

DECISION
MAKING
BY THE BOOK

HOW TO CHOOSE WISELY IN AN AGE OF OPTIONS

HADDON W. ROBINSON

Decision-Making by the Book

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Discovery House books are distributed to the trade exclusively by Barbour Publishing, Inc., Uhrichsville, Ohio.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Robinson, Haddon W.

Decision-making by the Book : how to choose wisely in an age of options /
Haddon Robinson.

p. cm.

Originally published: Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, © 1991.

ISBN 1-57293-021-7

1. Decision-making—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Christian life.

I. Title.

[BV4509.5.R63 1997]

248.4—dc21

97-4944

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

07 08 09 10 11 12

/ BPI /

4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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1

Looking for the Will of God

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices, the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.”

(Deuteronomy 18:10–12)

People have devised all kinds of approaches in seeking God's will. Some consult Ouija boards. Some go to New Age "channelers," who claim to be the vehicles for the counsel of wise people long dead. Some flip a coin. And some sophisticated church leaders use computer-generated probability studies. They argue that it's God's will to use technology to seek God's will.

But seeking God's will didn't begin in the twentieth century. As far back as we can go in recorded history, people have tried to get divine guidance for the living of life.

Among followers of the ancient pagan religions, knowing the mind of the gods was a central concern. Leo Oppenheimer, in the department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago, estimates that about ninety percent of the ancient cuneiform writings from Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon have to do with divination—the attempt to understand the mind of the gods when making important choices (*Ancient Mesopotamia*, University of Chicago, 1964).

People in the ancient world used all kinds of ways to determine the mind of the gods. Some of them studied livers, thinking that the center of thought was in the stomach, not the head. During their divination ritual the priests killed an animal. While the animal was still warm they ripped it open, cut out the liver, and by the motion of the animal's organ—the quiver of the liver—discovered the mind of the gods. In fact, a library in the ancient city of Assurbanipal, Assyria, contained many of the tablets that dealt with the study of livers as an aid in divination.

Today we no longer believe in the mystical powers of the stomach, even though it sometimes seems as if we're thinking with our stomachs rather than our heads! But the legacy of this ancient belief remains in our language, particularly when someone says they made a gut decision or "just felt it in their gut."

Other people in the ancient world consulted the stars. Astrology, as we know it today, came into existence around the fifth or sixth century B.C. in Persia. Astrologers divided the heavens into houses, and depending on the date of your birth and the time of day you were born, you had a place in a particular house. As the stars moved your stars were sometimes in a position to bring you luck. These provided the most fortuitous seasons for kings to sign treaties, for armies to go into battle, and for businessmen to enter into special contracts.

Others in ancient Greece and Rome consulted oracles. Oracles were priests or priestesses who supposedly had divine enablement to know the mind of the gods and to predict the future. What they actually possessed was a special skill to give a general answer that sounded specific. For example, if a military commander went to the oracle to get counsel as to whether or not to go to battle, the oracle might say something like this: "Go, and a great army will be defeated." The commander would take this as a positive statement that he should go off to battle. If he won, he was sure that the oracle had given him sound advice. On the other hand, if he lost the battle and came back looking for that oracle, the oracle might shrug and say, "Well, I said that if you went to battle, a great army would be defeated. Yours is a great army, and as you can see, your army was defeated."

We're not sure of the life expectancy for individual oracles when their vague predictions resulted in kings losing wars, but the practice of consulting oracles lasted a few hundred years until the generals, kings, and businessmen realized that something was wrong.

The Silence of the Bible

When we understand the ancient world's preoccupation with various practices of divination, it's surprising to note that nowhere in the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus, or the New Testament epistles do we see any description of a step-by-step process by which we can determine God's will.

As we have seen, this silence isn't because divination wasn't a major preoccupation of the times. Quite the contrary, divination was a consuming passion of the pagans. Perhaps that's part of the reason that God, in His Word, expressly forbids divination and similar practices. Read what God tells His people:

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices, the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.”
(Deuteronomy 18:10–12)

Divining Christians

Certainly, as twentieth-century Christians, we wouldn't even consider examining a liver to determine God's will. But, unfortunately, many modern followers of Christ do seek guidance in ways dangerously close to divination.

I have a friend who tells me that when he wants to find the mind of God, he sits down in an easy chair, clears his mind of every thought, and asks God to direct him. This friend believes that the first thought to come into his mind is divinely prompted. Now, I have no quarrel with somebody sitting in a chair to think as he's making a decision. But when we lift our inner impressions to the level of divine revelation, we are flirting with divination.

Other people play "biblical roulette" to seek God's direction in their decision-making. They let their fingers walk through the sacred pages, seeking some land of guidance as they scan the surface of God's Word. If a verse pops out at them while they're scanning, they believe that's what God is trying to say to them. Other people play "biblical roulette" by letting the Bible flop open at a particular passage or verse and accept that as the voice of God.

There's a story that has lasted a long time not only because of its humor but also because of its insight. It's about a man attempting to discover the mind of God by taking his chances with the Bible. He simply shut his eyes, opened up his Bible, and put his finger on a passage. Opening his eyes, he read this passage from Matthew 27: "Then he went away and hanged himself." Somehow, the fellow didn't think that gave him any direction for his problem, so he closed his eyes again and opened his Bible to another passage. He looked and read Jesus' statement in Luke 10: "Go and do likewise." That wasn't quite what he was looking for either, so he tried one more time. He shut his eyes, opened his Bible, and read the statement in John 2:5, "Do whatever he tells you."

This ridiculous example makes a point. Many people have treated the Bible as a book of magic and thereby delved

into divination. In doing this they have made some disastrous decisions and, even worse, they have used the Bible in a way that is detestable to God.

Another method well-meaning Christians have employed for finding God's will is the use of "promise boxes." You've seen these promise boxes; they're sold in many religious bookstores. The boxes contain cards listing a thousand verses, many of which are taken completely out of their context. For many sincere Christians, these promise boxes have sometimes served as instruments of divination.

A well-known Christian leader faced the impending death of his wife who was in a hospital intensive care unit. One morning as he was eating breakfast before going to the hospital, he noticed the promise box on the kitchen table. He reached in and pulled out a card. It said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live" (John 11:25). Struck by the promise of the verse, he put it back in and reached in and pulled out a second card. It said, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD" (Psalm 118:17, NKJV).

The man was convinced that God had spoken to him. With the elation of his newfound inspiration, he left for the hospital filled with joy, convinced that God was going to raise up his wife and bring back her health again. He testified to his wife's nurses that God was going to perform a miracle. The next morning, his wife died. Not only was this good man crushed, but the name of God was blasphemed in that hospital. People observing this bizarre chain of events could choose their conclusion—either the man was a religious fanatic or God had gone back on His promise.

Filling in the Blanks

When we grow unhappy with the results of our promise boxes and displeased with the lack of a surefire biblical plan for knowing God's specific will, we often adopt pet theories to help us find God's great plan. People constantly ask how they can know God's will, and apparently some have decided there must be an easy answer.

In my youth, advice for confronting the important decision, "Whom should I marry?" came freely in short sessions at summer camp. Today we attend expensive single's conferences complete with specialized sessions on dating and hefty notebooks. But the answer to the "whom" question often remains, "God chooses best for those who leave the choice with Him."

That sounded reasonable when I was asking the question. But I still struggled with how I would know the woman God had chosen for me. Would she wear her hair in a special way, or carry an extremely large Scofield Bible? Or would I see a sign—say a lightning bolt with our initials nicely etched in a heart-shaped pattern?

Unfortunately, it was at the point of asking for more specifics that answers became more vague.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor who used to say, "God always speaks loud enough for the willing heart to hear." That, too, seemed to be eminently good counsel. My heart was *willing*, or at least it was willing to be made willing. But what my professor didn't tell us was precisely how the willing heart hears. Would I have a hunch that felt particularly inspired or perhaps a warm feeling in my willing heart?

Later, I encountered the bull's-eye theory of the will of God. Those who espoused this view seemed to think that

there was a range of possible choices that were acceptable to God, but that our main goal should be to hit God's bull's-eye. These people would say, "Look, it's not enough to be in God's will; what you want is to be in the center of God's will." Usually the people in the center of God's will were professional Christians—presidents of seminaries, pastors, and especially missionaries. Then there were people in the next concentric ring right outside the bull's-eye—the staff of a seminary and Christian businesspeople supporting pastors and missionaries. Then there were the folks who were one ring farther out. They went to church but weren't quite as involved in God's work as the others. Finally, we had those who missed that target completely. These poor souls had missed God's will and didn't have a chance of returning to that bull's-eye. Amazingly, this bull's-eye theology was taught as though the authority of the Scripture was behind it.

But the question, *How do I know God's will?* seemed legitimate and since thoughtful Christians asked it, many Christian leaders felt they had to provide an answer.

The Three Wills of God

One reason for the confusion is that we aren't always clear about what we mean when we use the term *God's will*. Philosophers are right when they demand that we define our terms. Once we define what we're talking about, the term *God's will* can really mean different things.

God's Sovereign Will

Sometimes the Bible speaks about God's sovereign will. This is God's purpose from eternity past to eternity future whereby He determines all that shall take place. That's what

Paul had in mind when he wrote, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). In essence, Paul was saying that history is God’s story and that He writes the story line.

Theologians sometimes call this God’s hidden will or His secret will because He doesn’t necessarily reveal it to His people. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of it. For example, the Jews knew from Old Testament times that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. But we see it primarily in retrospect. We read history books to review what has taken place, and even then can’t be sure God’s sovereign will was properly interpreted.

God has a sovereign will, and He chooses to reveal parts of it to us. But we are treading presumptuously on holy ground when we too readily identify our will—or the actions of our church, organization, or movement—with His will. Much of God’s sovereign will is hidden from us, shrouded in mystery and majesty.

God’s Moral Will

The second level of the will of God is God’s moral will. We have much of this—or at least what God wanted us to know—revealed to us in the Bible. The Scriptures tell us what God wants us to believe and how God wants us to behave. This is the moral will of God, and it is clear.

God’s Individual Will

There is yet a third level of God’s will in which many people believe: God’s individual will. This is what we are usually concerned about when we ask, “How can I know God’s will?”

When it comes to God's individual will, we seem to believe that God has our lives mapped out on a blackboard in heaven, and that we must see it to make the choices God desires for us.

In fact, Scripture tells us that God uses even atheists and unbelievers, those who surely aren't seeking it, to bring about God's will. Peter, speaking about Christ's death in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, said to the people in his hearing, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). Christ's violent death on the cross had been planned in eternity past, and when those Roman soldiers carried out the crucifixion it was not because they sensed they were doing God's will.

God works out His sovereign will through all men and women. He has revealed to us His moral will. But He doesn't necessarily reveal His specific, individual will to us. It's possible that He does this at special times for some Christians, but we have no solid biblical testimony on that point. Unfortunately, this hasn't stopped many Christians from putting God's individual will on the same biblical footing as God's sovereign and moral will.

Misusing Our Main Tool

In fact, in our attempt to discern God's will, we frequently misuse the Bible. While Scripture is our main tool for finding God's will, a number of books on the subject mis-translate, misapply, or ignore the context of Bible verses they use to support their theories. Let's look at a few of the passages commonly misused.

One passage frequently misapplied is Proverbs 3:5–6. The King James Version says, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” The New International Version ends verse 6 with “and he will make your paths straight.” Writers often interpret these verses to mean that we will get specific direction every day in the choices we make. That’s not what the wise man is saying. Verse 6 promises only that God will make our paths smooth or straight.

Proverbs 11:5 uses the same phrase again: “The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.” In other words, the wicked fall flat on their faces, but the path of those who are righteous resembles a straight highway.

Look also at Proverbs 4:18–19: “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.” Very simply, this says that if you walk in the wisdom of God, you won’t trip and fall; but the wicked follow a dark and troubled way. The wicked don’t even know what makes them stumble; they can’t see all the traps along the way.

In the context of the book of Proverbs the instrument for knowing God is His Word (see Proverbs 2).

Peace as Proof

One popular teaching on God’s will declares that a sense, or feeling, of peace confirms that we are following God’s will for our lives. A verse often misused in such discussions is Colossians 3:15: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,

since as members of one body you were called to peace.” This passage is used to argue that peace proves we are in God’s will.

Some who use this text explain that a possible translation of the word *rule* is our word *umpire*. You know you are in God’s will, they argue, because you enjoy a feeling of peace as long as you remain within God’s boundaries. Once you step over these divine boundaries, the heavenly umpire’s whistle blows and you experience turmoil in your life. According to this interpretation, you must literally let the peace of Christ rule in your heart determining each specific decision.

This sounds plausible, but the passage isn’t talking about decision-making, and Paul wasn’t referring to inner peace. In the previous verses he said, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:13–15).

Paul was not offering guidelines for making decisions. He was emphasizing that God’s will is that we live in harmony with one another. That’s it. The passage has nothing to do with the process of making major life decisions.

If we think about it, peace cannot be the proof that we’re in God’s will. If ever anyone was in God’s will, it was our Lord Jesus Christ. But the Bible tells us that just before His crucifixion, Jesus sweat great drops of blood. With strong cries and tears He asked that, if possible, this cup be taken from Him (Luke 22:41–44). At that moment Jesus fulfilled the will of His Father in heaven, but if these are the marks of a man at peace, it’s certainly a strange kind of peace.

Look at a contrasting example. If ever anyone was out of God's will, it was Jonah. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, which was to the north and to the east. But Jonah, the reluctant prophet, immediately headed to the south and to the west, and boarded a ship sailing out into the Mediterranean. After the boat put out to sea, a tremendous storm arose, and the pagan sailors were terrified.

But Jonah didn't worry—he was asleep in the lower deck of the boat. He had peace, perfect peace, in the midst of the storm. Yet the prophet was completely out of the will of God.

These accounts of Jesus and Jonah demonstrate that inner peace cannot signal whether or not we are in God's will. Scripture simply does not uphold such a theory.

The Long Shadow of the Early Church

One of the more complicated questions that arises in a discussion of decision-making is "Do you believe the early church had divine guidance?" Undoubtedly the early church had very clear guidance. Three passages from the book of Acts make that evident.

First, let's look at Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza' " (Acts 8:26). As Philip was on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of the entire treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on the way home he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it' " (8:29). And Philip went.

God's guidance was more than a hunch; it was direct, divine intervention in Philip's life. Philip didn't have a sudden compelling sense that his Samaritan ministry was ending, or a deep feeling that God wanted him to start a new ministry down in Gaza to charioteers on their way to Egypt. Scripture is clear that the word came from an angel of the Lord who told Philip to go to that place, and when he got there, the Spirit said, "Join thyself to this chariot" (κxv). This is not an impression or a feeling, but direct, specific verbal guidance from God.

We find a second example of God's guidance in the early church in Acts 10.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." (Acts 10:1-6)

The name *Joppa* did not flash in and out of Cornelius' mind, nor did he suddenly decide he ought to go there because he had an inner compulsion. Instead, an angel came to him and commanded, "Go down to Joppa." The angel revealed to Cornelius a specific place and a specific location

where he would find a specific man to bring back. Cornelius wasn't dreaming or hallucinating. Like Philip, he received direct, specific verbal guidance from an angelic messenger of God.

A third example of direct divine guidance is recorded in Acts 16, which describes a vision Paul received as he was traveling in Asia Minor. In this divine vision, Paul saw a man from Macedonia asking him to "come over and help" the Macedonians. As a result of that vision, Paul began to evangelize these people.

One striking similarity in these three instances of divine guidance is that they pushed the early believers to share the gospel with people they may not have thought of reaching. Luke's purpose in recording these events was not to identify a means for receiving direct guidance from God when we have to decide whether to marry a particular person, take a different job, or move to a new location. If we're going to wait for that kind of direction, we may wait a very long time.

Fleecing Ourselves

Perhaps the most misused Bible passage is the account of Gideon's fleece. The story begins with the Lord's appearance to Gideon, commissioning him to lead Israel's rebellion against the conquering Midianites. Gideon was overwhelmed. "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said" (Judges 6:36–37). And sure enough, that's what happened. Gideon arose early the next day, squeezed the fleece, and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

Not wanting to rush to any uncertain conclusions, Gideon decided a second test was in order! “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.’ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew” (Judges 6:39–40).

The experiences Gideon had with the fleece were truly amazing. For the fleece to be soaking wet while the ground was dry was nothing short of miraculous. And for the fleece to be dry when the ground was wet was equally astounding. Based on that incident in the Old Testament, many Christians try to determine God’s will by “putting out a fleece.” What they do usually has little to do with Gideon’s test.

The first winter I was at Denver Seminary, one of the students was chatting with me about the Christmas break. She told me she was thinking of going skiing, but she was seeking the mind of God as to whether or not she ought to go. I asked her how she expected to determine God’s will on the matter. Very matter-of-factly she said, “Well, I put out a fleece. If my daddy sends me some money, then I’ll know that skiing is something God wants me to do.”

I thought for a moment, and asked her, “Does your father send you money very often?” “Oh, yes,” she said, “about three or four times a year. I haven’t asked him for any money lately, and I figure if he sends me money I’ll know God wants me to go skiing.”

I appreciated her faith and her willingness to submit even the mundane decisions of her life to the guidance of God. But I thought she was undervaluing Gideon’s experiences with the fleece.

“Look,” I asked her, “if you’re really going to put out a fleece, why not a good one? After all, if you go skiing and you’re not in God’s will, you might break your neck. Why don’t you pray that the president will send you a letter, and in that letter there will be a check that will give you enough to go skiing? And if you’re really going to follow Gideon’s example to the limit, pray that you get a second letter and a check from Britain’s prime minister the next day. When you get both checks, back-to-back, you can be assured that God wants you to go skiing. That’s the type of miraculous sign that Gideon wanted from God. His odds weren’t 70–30; he was asking for two miracles, and he got them both!”

If we carelessly apply Gideon’s case to our decisions, we are only fleecing ourselves—and we may be keeping ourselves from following God’s will when He has given it to us in a much clearer form.

A Sure Source of God’s Guidance

As you’ve been reading this chapter you may have wondered whether I believe God guides us at all. You might think, “If he believes God guides us, I haven’t seen any evidence of it yet!”

Let me make this clear. Christians have guidance. It’s unambiguous and direct. It’s from God, it’s for us, and it’s found in His Word.

Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is “God-breathed,” or inspired by God. This means that the Bible is to God what breath is to a man or a woman—it comes out of His innermost being. Then Paul said that this God-breathed volume is profitable for four things. It’s profitable for teaching us what we ought to believe. It’s profitable for rebuke; it tells

us when we've gone wrong. It's profitable for correction; it gets us back on the path again. And it's profitable for instruction in right living.

But all of this is designed to do one thing—to thoroughly equip the man or woman of God to do every good work.

This is important. This God-breathed book is not only inspired, but when we understand and apply it correctly, it is all-sufficient, giving us all we need for all life's decisions so that we might be all that God wants us to be. For us to live according to the Scriptures is to live in the will of God.

The Crowd Waits Anxiously

It's the day Jesus is to come to Los Angeles for a press conference. (Such an event may not fit into everybody's eschatology, but please bear with me.) At the meeting, we've been promised Jesus will tell us how we can know the will of God.

A large coalition of religious leaders has rented the Coliseum in Los Angeles to hold the crowd that's anticipated to come and hear Jesus speak. The story is scheduled to lead all three U.S. network news broadcasts; satellites will beam the story around the world. Stories and photos from the Coliseum will get page-one treatment in every paper in the country.

Inside the mammoth Coliseum, packed to the rafters with anxious seekers, at last Jesus comes to the podium.

To the amazement of all, Jesus steps up to the microphone but doesn't say a word. He simply holds up a book, the Bible, and says, "I have given you my Word. All that you need to know for faith and practice is in this book. It is enough not

only for your eternal salvation, but for your guidance through life. Read it. Follow it. Then you will know God's will."

I don't know if you would be disappointed if you were in that crowd—or how the press would portray such a daring presentation—but it's the truth. God has spoken, and His Word guides us.