

## *I Corinthians 7:36-40*

### *Decision making and the Will of God*

- Diversity has always been a challenge to God's people. We find security in being with people who agree with us on just about everything. But God has designed the church in such a way that diversity is an essential part of his plan. We need to recognize legitimate diversity in the area of decision making just as much as in areas like personality, giftedness, roles, etc.
- Is God's will relative or absolute and fixed? Is Scripture to be applied the same way by everyone?
- Our perception of God's will and how we come to understand and follow it has been a point of discussion and debate from early in the history of Christian experience.
- This passage illustrates something of how the Apostle Paul understood the subject.

### **A. Truth and Tolerance**

1. Tolerance is one of the great virtues of postmodern culture. It has come to mean that we accept every belief as true or worthy of respect. It dignifies any and every idea or value as an expression of the creative human spirit.
2. Some observations with respect to religious tolerance.
  - a. Three different kinds of tolerance must be distinguished.
    1. **Legal tolerance** commits us always to protect people's political rights to follow any religion or no religion at all.
    2. **Social tolerance** advocates charity toward people who think and believe differently from the way we do.
    3. **Ideological tolerance** is the relativistic notion that one system of belief is as true as any other.

NOTE: Ideological tolerance is not necessarily demanded by legal and social toleration.

- a. Pluralism does not demand that we all believe and behave the same way nor does it demand that we believe that any belief system is as good or true as another.

**Illustration:** Slavery is a part of social systems preferred by many groups throughout history. This does not mean that it is as right or good as other systems that promote human dignity and freedom. Christians believe that their view of truth and the world is not the only view but that it is the correct view. It is worth defending against all contrary views. Christians would argue for the rightness of their own view without fear of disrespecting the freedom of others to disagree.

- b. Pluralism does demand that we practice legal and social toleration.

- c. Evangelicals must embrace legal and social toleration without intellectual toleration.
  - d. Evangelicals must also resist the tendency of their critics to tie intellectual intolerance to legal and social intolerance.
- b. Is it not judgmental to judge those with restrictive moral and ideological beliefs? Does tolerance apply to all but those who have an absolute view of truth?
- c. We all have certain "common sense" boundaries or limits on our pluralism. Most of us do not feel that Hitler's views or the views of Muslim terrorists were simply moral preferences that deserve respect and should not be condemned.
- d. If you define religious belief as a "world and life view" held by faith, then you must label radical pluralism as a religious conviction.
3. Tolerance of legitimate differences is needed in seeking the truth.
- a. "Nietzsche claimed that if men took God seriously, they would still be burning heretics at the stake." Two types of people agree with this statement.
    - 1 **Ordinary bigots** - "That's why we should burn heretics."
    - 2. **Reactionaries** - "That's why we should suppress the public expression of belief in God."
  - b. Tolerance cannot be neutral about what is good, for its very purpose is to guard good and avert evils. What is tolerated depends upon what is viewed as the ultimate good or concern.
  - c. Tolerance is a moral virtue between the two vices of:
    - 1. **Soft-headedness** - We stand for little and fall for anything. When radical tolerance is the only virtue, we must dignify every form of human expression no matter how weird, as beautiful and noble.
    - 2. **Narrow mindedness** - We cannot see beyond our own preferences, which we mistakenly assume are also God's standards.
  - d. Tolerance involves right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Political conservatives and Liberals often share a common core goal (liberty and justice for all). They however have very different ideas as to how that goal is best reached and preserved. The danger is that the means of reaching the goal can be so closely identified with the goal itself that to challenge the means is to be understood as a challenge to the goal. Those who do not share our means to reach the goal are assumed to be motivated by something other than reaching the goal. That "something other" is usually pretty ugly, selfish, and un-American.

- e. Tolerance needs an ultimate concern as an end. It assumes a certain value system constructed around an ultimate goal.
- f. Christians are to be legally and socially tolerant for four reasons.
  - 1. God does not want unwilling worship.
  - 2. We see in a glass dimly. I Cor.13:12
  - 3. We are all in process.
- 4. There is a Biblical precedent for it in **Rom. 14:5** "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."
- 5. Common mistakes that Evangelical Christians can make
  - a. Confusing ideological tolerance with legal, and social tolerance.
  - b. Assuming that ideological absolutes exclude any relativism in application.
  - c. Demanding that God's will be only understood as fixed, absolute decree.

**B. In speaking of God's will there are four aspects that must be equally respected.**

- 1. **God's Will is Determined.** (Is.14:24; Acts 4:27-28; Rom.9:19)
  - a. Much of this aspect of God's will cannot be known by us until after the fact. (Prov.25:2; Is.55:8; Deut.29:29)
  - b. God's sovereignty is in one respect absolute and cannot be thwarted by man's carnal will.
- 2. **God's Will is Directive.** (Col.4:12; Rom.12:2; Eph.5:17; Is. 48:17; Psalms 32:8; 37:23; 73:24)
  - a. We will receive all of the revelation that is necessary to meet our responsibilities to God. (II Pet. 1:3-4)
  - b. Our problem is never one of not having revelation, but rather one of not responding positively to the revelation we have. (John 7:17; 9:31; Rom.12:1-2)
- 3. **God's Will is Dynamic.** (Rom.8:28, Lk.18:1-8)
  - a. Sin is never the will of God, but it can be worked into God's plan for good. (Gen. 50:19-20)
  - b. Man cannot thwart the decreed purpose of God, though he can disobey the directive will of God. (Acts 4:27-28)
  - c. God's directive and determined will may appear to be at odds in some instances (Matt.18:14; II Pet.3:9). It is at these points that the dynamic aspect of His will is realized.
  - d. Prayer does change things and God does "change" His plans in response to man's posture. (Gen.6:6-7; Ex.32:14; Judges 2:18; I Sam.15:11,29,35; II Sam.24:16; Jer.18:7-10; 26:3,13,19; 42:10; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 3:9,10; 4:2)

3. **God's Will is Detailed.** God sometimes reveals a specific life plan for an individual.
  - a. God sometimes has very specific, detailed plans for individuals. (Jer.1:5, Isa.6:1-13)
  - b. It is often assumed that God has a detailed plan or will for everyone but there is no clear indication in Scripture that this is so.

NOTE: The two Greek words translated "will" may have slightly different nuances. THELO (qelw) = "desire", BOULOMAI (boulomai) = "design" **I Tim.2:4** "who desires (qelw) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

### C. St Thomas Aquinas on Wisdom and God's Will

1. **Scriptural directive.** Does the Bible give clear direction?
2. **Subjective intent.** Is the motive loving?
3. **Situational context.** Are the circumstances appropriate?

### D. Paul gives some advice on choices.

"<sup>36</sup> But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin {daughter,} if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. <sup>37</sup> But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin {daughter,} he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then both he who gives his own virgin {daughter} in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. <sup>39</sup> A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God."

1. **Two possible interpretations.** Is this text addressing fathers or grooms? The original Greek can be read either way.
  - a. The "any man" refers to the father of an unmarried daughter. This is the assumption of this translation.
  - b. The "any man" refers to the groom of an engaged couple. This would mean that the translation should be "<sup>38</sup> So then both he who marries his virgin does well, and he who does not marry her will do better."
2. **Note the reasons for decisions.**
  - a. Avoid trouble vs.28
  - b. Undistracted devotion to the Lord vs.35
  - c. Whatever he or she wishes vs.36
  - d. Honoring a covenant vs.39
  - e. Personal happiness vs.40
3. **The point of this text.**

**We are free to make decisions based on a number of factors including undistracted devotion to the Lord and our happiness.**

## **E. Relativism and Moral Absolutes.** (See [apptoteach.org](http://apptoteach.org) theology file #307)

### **1. Higher and lower moral laws exist.**

- a. The "least" (**Matt.5:19**) and "greatest" commandments (**Matt.22:36**).
- b. The "weightier" matters of the Law (**Matt.23:23**).
- c. The "greater sin" of Judas (**Jn.19:11**).
- d. The "greatest" virtue (**I Cor.13:13; Jn.15:13**).
- e. Degrees of punishment and reward (**Matt.5:22; Rom.2:6; Rev. 20:12; I Cor.3:11f**).
- f. Degrees of Church discipline (**I Cor.5, 11:30**).

### **2. Unavoidable moral conflicts exist.**

- a. Abraham is commanded to kill his son Isaac (**Gen.22**).
- b. Samson is instructed by God to commit suicide (**Jud.16:30**).
- c. Jephthah is instructed by God to sacrifice his daughter (on vows to God). (**Jud. 11**) (Note also Eccl. 5:1-4 on vows to God).
- d. Rahab lies to protect the Hebrew spies and is commended for it (**Josh.2; Jas.2:25**).
- e. The Hebrew midwives lie to protect Moses and are rewarded (**Ex.1:15-17**).
- f. Daniel disobeyed civil government (**Dan.3,6**).
- g. The apostles refused to obey Jewish authorities and preached the gospel (**Acts 5:29**).
- h. David and his men stole consecrated bread to save their lives (**Matt.12:3-4**).

### **3. Examples of graded absolutes:**

- a. Love for God over love for man — **Matt.22:34f**.
- b. Obey God over human government — **Acts 5:29**.
- c. Life-saving mercy over truth telling — **Josh.2**.
- d. Sanctity of life over sanctity of property — When a fireman breaks into a house (destroys property) to save a life, he is not guilty of abusing someone else's property.

### **4. No guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.**

- a. It is not logical that God would hold someone responsible for what was in fact impossible.
- b. The Scripture gives examples of people who are praised for keeping the higher demands of the law while violating the lesser demands (**Matt. 12:3-4**). Nowhere is there a hint of guilt in these cases.