God created and the desire God gave us as his arena of temptation."²⁹ Satan even tested Jesus after His baptism in the Jordan River: "Again, the devil took him to

²⁷ Anderson and Saucy, *The Common Made Holy*, 369.

²⁸ Terry L. Miethe, *The New Christian's Guide to Following Jesus* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984), 128.

²⁹ Knofel Staton, *How to Know the Will of God* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1976), 98.

a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (Matt 4:8).

Although Satan controls the world’s wealth, he is still under God’s control. “But God sets the limits on the extent to which the devil may express his evil intents (Job 1).”³⁰ It is clear he is within God’s plan because he needs to ask the Lord’s permission before hurting God’s people like Job. Satan may cause suffering, but his power is limited. God has His own plan for whomever Satan attacks. God uses the misfortune imposed by Satan to purify God’s people.³¹ “The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster” (Prov 16:4).

The trees in the Garden of Eden illustrate that God’s plan is bigger than good and evil. While the tree of knowledge brought evil into the world, the tree of life represents God’s will for His children to enjoy the fruit of eternal life. In the Book of Revelation, the Lord reigns over the new heaven and new earth and His children have abundant life forever in His presence.

God has various ways to purify His children in order to ready them for His kingdom. God allows Satan to test His people through the temptations of glory, fame, or wealth. God does not use these methods to tempt human beings—Satan does—and individuals stray from God’s kingdom for worldly desires. God allows temptation as part of free will, but

³⁰ Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 202.

³¹ Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God’s Will*, 163.

“His allowing evil does not mean that He planned it.”³² While Satan may attempt to lure humanity into his traps, the Lord is the final author of this universe (Eph 3:20).

Although God may test and purify His people in many ways, He has given human beings the ability to freely choose how they will respond to life’s trials. Through free will, God allows individuals to choose between the tree of eternal life and the tree of the knowledge. Christians must choose between Christ and the world. The Bible explains that in the end, the whole universe will be under Christ’s foot, including the earth, which is currently under Satan’s influence. Christians must spread the gospel and be Christ’s tools in this world because the victory of Christ will overcome everything in the end. Christians are called to become salt and light that God can use so that through the Holy Spirit people can be awoken from darkness and control of Satan. Believers need to help God’s people understand that God is in control of everything, including all of Satan’s plans, that are only carried out when permitted by God.³³

Growing and Walking in God’s Will by Faith

God’s will is an exclusive benefit for His children. “Jesus Christ is our everything, if we allow him to be the great I AM who will transform our world as we turn to him at every step of the way. Jesus Christ is everything to us.”³⁴ Satan is not interested in God’s desires; rather, he is concerned with his own desires. Like Satan, people who despise God desire

³² Staton, *How to Know the Will of God*, 74.

³³ Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 202.

³⁴ D. James Kennedy, *Delighting God: How to Live at the Center of God’s Will* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1993), 182.

only selfish things. Only the body of Christ, comprised of the children of God, is interested in God's will because following God's will shows how much believers love God and desire to be with Him.

God's children should not be concerned with blessings or His ability to give things. Believers must love the Heavenly Father simply because He is their Lord. Job understood that God is God and that good and evil were both under the control of God's plan. "He replied, 'You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (Job 2:10).

Believers should worship and fear God because He is God. Job knew he had no right to bargain with God regarding blessings. God has absolute rights over his blessings. He can bless whoever and whatever he prefers (Job 1:21). God wills for His children in Christ to desire Him and have abundance.

As Christians grow and walk in faith, they should simply believe that the Lord guides them when they are in Christ. While the inner-heart may struggle when a person faces the world, the Holy Spirit guides believers into the godly path.³⁵ Christians should believe that they are already on God's path and in His way. "The Christian walks on the path, which God has laid; he enjoys the purpose for his life which God has ordained; he looks forward to the destiny which God has planned."³⁶

Paul claimed that he enacted and spoke the will of God, but being in Christ was his only way to know God's will. Many Christians have discovered individual methods to know

³⁵ Heynen, *The Art of Christian Living*, 118.

³⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 16.

God's will based on personal experiences and encounters with the living God. Christians need to ask for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit so they can be sure that they are in Him and He is in them. Without the Holy Spirit's revelation, believers may doubt the reality of God's truth. Furthermore, "if Jesus Christ is abiding in us, and we are submitting to him, and He is supplying our every need, then we are in the will of God and we can know the will of God, and we can do the will of God."³⁷ Believers also must have faith and accept the Word of God.

Changing God's Plan by Knowing His Will

The author of this paper believes that God's permissive will is the most mysterious part of His will. While His permissive will may not be what is best for His children, it is still part of His plan. Because God allows human beings to choose their own paths, they sometimes go in undesirable directions. When believers beg Him for their heart's desires, He sometimes grants these wishes, even though it is not His desire. This permissive will of God is still in His plan.

Biblical Examples of God's Permissive Will

Although Abraham knew that God planned to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he pleaded with God several times for mercy on the cities (Gen 18:23-32). Abraham knew God's heart was loving, merciful, and compassionate, so he asked the Lord to spare lives in those cities.

³⁷ Glisson, *Knowing and Doing God's Will*, 67.

Like Abraham, Balaam also knew God's will, but he continued to harass God and begged Him to allow Balaam to go and bless the people. God finally agreed to his request. Balaam thought he was tricking God, but instead he was experiencing the permissive will of God (Num 22:5-21).

Lot also appealed to the permissive will of God. He remained in the city that God planned to destroy. Lot was supposed to flee to the mountains but instead, he pleaded to run to the city of Zoar. In this instance, God permitted Lot's request (Gen 19:18-22).

Jonah was called to Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment, but instead, he ran away to Tarshish. Jonah knew God's will but did not want to obey and follow. God permitted Jonah to go his own way but, through a series of trials, brought him back into obedience (The Book of Jonah).

King Jehoash asked for advice from the prophet Elisha to destroy his enemy, Aram. When Elisha told the king to strike the ground, he struck it three times, then stopped. Elisha replied that the king should have struck the ground at least five or six times (2 Kings 13:17-19). Elisha knew God's heart, but the king Jehoash changed the will of God by only striking the ground three times.

God created individuals with plans for their lives. "God's plan or His guidance is more than a set of directions for us to follow. It is also something He uses in forming us into the likeness of Jesus."³⁸ God wants all people to know Him and walk in His will. Human desire, however, often interferes with God's will. The Father in Heaven wants His children to willingly submit themselves to His will, so He allows free will and choice, but "be aware

³⁸ Coleman, *Divine Guidance*, 28.

of how the Spirit works in our life does not mean much unless we obey Him promptly.”³⁹

Human will is often not His will. God, however, permits human beings to pursue their desires because He has great mercy and love for His children. From the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden, God granted Adam and Eve choice. God’s will and desire was for His children to choose the tree of life, not the tree of the knowledge.

No one is perfect. Even those who believe in Christ and are in Christ must decide between right and wrong. The Lord gives all humanity the freedom to choose, even if a decision dishonors Him, but “what He has promised to do is keep us from evil.”⁴⁰ Therefore, discernment cannot exist if a believer doubts God’s authority because doubt enables the struggle between human will and God’s will. But when a person believes firmly in the Word of God by faith, he or she is a child of God. One needs to trust the Lord and walk in faith, believing He will guide him/her, and He will reveal that “He has a plan for every life.”⁴¹

The story recounted at the beginning of this dissertation told of a girl who depended on visible guidance and help. Christians should not depend on the help of friends or the confirmation of personal circumstances although these experiences may provide an additional affirmation that believers are in the Lord’s will. God’s will is not limited by worldly reality. God is beyond, above, and behind every conceivable experience or fact: “As

³⁹ Leigh Wilkins, *Closer to God: Devotional Thoughts to Help You Grow* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 24.

⁴⁰ Coleman, *Divine Guidance*, 108.

⁴¹ Coder, Samuel Maxwell. *God’s Will for Your Life* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1958), 11.

the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9).

One need only receive Jesus Christ as personal savior and believe in the guidance of Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:12). If a person is in Christ, nothing can separate the individual from Him (Rom 8:33-39). The Bible teaches that if a believer walks by faith and is in Christ, he/she is loved by God: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). Being “in Christ” is the key to knowing and doing God’s will. God’s will cannot exist outside of Jesus Christ, but because of human ignorance and lack of discernment, people attempt to live from moment to moment without consideration to His will.⁴²

God’s guidance is present throughout human life. Although some people in the Bible did not know God’s will at first, time revealed His will. Those who sought God first in their lives walked through God’s will and plan. When these believers looked back on their lives, they were aware of God’s will. While some of them were always certain of God’s will, others did not know how to walk in His will or understand their part in His will. The prophet Nathan told David to do as he had planned; he could trust the Lord to lead and guide: “Nathan replied to the king, ‘Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you’” (2 Sam 7:3). Christians can walk in faith without fear because they are in Christ. If a believer strays, God will bring him/her back to His course.

⁴² Gordon and Funk, *Guidebook for the New Christian*, 88.

Principles to Discern between God's Will and Human Will

Even when believers are in Christ, their free will can allow them to make mistakes.

Believers must “make up [their] mind[s] that [they] sincerely want to do God’s will.”⁴³ If a Christian sincerely intends to do God’s will, the following principles can help guide him/her:

1. Christians must allow for substitution, not just change in order to know victory over themselves. When Christ is alive in a person, new life from the Lord takes the place of the former self. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me ” (Gal 2:20).

2. In order to live for Christ, Christians must receive, not arrive.⁴⁴ They must receive the grace of God in order to live like Christ; they cannot become like Christ by working hard or studying. Only by grace can humans do what He has commanded them to do (Phil 4:13).

3. Believers must walk by faith.⁴⁵ God put humans in this world as an army on the battlefield.; there is no turning back. The Lord is always present and provides the necessary weapons and armor so believers can march on to fight forces of evil. “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:11).

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ Watchman Nee, *In Christ*, in *Watchman Nee Sermons Collection* (Taiwan: Christian Fellowship 1993), 2:22:261.

⁴⁵ Douglas, *100 Bible Lessons, Part Two*, 38.

4. Believers must be united with Christ and with our each other. Every believer is part of Christ's body. Each person in Christ's body is redeemed by His blood on the cross. Christians are united with Him as one (Rom 6:4-22; Gal 3:20; Rom 6:4-10).

5. Believers must surrender all to Him. Christ should be the sole priority in a Christian's life. "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Rom 6:13).

6. Christians must properly handle free will and temptation. When temptations arise believers must not allow them to take control. "No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor 9:27).

7. Christians must be patient and wait for the Lord. Noah waited a hundred years for the rain to fall, Moses waited eighty years to deliver the people of Israel, and Joseph waited many years to fulfill his dream. Even if God's will is clear, His timeline may not be. Sometimes believers must be patient in order to fulfill His will.

The Wisdom and Revelation of the Holy Spirit

Christians should know that when Jesus Christ is personal savior, He is alive within through the Holy Spirit, but God's presence in a believer's life may not be fully understood. God promises that the Holy Spirit is a present guide in a believer's walk with the Lord. Because of God's constant presence, revelation of His work for a Christian is more important than the discernment of His will. God's will is clear because He has already

revealed it: “God has gone to great efforts to clearly reveal His will to us, even to give it to us in written form.”⁴⁶ His will can be discovered through devotional times, prayers, dreams, and the Bible’s explanations of His will and plan for the whole human race. Often, however, God must still reveal the individual’s role in Christ’s body as a whole: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Eph 1:17).

The difference between simply knowing the Word and having the Holy Spirit’s revelation is like the difference between recognizing something and actually experiencing it. Even if a believer knows Christ as savior and that he/she has the help of Holy Spirit, until that believer experiences God’s revelation and wisdom, God’s real strength will not be available to that person. God’s revelation is necessary in order to know God’s will and plan in the heart rather than solely the head. God has already done His part of the work, but a believer needs the revelation to explain what He has already done in this world (John 5:39). The Pharisees knew the Word of God. Because they did not have the revelation of the Holy Spirit, however, they did not recognize Christ as the Son of God. Peter, on the other hand, had the Holy Spirit’s revelation, so he proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16).

When believers are “in Christ” and have the Spirit’s revelation, they know exactly what God wants them to know because the Lord has put His will and desire in their hearts. They have the strength to achieve their tasks for they know what role they play in the body of Christ. The Discernment of God’s will is the Lord’s gift for people who are at a halfway

⁴⁶ Carlson, *Living God’s Will*, 28.

point in their journey with Christ. They have access to water but have not yet drunk it.

Christians, however, who are in Christ simply know God's will, for they are taking steps of faith and drinking the water already. These Christians only need the Spirit's revelation to show them what has already been done in God's kingdom. Once they have seen that, they can enjoy what has already been done for them by Christ.

The discernment of God's will is possible if persons walk with Him: "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Prov 3:6). Christians only need to walk in faith because they are already in the Lord's hand if they believe and trust in Him. When a believer walks in His will and on His path, everything is clear. God's will is knowable with faith: "Just trust that Christ lives, and your true self -in- Christ that you will know it."⁴⁷

Conclusion

From an Asian Christian point of view, to drop the superstition of a fortune teller's guidance, believe and trust in God, overcome the world, and rely on God's unseen will and plan is a huge step. Although guidelines to discern God's will are available, an Asian Christian has a hard time differentiating the will of God from one's own will. Very often Asian Christians feel confused about God's will.

Western Christians believe that the Bible, prayers, mature Christians, and elders can help to discern God's will, and it is true that faith in Christ and belief that God is using the

⁴⁷ David G. Benner *Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Heart with the Heart of God* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 103.

Bible and spiritual mentors as tools to relay His will. But many Asian Christians are blinded by their doubts, and they don't believe that God can speak through things like Bible, prayers, and other believers. They seek the approval of others for their own will. They need the faith of a mustard seed in order to believe that God has a plan for them and it is good.

God's will becomes the inner desire of our hearts; God's word becomes the compass to show our way. Prayer becomes the conversation between believers and God, for He is the One holding our hands and walking with us in our daily journeys.

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