

GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE

Virgil Warren, PhD

1. Biblical evidence for the Holy Spirit's guidance

a. examples of divine calling and direction of his servants

- (1) Noah: Genesis **6:13 ff.**
- (2) Abraham: Genesis **12:1ff.; 13:14ff.**
- (3) Moses: Exodus **3:1ff.**
- (4) Gideon: Judges **6:11-25ff.**
- (5) Manoah: Judges **13:2ff.**
- (6) Samuel: 1 Samuel **3:1ff.**
- (7) Amos: Amos **7:14ff.**
- (8) Jonah: Johan **1:1-2; 3:1-2; 4:9-11**
- (9) Isaiah: Isaiah **6**
- (10) Jeremiah: Jeremiah **1:1-2:1**
- (11) Ezekiel: Ezekiel **2:1-7; 3:16ff., 22ff; 6:1ff., etc.**
- (12) Haggai: Haggai **2:10ff., 20**
- (13) Zechariah: Zechariah **1:1-2ff.**
- (14) Zachariah and John the Baptist: Luke **1:5-25, 39-80; 3:1-20** (= Matthew **3**; Mark **1:1-11**); John **1:6-36**
- (15) Joseph: Matthew **1:19-25**
- (16) Mary: Luke **1:26-38**
- (17) The twelve collectively: Matthew **10:1-4ff.** (= Mark **3:13-19**; Luke **6:12-16**); Acts **1:1-11**
- (18) The Four: Matthew **4:18-22** (= Mark **1:16-22**; Luke **5:2-11**; John **1:40-42**)
- (19) Philip the Apostle: John **1:43**
- (20) Matthew: Matthew **9:9** (= Mark **2:14**; Luke **5:27-28**)
- (21) Philip the evangelist: Acts **8:26-40**
- (22) Saul and Ananias: Acts **9:1-19; 2:3-21; 26:2-23** (cp. **9:26-30**)
- (23) General statement by Paul: Galatians **1:11-2:10**
- (24) Paul's Second Missionary Tour: Acts **16:9-10; 18:9-10**
- (25) Paul's Last Trip to Jerusalem: Acts **22:17-21**
- (26) Peter and Cornelius: Acts **10:1-11:18**

b. evidence for the Spirit's general guidance of all servants

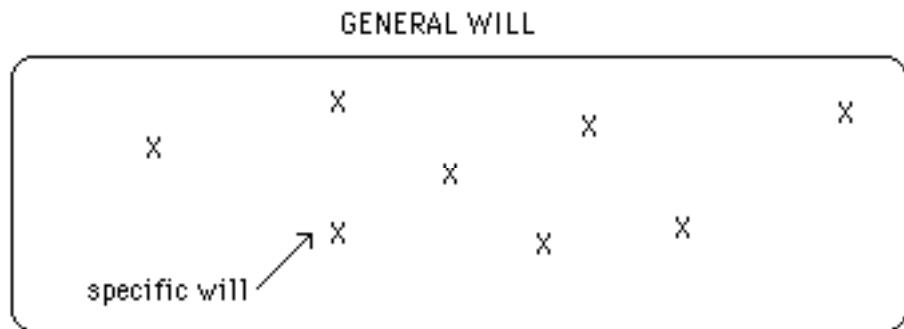
- (1) Romans **8:14** (S or s?)
- (2) Galatians **5:16** (S or s?)
- (3) Galatians **5:18** (S or s?)
- (4) Galatians **5:25** (S or s?)

c. the Spirit's responsibility over the special revelation process

- (1) where the Old Testament human author is mentioned: Matthew **22:43**, 44 (Mark **12:36**); Acts **1:16-20; 4:25-26; 28:25-27**; 1 Peter **1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:16-21**
- (2) where the Old Testament human author is not mentioned: Hebrews **3:7-11; 9:8; 10:15-17**
- (3) promise to the apostles to oversee their message: John **14:26; 16:13**

2. Important variables in thinking about divine guidance

- a. the distinction between God's general will for everyone and his special will for me



- b. what God himself determines (prescriptive will) and what God allows (permissive will). In his providence he oversees history by

(1) the nature of creation

He decided the amount of power his creatures would have.
 He decided whether opportunity for salvation, *etc.*, would be set up.
 He set up life in such a way that evil tends to self-destruct and righteousness tends to prosper.
 He determines the length of time for people's availing themselves of opportunity
 He determines what destinies there are.

(2) the revelation of his will

He directs people through what he tells them.
 He does not reveal himself to people in all respects.

(3) special intervention

- c. the difference between direct and indirect guidance

3. Questions that occur about the biblical examples of calling and leading

a. How did God call to specific tasks and direct his special messengers?

They were clear, observable ways that could not be confused with chance, natural phenomena, or normal human experience.

b. From the biblical examples, is there reason to think God had for all Christians a specific job for them or that he directed each step each day?

Note the thousands of God's people that we have no reason to believe were specially led.

(1) He is a Father. Fathers answer their children when they ask them a question. But note the allegorizing of a comparison here. God always answers, but it is not necessarily an audible one like "*Samuel, Samuel*" in the night. It can be general will for all his children.

(2) "*If the Lord will*" sounds permissive: Acts **18:21**; 1 Corinthians **4:19**; **16:7**; James 4:13-15 (Hebrews **6:3**; Romans **1:10**; **15:32**; 1 Peter **3:17**; 1 Corinthians **12**; Romans **12:6-8**)

(3) All things being equal, why suppose that God would rather have X do a job than Y?

(4) People sometimes argue from the body figure that each person has a specific role God wants that person to do rather than another one: Ephesians **4:1-16**; 1 Corinthians **12**. But it is one thing to say there is a job for everybody; it is another thing to say God chooses which job he wants each person to do.

(5) In interpreting the passages related to divine guidance, we should remember that Semitic expression often omits intermediate causes.

c. Is there reason for supposing that the biblical examples of special calling and direction are proportionately the same now as in biblical times?

There could be less special attention needed after God's program has been authenticated and set in motion. A four-hundred-year period lies between the testaments—an intercalary period, when there was no exact succession of prophets. The Bible is a collection of God's special acts in history, so the amount of special leading then does not necessarily compare with all people throughout history.

Rather than argue whether God calls directly today, we can presuppose the first-century setting and apply the principles Christians then would have needed to distinguish his calling from other kinds of things.

d. What determines how people should conduct their lives and ministry?

- (1) the teaching of scripture
- (2) needs that exist
- (3) opportunities that come

(Items 2-5 are subject to modification)

- (4) interests we have
- (5) abilities we are given
- (6) suggestions received
- (7) maximum influence possible
- (8) doing it with our strength: Ecclesiastes 9:10

e. Do we need to know the Spirit is specifically leading us?

- (1) What about “*throwing out the fleece*” (Judges 6:11-40)?

Verse 17 shows that Gideon was not trying to determine what the Lord wanted him to do. He wanted to be sure Yahveh was the One speaking to him. (In a similar vein, note Xenophon’s *Anabasis* 3:1:4-7) The Spirit is not doing the leading if we set the options and ask him to choose between them, or if we set the option and ask his direction in fulfilling it.

(2) Affirm the Spirit’s potential special guidance by promise yet be careful about claiming his special guidance in the situation.

How do we tell the difference between God not opening the door and Satan holding it shut? If something apparently good does not “succeed,” do we conclude that it was not God’s will despite the fact that it was good, the doors seemed to open, and we felt good about it when we started?

(3) To the extent that God’s will is specific, his guidance must be explicit.

God holds us responsible for what is possible for us to know: Romans 3:25; 1 Timothy 1:13; Acts 17:30; 14:16 (?). If it is not possible to distinguish between his guiding and the normal course of events, it seems best not to affirm that he is specially leading and simply go ahead with doing what is good to do as per his general will. Within any set of circumstances, opportunities will arise for serving him.

(4) What does it mean to be sensitive to God’s will?

Being sensitive to God’s will does not require a special or supernatural capacity. It means having our heart in the right place so his concerns are in mind during our daily routine and make our plans about the future. Instead of trying to see what is invisible in many cases, we adopt an attitude of deference and proceed accordingly.

(5) What about answered prayer?

Prayer is for benefiting and aiding us. Answered prayer may confirm faith, but it is not often a basis for other people’s faith.

(6) God is the more glorified by the less he has to do for us. God lets us do as much as we can do without doing it for us.

(7) Difficulties created by supposing direct, knowable guidance

- (a) Encourages waiting
- (b) Encourages reading events as signs to be followed rather than as data to be evaluated
- (c) Encourages self-justification, hence we may not be sufficiently receptive to advice from other Christians

People sometimes reason that because they have the Holy Spirit, an idea that comes forcibly to mind the Spirit planted there. Especially that is true if it comes during a spiritual exercise like Bible reading and prayer. The general rule ought to be that if we cannot tell the difference between an idea that comes to our mind and divine revelation, then we ought not regard it as revelation even for our own thinking, much less for directing other people's beliefs and activities.

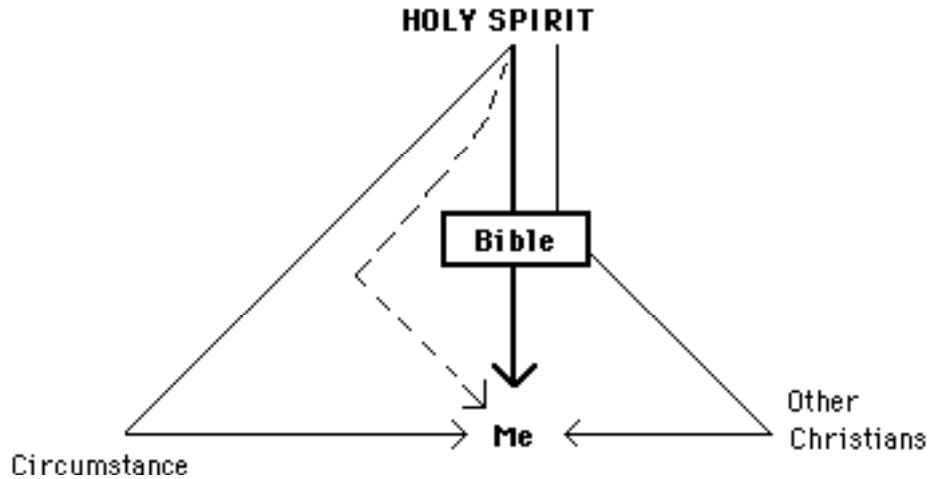
- (d) Tends toward tempting God
- (e) Requires secondary explanations when things do not work out as planned, guilt often being connected to the lack of success.
- (f) The specific "will of God" is not always kept within the general will of God as it should be.
- (g) Ideas that come to mind for no apparent reason are assumed to be revelation.
- (h) Confuses result with cause

Looking back over a series of events makes clear the pattern they have followed, but the supposition is that their special guidance caused the pattern. The very occurrence of the choice eliminates all the other options, and a pattern emerges. When we look back over the past, those other options are not "there" to be seen.

(i) Can create false expectancies. When they are not fulfilled, discouragement and disappointment can come, perhaps even the leaving of the faith because it does not deliver on its promises. It can make us question our relationship to God. Finally, it can make us susceptible to false teachers that have claimed experiences we have not had.

Acts 11:19ff. may be an example of non-specific will for Christians. At any rate, the very fact that Christians may with good intent do something that in time proves not to be good or successful would seem to indicate that guidance was not exact, special, or direct.

4. Model for guidance and other post-conversion work of the Spirit



a. dangers to be guarded against in this model

We tend to push concepts to extremes, to “absolutized” them. In the case of divine guidance, the extremes are (a) no direct involvement with us and (b) direct involvement in our every act and choice. As there are dangers in over-expecting God’s choosing for us, so also there are dangers in “under-expecting” it.

- (1) the supposition that God is not involved at all and that Christians are on their own and alone in the world. It could create a sense of abandonment.
- (2) not properly crediting God with the accomplishments of ministry and personal growth. It could create pride. Success is misperceived.
- (3) It could create an illegitimate sense of guilt because we see the result as too dependent on our own actions. Failure can be misperceived.

b. ways to guard against dangers of the model

- (1) In attitude we are willing to let God have prescriptive control as detailed as he pleases, while in responsibility we are willing—in light of his revealed will—to make the choices all the way up to the biggest ones. That, of course, has been the very thing that happened in choosing salvation itself.
- (2) To be invisible does not mean to be non-existent.
- (3) Not to know God is specifically leading does not mean he is not specifically leading.
- (4) God can be the more glorified by the less he has to do for us.

c. implications of the model

- (1) What is capable of an alternate explanation is not capable of certainty.
- (2) God holds us responsible only for what we can know.
- (3) To the extent that God’s will is specific his directing is explicit.
- (4) God lets us do as much as we can without doing it for us.
- (5) We make our own judgment if he gives no special directing.

(6) Let the simpler explanation explain as much as possible: the law of parsimony means that the simpler explanation is more likely correct. We do not appeal to supernatural explanation if “natural” explanation is sufficient. In interpretation we call it minimum affirmation.

d. effects of the model

- (1) Glorification of God
- (2) A sense of responsibility
- (3) Assurance; a sense of being well pleasing to God
- (4) Freedom; a sense of freedom to use our wills based on his word. We do not need to read into events the feeling that God is trying to tell us something.

5. Summary: two models for guidance

a. God has a specific will for each person at each point in life. He wants to direct our choices. We search for what that will is. The inferences are:

- (1) If I am not getting that kind of direction, there is something wrong with my faith. GUILT
- (2) If I am not seeking that kind of guidance, I am not being sensitive to God’s direction. GUILT
- (3) The things that are happening to me are signs to be followed rather than data to be evaluated. FORCED INTERPRETATION OF EXPERIENCE TO AVOID GUILT

GOD IS THE MORE GREATLY GLORIFIED BY THE MORE HE DOES FOR US.

b. God may or may not have a specific will for us. He does not necessarily want to direct all our choices. We are willing to let him choose for us, but are willing to choose for ourselves as guided by his revelation.

GOD IS THE MORE GREATLY GLORIFIED BY THE LESS HE DOES FOR US as long as we are willing to let him do with us according to his will.