

## **Discerning God's Will**

*by Steve Gerali*

The National Youth Workers Convention is a great opportunity to get recharged, explore new dimensions in ministry, hang out with people of like passion, and... dump a lot of garbage.

Each year I lead a team of convention pastors who get the distinct privilege of listening to youth workers talk about things they can't talk about in their churches or ministries. Some of those dear saints are in unsafe environments; some are protecting their churches from their own unsettledness; some are just looking for an unbiased perspective on their struggles; and others just don't have the resources available to get a "soul check-up."

We're often able to identify a few predominant themes in our sessions each year; this year we became particularly aware of the restlessness of many youth workers. Their common concerns surround God's direction in their lives. Conversations range from wrestling with leaving their current jobs to painful internal battles over God's will with regard to specific personal issues.

Almost everyone we spoke to held a common desire—to be pleasing to the Lord; but sin was contaminating that passion, immobilizing God's people. I'm not talking about the kind of sin that probably first pops into your mind. Rather, I'm talking about their motivations. These youth workers' passion to please God was being fueled by fear formed by misconceptions about God's will.

### **Not a Blueprint**

Many youth workers believe God has a specific, detailed plan for their lives, like a blueprint that needs to be followed to the minute detail. Though God does have a wonderful plan for our lives, we don't always understand it fully—and that's okay. It saddens me to know there are folks who believe that their lives will be less than fulfilling if they don't understand the celestial blueprint. Have you ever seen a blueprint? It's a complicated piece of work that takes a degree to understand.

A blueprint mentality also brings the incredible fear of failure. If a blueprint is misread, the entire scheme can be compromised. That means the building will have potentially fatal flaws, dangerously unsafe conditions, and the potential to crumble at some unexpected date. We become afraid of getting the plan wrong, obsessed with focusing on what we should *do* rather than on the *God* who designed the plan in the first place.

Let's not forget that God's agenda is one of grace, which makes mistakes correctable. The blueprint approach to God's will produces anxiety. A lot of energy is expended in overanalyzing decisions and worrying about screwing up the plan. Without us realizing it, this approach manipulates us into trusting our own knowledge, skills, and talents, instead of letting that trust rest in God, where it belongs.

### **Not a Treasure Map**

Others view God's will as a secret hidden treasure that's only found through discerning hidden clues that God gives along the way. This approach connotes a god of confusion, who has a great plan for you—but you have to guess it. With this often comes the belief that if you guess wrong, you're trashed. This view runs counter to a theology of God as a loving parent who gives us good things.

When my children were growing up I told them exactly what I expected of them. I didn't play guessing games that had severe consequences. They knew my plan and desires for them. When they didn't understand that plan, I made it more clear to them, thus eliminating doubt and confusion. And I think God treats us the same way. Fear can be eliminated when I change my thinking about the treasure map effect and start trusting in a loving God whose perfect love casts out fear.

## **Not an Archery Target**

I was raised with this oppressive view, and I have to admit that sometimes it still comes back to bite me. For many years I heard that when we were really "on target," we could find ourselves "in the center of God's will." I saw God's desires and plans as an archery target that had concentric rings around the very best plan for me, followed by the okay plans, followed by the not-so-good plans, etc. This meant that every decision I made needed to be a calculated shot.

I longed to be in the center of God's will, without even being sure what that meant. But that wasn't a useful analogy for me. God isn't drawing us to a bull's-eye lifestyle; God's desires for us are about intimacy. God wants us to be close, and God wants us to be fulfilled.

God makes things new every morning. There's no dot on the landscape that tells me I've arrived at the center of the divine will. I can see why the bull's-eye perspective is comforting for some—there's security when we think our actions can be defined for us. We don't have to deviate once we know the plan. As a matter of fact, if we're in the center of God's will, we don't even have to move—which makes us immobile.

As children of God, we're heirs to the Kingdom. God's will is a vast, luscious field in which we can run and play. Picture, if you will, Jesus inviting you into a field as green as you can possibly imagine. Scattered over the field are wildflowers of many colors. The blue sky meets the horizon as far as you can see in every direction, and there seems to be no end to the field. Jesus tells you that all this is yours. He reminds you that you're free because God made you free. He tells you that there is a fence, but it's way out there beyond where you might expect. I hope you wouldn't then turn to Jesus and ask him where the center of the field is so that you could set up camp there. We can run free through the field knowing that God is in control and will direct us. God's will and desires for us are meant to be freeing, not binding.

## **Discerning God's Desires**

If you find yourself looking for that field, and you're trying to figure out where the fences are, might I suggest you consider three things: First, I think God's plans for us will be consistent with God's Word. We've been given directions; we just have to follow them.

Second, God's desires for us are congruent with our passions. The psalmist says that when we delight in the Lord, God gives us the desires of our heart (Ps. 37:4). This not only means that God will give you the things that your heart desires, but it also means God will give your heart the desires that it should have. Talk about a win-win situation.

Finally, God's will is most often confirmed by God's people. The writers of Proverbs remind us that there is wisdom in many counselors. Throughout the New Testament we are told of the work of the Holy Spirit through the church and the authority that comes with that. So when we feel God prompting us to move, it's a good idea to confirm it with those around us who also know and love God.

## Parting Picture

About six months ago my wife and I spent the day with our daughters and some of their college friends at Disneyland. At about 8 pm we decided to break away from the group and just sit down. The most likely place to do that was an exhibit hall dedicated to Disney animation.

The hall wasn't the most adventurous place in the park, so there weren't a lot of people in it. We entered a great open atrium. There were clips of Disney films projected all around the rotunda ceiling of this great building. From the exterior of the rotunda you could enter into a number of corridors that led into various exhibits. My wife and I sat on a cushioned bench in this huge semi-empty rotunda watching a kaleidoscope of animated characters dance to happy music.

Shortly after we sat down, we were interrupted by a young family who had the same need for refuge. The child with them was about three years old, and for him, this was like dying and going to heaven. I watched this little guy stand in the center of this expansive hall, gazing in wonder at the cartoons above him. He was mesmerized by all the animated friends he recognized.

After a few minutes his little booty started to wiggle to "Hakuna Matata," and he broke into a toddler rumba, accompanied by squeals of joy. He started to run as fast as his tiny legs could carry him around the rotunda. His mom and dad sat exhausted on a bench watching with the same delight that my wife and I felt.

The little guy suddenly saw the opening of one of the corridors. He made a mad dash. His father immediately sprang to his feet and caught the little body from behind, lifting him in the air and righting his path. The kid enjoyed the ride and tried it again. After a while the dad just stood in the path of the running kid and without stopping, the boy shifted direction, still overwhelmed with the joy and adventure of his circumstances.

This loving dad never reprimanded. He made his plans known to his son without any anxiety, fear, confusion, or fatal consequences. That's God's plan for us. We need to trust that God has things under control. We can run squealing through life knowing that a loving dad is going to make his intentions known to us.

God doesn't want us to guess the plan, stand stoic in the center of the room, or analyze it into oblivion. God's delight comes when we are mesmerized, when we squeal in joy, and when our booties wiggle to "Hakuna Matata." And when we do that, we can delight in God's plan, as well.

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